On 23 November 1885, about 120 members of Local Assembly 3504, the Alpha Assembly, sat down to their first anniversary dinner at the Rose and Crown Hotel, Sunderland. The lodge room of the hotel, as one newspaper described it, ‘was tastefully decorated for the occasion, the four walls being draped and festooned with variegated bunting and national flags, prominent among which were the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes.’ After a ‘very excellent repast, served up under the personal superintendence of Mr. Wingate, manager of the hotel,’ the leaders of the assembly made a series of toasts, to the ‘Alpha Assembly of the Knights of Labor,’ ‘The Mayor and Corporation,’ ‘Trade and Commerce’ and then ‘The General Assembly of the Knights of Labor in America.’ The assembly’s secretary, Joseph French, gave a short address on its history. The night was then given over to music and dancing, poetry and dialogue, and the anniversary ended with a hearty rendition of ‘Auld Lang Syne.’

Of the many intriguing symbols present that evening, the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes are the most obvious. They are also the most pertinent to this chapter, which is concerned with the cultural practices and organisational methods of the British Knights of Labor, and the ways in which they adhered to and departed from the practices and methods that American Knights laid down for them. We see whether British Knights followed or deviated from the cultural and structural forms of their adopted order. We explore how other workers, not themselves affiliated with the Order, adopted its name and model for their own purposes. We finally address the reasons why British Knights failed to organise women workers, even though their counterparts organised them in large numbers in the United States. These three interrelated questions all point to wider questions of cultural and social similarities and differences between Britain and the United States – between

1 JUL, 25 December 1885.
the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes. They raise further questions about
the nature of transnational labour movements, and of the attractions of these
movements for workers in other, culturally distinct countries.

The Knights of Labor began its history in 1869 as a fraternal order. Its founder, Uriah Stephens, based its secrecy (later dropped), its titles (later altered), and its complex ritual and ceremonies (later simplified) on his experience of the Freemasons, Oddfellows and other fraternal orders. Indeed, Stephens, like later leaders, meant for his order to perform similar functions to those orders. The assemblies would educate their members in the principle of universal brotherhood. The assemblies would also become a schoolroom in which Knights would learn and debate the ideas of economics and political philosophy. Moral self-improvement would take place alongside collective struggle. Historians, like many of the Order's contemporaries, have generally viewed these practices as either harmful or irrelevant. Engels wrote off their titles and ritual as 'medieval mummeries.' Even Terence Powderly later wrote that the Order's early rites were so long that they hampered recruitment and left little time at meetings for other business. Most historians have agreed with them or else ignored the Order's ritual and other fraternal practices altogether. Other historians claim that the emphasis on education served mainly as an excuse for Knights to avoid entering political and industrial struggles in earnest.

Historians have also criticised the Order's hierarchical structure, from local to district assemblies and finally the annual General Assembly, as poorly suited to the needs of American workers in an age of nationwide corporations. They, and particularly John Commons, Selig Perlman and Gerald Grob – the so-called ‘Commons school’ – have done so mainly on the assumption that the Knights almost exclusively organised themselves into mixed assemblies, which brought together workers on the basis of geography rather than occupation, rather than in assemblies devoted to a single trade. In this view, the craft unions of the American Federation of Labor offered a more rational response to the requirements of advanced capitalism; this difference played no small role in the victory of the AFL and the decline of the Knights of Labor. Many recent historians have taken issue with these claims, however. First, they point out that trade

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5 Philip S. Foner claims that ‘to the leaders of the Order education became a substitute for action’ (*History of the Labor Movement*. II, p. 76).
assemblies remained as numerous and important as mixed ones throughout the Order’s history. Second, they point out that the Order’s model was well-suited to building powerful movements at a community level. Some historians have gone even further and argued that the fraternal culture at the heart of the Order was not as harmful or irrelevant as others have claimed. Robert Weir, in particular, argues that fraternalism remained extremely popular throughout the late nineteenth century, and provided a kind of solidarity that often outlasted bonds based exclusively on material self-interest.

Weir also argues that the Knights were so successful on the international stage because they remained willing to let foreign workers mould their Order to local conditions. In New Zealand, for instance, Knights enthusiastically practised their ritual and turned their assemblies into a powerful political lobby, even a nascent political party. Australian Knights developed their own elaborate regalia to heighten the drama of assembly-room ceremonial. Knights in South Africa created an equally elaborate series of titles, ritual and a system of degrees which they plagiarised directly from Freemasonry. Belgian coal miners, by contrast, found the ritual cumbersome and soon abandoned it. Powderly allowed Knights in Britain and Ireland the same freedom of action. In 1884, he told A.G. Denny, LA300’s representative to Europe, that:

I will not attempt to lay down any rules or regulations for your guidance while in Europe … The circumstances which surround the workingmen in Europe are, of necessity, different from those surrounding our people, and as a matter of course our cause must be attuned here and there in order to conform to existing circumstances.

The main principle of the Knights of Labor, as Weir argues, remained the flexibility of its principles.

Yet British Knights held fast to the cultural practices and organisational structure of their order. Workers on both sides of the Atlantic, after all, shared important cultural traditions and one of these was an attachment to fraternal orders, which they joined in larger numbers than the trade unions. The ritual practised in British orders never reached the elaborate heights of their American counterparts, but both offered social insurance and some, like the Oddfellows, paid tens of hundreds of millions of dollars in sickness,  

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9 Weir, *Knights Down Under*, ch. 6; The Lantern, 5 December 1891.
10 Powderly to A.G. Denny, 18 November 1884, Box 94, TVP.
injury or death benefits over the course of the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{11} Many British and some American trade unions offered similar benefits even if the Knights did not.\textsuperscript{12} The ways in which the Knights melded the functions of a trade union with the secrecy and ritual of a fraternal order also had British precedents. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union borrowed titles, ritual, oath-taking and other practices from the fraternal orders – as the Tolpuddle Martyrs found to their cost in 1834. The practices of the Knights of Labor fit comfortably within British working-class traditions.

The Order's record on questions of gender was an exception to that rule. Notions of Victorian respectability, the existence of separate public (male) spheres and domestic (female) spheres, and strong dichotomies between the feminine and the masculine, were equally powerful on both sides of the Atlantic in the late nineteenth century. Male workers in Britain and the United States all looked forward to a time when women would return to their rightful place as mistress of the home. Major differences, however, appeared in the 1880s when it came to the organisation of women already in the labour market. The American Knights of Labor pioneered the inclusion of women as equal members in the labour movement. The British trade unions preferred mainly to ignore the problem for as long as possible; alternatively, they tried to keep women out of employment altogether.\textsuperscript{13} British and Irish Knights, faced with these mutually exclusive positions, chose exclusion rather than inclusion. That choice, however, rested not on the rejection of their order's stance on gender but on a misunderstanding of it. American Knights renegotiated rather than overturned Victorian ideas concerning the public and private spheres, and did so in an ambiguous way; British Knights failed to follow the nuances of their position.


\textsuperscript{12} An overview of the ASE benefit scheme can be found in Jeffreys, \textit{Story of the Engineers}. For the role of this benefit system in encouraging the international spread of the ASE see K.D. Buckley, \textit{The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia, 1852–1920} (Canberra: Australian National University, 1970), pp. 6–7.

Important cultural themes, in other words, often became lost in translation. These misunderstandings and cultural differences were even sharper when British workers decided to make use of the name, model or methods of the Knights of Labor without affiliating with the Order itself. We saw in the first chapter that potters in Staffordshire borrowed freely from the Knights to create their own National order; over the course of the 1880s, coal miners in Lanarkshire, workers on Tyneside and Wearside, and even agricultural workers in Somerset did likewise. Their adaptations testified to the elasticity of the Order’s model and to the many uses to which it could be put. Trade union, fraternal order, educational society, social insurance provider and political machine: in Britain and Ireland the Knights, and other organisations trading on their name or methods, became all of the above at various times in their history. We explore the limits of that flexibility through the organisation and culture practised by British and Irish Knights, through the organisations modelled on but not affiliated with the Order, and finally through the question of gender in the British and Irish assemblies.

Culture and Organisation in the British and Irish Assemblies

In 1885, James Sexton, later to become a dockers’ leader and a Labour MP, joined a short-lived assembly of the Knights of Labor in Liverpool. ‘We met,’ he wrote in his autobiography,

like conspirators hatching a second Guy Fawkes plot, gathering together in a gloomy cellar with only the flickering half-lights given by tallow candles thrust into the necks of pop bottles. The attendance was always small, and for a time we thought our proceedings were unnoticed, but something leaked out; it got to the ears of the bosses, and every individual who attended those subterranean conclaves soon became a man marked out for victimization.14

Not since the early days of the Knights of Labor in Philadelphia, when they announced their meetings in secret code on the walls of public buildings and kept the name of their order secret, had assemblies met in such a conspiratorial atmosphere. Then, Knights justified their secrecy on similar grounds to Sexton. Secrecy offered protection from victimisation at the hands of employers, especially through the infamous ‘iron-clad’ contract, which bound workers to never join a trade union, and made it more difficult for the Pinkertons and other private detectives to infiltrate their assemblies and identify their members.

14 Sexton, Agitator, p. 80.
Later British assemblies also practised secrecy in a manner more reminiscent of the early days of the Order than of most American assemblies in the 1880s. In February 1889, the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* observed that ‘their proceedings have hitherto been conducted in so secret a manner in England that few outsiders have even known of their existence … the desire to work without being known is conspicuous in the whole of the history of the English Knights.’\(^{15}\) Like the early American Knights, they justified their secrecy on defensive grounds. One of the Order’s supporters told the *Gazette* that while ‘the best of the employers see the advantage of powerful combination amongst the workers, the majority do not, and they would discharge any of their men whom they knew to be taking a leading part in the Order.’ This, he claimed, ‘has happened in more than one instance in this district already.’\(^{16}\) Knights insisted that this need for secrecy would disappear once they convinced employers that their intentions were benign. ‘If our principles could be made a little clearer,’ Charles Chamberlain told the *Smethwick Weekly News*, ‘there would be no necessity for us to keep secret.’\(^{17}\)

The British Knights soon underwent a similar evolution to their American counterparts, becoming more open and announcing their plans and activities to the public, but not for the reason Chamberlain gave. They had already held their first public meeting at Smethwick in May 1888, with Michael Davitt as their keynote speaker. With this coup the Knights developed a public profile. The next step came when the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* published a series of five exposés in February 1889, which revealed some of the Order’s secrets and presented the Knights as a danger to the supposedly harmonious social relations of the city and surrounding area. Suddenly Charles Chamberlain made himself available for newspaper interviews where he had previously refused.\(^{18}\) By August of that year Thomas Dean, the Master Workman of DA208, told its meetings that local assemblies should establish ‘a channel for the dissemination of necessary information’ with local journalists.\(^{19}\) In 1889 and 1890 the Liverpool *Halfpenny Weekly* even ran a weekly half-page column that featured news from all the English assemblies.

As in the United States, not all British Knights regarded this greater openness as worthy of praise. ‘Societies who show their weak points as well as their strength are often attacked where they are least able to stand,’ one Knight from St Helens argued in 1888, ‘whereas if they keep their own counsel the points their oppressors believe to be weak may be their

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15 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889.
17 *Smethwick Weekly News*, 2 March 1889.
18 *Smethwick Weekly News*, 2 March 1889.
19 *JUL*, August 1889.
Another Knight from Handsworth complained to the *Journal of United Labor* of ‘the infidelity of a great many of our members to the pledge they took at initiation wherein they promised to keep intact the things they saw and heard,’ and insisted that ‘if our secrecy tends to strength, then the fact remains that giving publicity to our affairs tends to weaken.’

The British assemblies never became entirely open. Knights met almost exclusively at hotels and public houses to safeguard the identities of their members. Haydn Sanders, of Walsall’s LA454, explained in 1890 that ‘people don’t notice a man going to a lodge at a public-house on account of the other secret societies, such as Foresters, Oddfellows, Corks, &c., &c; whereas at a private meeting room anyone could ascertain easily.’ But Knights forged links between the assemblies and the pubs much earlier than that. When Robert Robertson and Charles Bird began their agitation among other workers in 1886 they had, after all, received their first break when local workers invited them to ‘a mug of ale and a chat’ at the Boot and Slipper Inn. The connection between ale and organisation survived as long as the assemblies themselves.

American Knights, on the other hand, generally advocated temperance and wished to sever any ties between the labour movement and the saloon. Many American assemblies built their own halls to make that separation clear. Some British Knights also called for temperance, and Richard Hill made the evils of drink the subject of his second letter to the *Journal of United Labor*. Sometimes they had good reason for that stand. Glassworkers at St Helens were obliged to send their secretary, Joseph Norbury, to the United States after his drinking problems held back their organising work at Pilkington’s. But British Knights lacked the infrastructure of their American cousins. Pubs offered private lodge rooms specially designed for the meetings of various societies, and British Knights had no alternative but to use them.

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20 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 January 1888.
21 *JUL*, 20 September 1888.
22 When the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* published a list of all the extant assemblies and the times and places of their meetings, all of them met at one of these two institutions (*Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889).
23 *Walsall Observer*, 11 January 1890.
25 Norman Ware argues that for Powderly, temperance was second only to the land question as the most important issue facing American workers (Ware, *Labor Movement*, p. 89).
26 *JUL*, 13 August 1887.
27 Joseph French to Powderly, 7 July 1887, Box 30, TVP.
British and Irish Knights did, however, keep the Order’s assembly structure intact. They organised local and district assemblies with the numbers assigned to them in Philadelphia, elected officials with the same titles and roles as in the American assemblies, and continued to do so even after they formed the British National Assembly in 1891, a subject explored at greater length in later chapters. Apart from the glassworkers of LA3504, all the British assemblies were mixed, although some were dominated by a single trade. Hollowware turners in Wolverhampton, stove-grate workers around Rotherham and dockers in Bootle all dominated their own assemblies. Even when British Knights broke with the American model they claimed an American precedent. LA3504, for example, copied their American colleagues in LA300 and organised separate ‘preceptories’ at each of the major glassworks. LA443 of Bootle experimented with a similar structure, except that they designed their preceptories as temporary bodies that would in time become full assemblies in their own right.

So far as we can tell, the British and Irish Knights also adhered to the ritual and fraternal culture of their order. The rulebook of the British National Assembly outlines a number of ceremonies, from the initiation of new members to the opening of new assemblies, which are indistinguishable in content from those laid down in the Adelphon Kruptos or A.K., the Order’s book of ritual. Newspaper reports mention opening and closing ceremonies at assembly meetings. In the course of debates with trade unionists in Walsall, Haydn Sanders referred to ‘giving the pledge of S.O.M.A.,’ an acronym that stood for the Knights’ watchwords, Secrecy, Obedience and Mutual Assistance; one of his critics heaped scorn on the ‘tinselled lances and toy globes’ that Knights received in return for the money they sent to headquarters. Globes and lances, as we saw in Chapter 1, were crucial symbols in the Order’s assembly halls. James P. Archibald, moreover, arrived in Britain and Ireland with instructions from Powderly to secure ‘uniformity of method in the way of making signs, giving passwords and gaining admittance to Assemblies in session so that the secret work may be alike all over the jurisdiction of the Order.’ Taken together, this evidence suggests that British and Irish Knights conformed to the practices outlined in the Adelphon Kruptos.

29 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 18 February 1889; Rotherham Advertiser, 29 March 1890; Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 69.
30 Halfpenny Weekly, 11 January 1890.
32 For one example at Rotherham see the Rotherham Advertiser, 23 January 1892.
33 Walsall Observer, 28 December 1889 and 11 January 1890.
34 Circular from Powderly, 17 June 1889, Box 101, TVP.
They certainly agreed with American Knights on the importance of education. The Order, its *Declaration of Principles* proclaimed, would ‘make individual and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and National greatness’; and one American leaflet even claimed that education was its fundamental principle. Leading American Knights certainly saw their assemblies as schools in which members would become educated enough to play an active and intelligent part in political and industrial life. Knights in many American assemblies did their best to turn this dream into something approaching fact. The *Journal of United Labor* and other working-class newspapers addressed questions of deep political and economic significance, and simultaneously provided readers with the practical knowledge necessary to become an accomplished worker at their chosen trade. Many local assemblies created libraries and reading rooms. These were as likely to contain the works of leading thinkers like Marx and John Stuart Mill as cheap paperback novels. Some assemblies even created Labor Temples that, as Philip S Foner writes, ‘became the center of all social and cultural life’ in their communities.

Most British assemblies lacked the time or the resources to go this far. They did, however, make education one of their prime concerns. Richard Hill informed the readers of the *Journal of United Labor* in 1887 that ‘at present we are having a course of lectures on [cooperative enterprise] and kindred subjects, for the purpose of educating our brothers to the required standard for active work.’ Jesse Chapman, of LA10227, expressed his agreement with Powderly as to ‘the wisdom of formulating and enforcing an Educational Policy for the Order in lieu of that baneful wage-squabble idea which, worse luck, still finds lodgement in many members’ minds.’ English assemblies, at least, gave generously to the periodic Special Educational Funds which paid for the Order’s roving lecturers. This educational work also concerned the history of their order. Robert Robertson asked Powderly in 1886 for as many pamphlets on that subject as could be sent. Five years later Arthur Nadin, the secretary of Rotherham’s LA1266, told the GMW

37 *JUL*, 10 December, 1887.
38 Jesse Chapman to Powderly, 12 May 1888, Box 44, TVP.
39 In August 1888, LA7952 contributed the princely sum of $72.10, nearly double any of the Order’s other assemblies anywhere in that month (*JUL*, 23 August 1888). LA647 of Liverpool, LA10356 of Smethwick and LA9086 of Cradley Heath also sent sums of more than $10, while LA913 of West Bromwich and LA583 of Aston sent smaller sums, the latter assembly in two instalments (See, respectively, *JUL* 26 July, 9 August, 13 September, 20 September and 1 November, 1888, and 28 March, 1889.)
40 Robert Robertson to Powderly, 15 June 1886, Box 22, TVP.
that he had ‘long felt the want of some further knowledge of the history of our noble order than I at present possess,’ and asked Powderly for a copy of Michael Davitt’s speech at Smethwick in 1888.\footnote{Arthur Nadin to Powderly, 20 May 1891, Box 67, TVP.} Powderly replied by sending Nadin a copy of his own book, \textit{Thirty Years of Labor}.\footnote{Powderly to Arthur Nadin, 3 June 1891, Box 103, TVP; Arthur Nadin to Powderly, 21 June 1891, Box 67, TVP.}

Local assembly meetings discussed ideas and current affairs. At one meeting of LA10227, for example, Jesse Chapman debated with J.W. Mahony, described by one newspaper as a ‘Radical Fair Trader,’ on the twin subjects of free trade and protectionism. Chapman defended the former while Mahony defended the latter.\footnote{\textit{Smethwick Telephone}, 14 June, 1890. For the description of Mahony see \textit{Midland Counties Express}, 14 June 1890.} On one occasion the members of LA7952 heard a lecture on the House of Lords.\footnote{\textit{Smethwick Telephone}, 25 October 1890.} The Master Workman of LA583 led the assembly in a debate on the topics of overproduction and overpopulation, and concluded that ‘the remedy is to study till you understand, then combine to get rid of the monopolies of land and capital.’\footnote{\textit{Smethwick Telephone}, 8 November 1890.} Other assemblies engaged in discussions ranging from the rise of the Knights in New Zealand to the fate of Jewish people driven out of Russia by pogroms and state repression.\footnote{\textit{Smethwick Telephone}, 21 February 1891; \textit{Smethwick Telephone}, 13 June 1891.} ‘Lectures on political economy have been and are frequently given in the various assemblies in this district,’ their supporters told the \textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette}, and ‘discussions upon economic questions are very frequent.’\footnote{\textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette}, 22 February 1889.}

In 1889, Knights in the Birmingham area entertained ambitious plans that would extend their commitment to the principle of education even further. ‘They hope somehow and somewhere,’ the \textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette} reported, ‘to raise £10,000 wherewith to build a Knights’ hall in Smethwick. The lower floor would be let to shopkeepers; the floor above would contain library, reading room, lecture hall, sanctuary, and whatnot.’\footnote{\textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette}, 23 February 1889.} These plans never materialised. The Knights of Derry’s LA1601, however, built on their growth in 1889 and 1890 by renting a hall in the town, and to meet their expenses they sublet it to other local societies. They established a reading room in the hall containing newspapers and non-gambling games, and held weekly concerts by local musicians.\footnote{Boyle, \textit{Irish Labour Movement}, p. 106.} In Derry, Knights created institutions that briefly became the centre of local working-class cultural life and rivalled those of some American assemblies.
This life revolved around more than lectures and debates. Like the glassworkers at their first anniversary dinner, the British assemblies celebrated their successes, marked important days of the year and promoted the solidarity of their members outside the workplace through a variety of social events. They followed the American Knights here too. Robert Weir has explored the ways in which Knights used sport, games, music, poetry and other leisure activities to bring their assemblies together in play as well as work. These social occasions often presented the rougher aspects of working-class life, and the austere Powderly informed the *Journal of United Labor* in 1883 that he would no longer attend picnics after one experience where, in the middle of giving a lecture on the labour question, his audience left *en masse* to the beer tent and to watch boys attempt to climb greased poles or catch greased pigs.

British Knights never held picnics, perhaps due to the vagaries of British weather. No pigs or poles, greased or otherwise, appeared at their gatherings. But every assembly seems to have enjoyed anniversary balls and suppers. Even in Scotland, where little evidence of the assemblies survives, Knights engaged in at least one ‘annual festival’ attended by such prominent figures in the labour movement as Keir Hardie and J. Bruce Glasier. Knights in Bootle ushered in the year 1890 with their first annual ball. After a concert, Knights and their wives and friends danced to a quadrille band playing ‘all the latest dance music.’ The band only stopped to bring in the New Year, ‘after which,’ the secretary told the *Halfpenny Weekly*, ‘dancing was resumed and carried on with great spirit until 5 am.’ Assembly meetings also became cultural events at times. In one case the members of LA7952, after hearing a pacifist lecture, listened to a poem entitled ‘The Lifeboat’ which, according to one account, ‘was given with pathos, spirit, and fire by a young lady friend.’

These occasions served a wider purpose than leisure alone. Knights inserted educational material into their dinnertime speeches, as when Joseph French regaled the 1885 supper of LA3504 with a short history of their assembly. They also drew on culture to advance their assembly’s wider agenda. The leaders of Derry’s LA1601, for example, hoped to form an Alpha band, uniting musicians from both Protestant and Catholic groups, in an attempt to break down the sectarianism that divided the town. This was more than

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51 *JUL*, July 1883.
52 *Glasgow Herald*, 28 December 1889.
53 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 11 January 1890.
54 *Smethwick Telephone*, 8 November 1890.
55 *JUL*, 25 December 1885.
wishful thinking: the Derry Trades Council succeeded in bringing together Protestant and Catholic workers in this way in the early 1890s. These occasions also demonstrated the cultural ties between the British Knights and their American order, and they did not all require the presence of the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes. Knights in Barnsley celebrated the opening of an assembly with that most stereotypically English of customs, the tea party. Knights in Bloxwich, near Walsall, settled down to a ‘dinner of good English beef and plum pudding’ at the opening of Even the practice of toasts owed much to the best traditions of British convivial culture. But British Knights also borrowed from the songs and sayings of their American cousins. Their toasts often concerned the experiences and principles of their order in the United States. And at the farewell dinner that Knights in Yorkshire and the Midlands put on for James P. Archibald, a highlight of the evening came when one of the Master Workmen sang ‘If We Will, We Can Be Free,’ a song written by Tom O’Reilly, a Powderly loyalist and leading American Knight. ‘The chorus,’ one Knight informed the Journal of United Labor, ‘was heartily rendered by the Knights assembled.’ This represented an attempt to make Archibald feel at home; it also, however, demonstrates that Knights were aware of their own order’s cultural achievements and were prepared to make use of them.

In song as well as in their secrecy, their ritual, their focus on education and in their use of social occasions towards that end, the British and Irish Knights very closely resembled the American Knights. They made some changes, of course. Their assemblies were initially as secret as those in the early days of the American Order, though like the Americans the British and Irish Knights soon moved in a more open direction. Their need for secrecy, as well as the availability of suitable lodge rooms and the absence of any alternative, led them to meet at public houses. They may not have followed every dot and comma of the Order’s ritual – and there is no way to tell if they did – but they never abandoned it. Their determination to follow all the practices of their order, as far as possible, becomes even clearer when compared with those organisations that used the name or the methods of the Knights for their own distinct purposes.

57 McAteer, ‘New Unionism in Derry,’ p. 15.
58 Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 21 May 1890.
59 Walsall Free Press, 7 December 1889.
60 JUL, 14 November 1889.
Appropriating the Knights of Labor

In November 1886, agricultural workers marched in a torchlit procession to Montacute, near Yeovil in Somerset, accompanied by two bands of musicians.61 Their procession was reminiscent of the glory days of the 1870s. Then, many of the agricultural labourers of Britain, led by Joseph Arch, had confounded the prevailing wisdom that they were incapable of organised action and had created the National Agricultural Workers’ Union, which organised torchlit processions like this one. One of the three speakers at their meeting, George Mitchell, embodied another link with that past. Mitchell had served as Arch’s chief lieutenant in the Union before it fell into disrepair at the end of the 1870s.62

One newspaper claimed that the procession and meeting represented an extension into the countryside of the socialist agitation among the unemployed of London.63 Mitchell was flanked not by socialists, however, but by an Australian trade unionist and a minister of religion. It might be thought that Mitchell wished his listeners to breathe new life into their old union. But he and his fellow speakers had another organisation in mind. After introducing resolutions that called for land for the agricultural labourers, and Home Rule for all the various nationalities that made up the United Kingdom, the speakers then turned to their main objective: ‘a union of the working classes to be known as the Knights of Labour.’64 Should anyone doubt the provenance of the phrase, they added that this new union would work, as The Times reported, ‘for the purpose of assisting each other in sickness, old age, &c.,’ and with ‘lawyers, bankers, gamblers, dealers in strong drink, and all non-producers not to be admitted.’65 The Knights of Labor would become the vehicle for the rejuvenation of trade unionism in the English countryside.

The Bristol Mercury attached ‘very little importance’ to this new movement, and was soon proved right.66 Mitchell’s new union soon disappeared off the edges of the historical record. The fact that he chose to call it the Knights of Labour, however, captures the interest, explored in the previous chapter, which the Order generated in Britain and Ireland. We have already seen the how the Staffordshire potters based their new order on the Knights; workers in Preston also began their own short-lived Knights of Labor assemblies in

61 The Times, 15 November 1886; Ipswich Journal, 16 November 1886.
63 Ipswich Journal, 16 November 1886.
64 Ipswich Journal, 16 November 1886.
65 The Times, 15 November 1886.
66 Bristol Mercury and Daily Post, 16 November 1886.
1887. Nor was this power limited to the British Isles. Assemblies of Knights emerged in Australia and New Zealand in 1887 and 1888 before the first organiser, W.W. Lyght, set foot in either place. South African workers created their own assemblies in 1890 on very different lines to Knights elsewhere, and took nearly a year to establish any contact with Philadelphia. An Italian founded three assemblies based on his experiences of the Order as a migrant worker in the United States. The Knights of Labor was an order that workers joined; it was also a model and a name that workers appropriated for themselves.

In the coal mining towns of Lanarkshire, in the west of Scotland, the most important of those British appropriations took place. Conditions in the Lanarkshire coalfields resembled the American Order’s early years in the coal mining districts of Pennsylvania, where employers had ruled through private detectives and collusion with the local authorities, and where the Molly Maguires, the secret organisation which used violence against the mine owners in an attempt to force them to the negotiating table, had been crushed through a close alliance between the coal masters and local law enforcement. The Lanarkshire Coal Masters’ Association was not as ruthless as its Pennsylvanian equivalents, but employers missed no opportunity to dismiss men suspected of union activism. They exerted a tremendous effect over the social and political life of the pit towns, as one miner explained in 1889:

First, if a man votes with his conscience, the manager turns him out of the ‘pet’; second, the landlord turns him out of the ‘hoose’; third, the minister turns him out of the ‘kirk’; so if a man’s got ‘weans’ he thinks twice before he votes with his conscience.

The miners’ union also lay in tatters after a failed strike in August 1887, when mounted police and soldiers shepherded strike-breakers through the picket lines. Coal mining trade unionism in Lanarkshire seemed ripe for a new departure.

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67 David Whittle to Powderly, 13 April 1887, Box 32, TVP.
68 There is some evidence that an assembly existed in Adelaide as early as 1887 (Burra Record, 15 February 1887). There is even stronger evidence that trade unionists in Brisbane hoped to either create assemblies directly affiliated with Philadelphia or independently create their own between 1886 and 1888 (For the first, see W. Lane to Powderly, 12 May 1886, Box 21, TVP; for the second, see Brisbane Courier, 5 September 1887). The pre-Lyght history of the New Zealand Knights can be found in Weir, Knights Down Under, pp. 1–10.
70 Campbell, Scottish Miners, p. 36.
71 Labour Tribune, 2 March 1889.
Its leaders looked to the United States. In Scotland, as James D. Young observes, ‘American labour organizations still provided the leaders of the advanced thought of the age with an ideological pivot.’ In 1887 they looked especially to the Knights of Labor. Keir Hardie had already drafted a programme for the Sons of Labour, based on that of the Knights, in the July issue of his journal, The Miner. In the following year this name reappeared as the title of a new organisation in the Lanarkshire mining towns. Its founder, William Bulloch, had attempted to revive trade unionism in the coalfields for some time and had experimented with another new organisation at Kilsyth in March. In April 1888, Bulloch opened Mother Lodge No. 1 of the Sons of Labour at Maryhill. Another lodge soon opened at Lambhill and by the end of July 1889, Blantyre miners met to draft a constitution for their new order, ‘on the lines of the Knights of Labour.’ By January 1889, reports claimed that the Sons of Labour numbered 14,000 members throughout Lanarkshire. This estimate may have been optimistic, but as late as March of that year, the Dundee Courier reported that ‘the “Sons of Labour” are prosecuting their cause with vigour amongst the mining districts throughout the West of Scotland, and week by week report considerable accession to their members.’ Yet the Amalgamated Order of the Sons of Labour, as it became known, came to an end in 1890. Lanarkshire’s coal miners soon returned to a more orthodox trade unionism.

There are no signs that the Sons of Labour ever affiliated themselves with the Knights in Britain or the United States. One knowledgeable source claimed that Bulloch was less the founder than the ‘introducer of the order into Scotland’; a newspaper report mentioned that local seamen had received a £25 cheque from ‘the Sons of Labour in the neighbourhood of Birmingham,’ suggesting that they were the same in all but name. Yet the Sons of Labour registered as a trade union with the Registrar of Trade Unions, listing their headquarters in Airdrie, and never referred to the Knights in their rulebook. The Knights’ records contain no reference to their almost namesake. The two orders had much in common, however.

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73 Young, ‘Changing Images,’ pp. 84–85.
74 See, for instance, The Miner, August and November 1887, and January and February 1888; for the Kilsyth Miners and Labourers’ Association, see The Miner, April 1888.
75 Campbell, Scottish Miners, p. 36; The Miner, June 1888; Glasgow Herald, 31 July 1888.
76 Birmingham Daily Post, 4 January 1889.
77 Dundee Courier, 22 March 1889.
78 For a more detailed history of the Sons of Labour see Frame, America and the Scottish Left, pp. 129–56.
79 Labour Tribune, 23 February 1889; The Scotsman, 14 February 1889.
80 Rules of the Amalgamated Order of the Sons of Labour, National Archives of Scotland, FS7/75.
Early newspaper reports concerning the Sons of Labour referred to either lodges or local assemblies, based at individual collieries. Sometimes these assemblies met as ‘Trades Councils of the Sons of Labour’ when discussing specifically industrial questions; at other times, they organised ‘general assemblies,’ which denoted a meeting of any large body of its representatives and not an annual gathering as it did for American Knights. In 1889, representatives held general assemblies in February, April and June.

The rulebook of the Amalgamated Order suggests that the Sons of Labour evolved over the course of their short history. That document placed the Amalgamated Order’s administration in the hands of a district assembly, to which local assemblies at all the various collieries became subordinated. The leadership of the local assemblies was vested in a Master Workman, and each assembly elected a Worthy Foreman, secretary and treasurer, as the Knights did with their assemblies. But the rulebook also dictated the election of an Agent, under the control of the district assembly, who would ‘receive for his services such remuneration as the members of the Association shall decide.’ The Amalgamated Order held the Agent responsible for the day-to-day organising work while the Master Workman presided over meetings. The Sons of Labour, in other words, appeared to be a curious hybrid between the organisation of the Knights and the demands of a conventional coal miners’ union.

The leaders of the Amalgamated Order emphasised certain features of both and discarded others. They certainly adopted a strict veil of secrecy to avoid what one miner described as ‘the victimisation which is practiced by employers [and] prevents the very best men in the mines from taking part in union work.’ There is one reference to ritual, from an unconvinced miner at a meeting in Maryhill – but only one, and from the absence of any ceremony in the rulebook or in other sources, we must assume that the Sons of Labour placed little weight in fraternal rites. The same applies to education which, William Bulloch claimed in May 1888, was ‘another of the higher

81 Glasgow Herald, 19 April 1889.
82 For ‘Trades Councils,’ see for instance Glasgow Herald, 8 February 1889; Glasgow Weekly Mail, 9 February 1889.
83 Glasgow Herald, 8 February, 19 April and 25 June 1889.
84 Rules of the Amalgamated Order of the Sons of Labour, p. 4.
85 Labour Tribune, 16 February 1889. Even those titles which the Lanarkshire miners borrowed from the Knights, such as the office of Worthy Foreman, which dealt mainly with the ritualistic and ceremonial elements of assembly-room culture, were given other functions. In the Amalgamated Order, for instance, the Worthy Foreman acted as no more than a deputy to the Master Workman (Rules of the Amalgamated Order of the Sons of Labour, p. 4).
86 Glasgow Herald, 17 May 1889.
duties of a local assembly or lodge.'87 No further references to educational activities have survived. On the other hand, the Sons of Labour envisaged a system of benefits from the very beginning. Each member was entitled to a funeral benefit and, according to one report, also in case of sickness.88 Taken together, it seems clear that from this merger of the Knights and local union traditions, the leaders of the Sons of Labour hoped to make their Amalgamated Order the vanguard of a new and improved industrial miners’ union in the west of Scotland and, perhaps, the rest of the country. Where the British and Irish Knights tried to transplant the American Order wholesale, the coal miners of Lanarkshire took what they wanted from that model as a way to quickly revive organisation in the county.

Workers in northeastern England, by contrast, used the Order’s name to construct their own benefit society. Glassworkers in Sunderland had proved less successful than their colleagues at Spon Lane in spreading their order beyond the glass trades. But at the end of 1888 a new organisation appeared in Sunderland which called itself the Knights of Labour. Initially, the leaders of this new organisation insisted that ‘this society would be governed by the rules and regulations of the American societies from the head branch,’ which they erroneously located in New York, and at a subsequent meeting ‘referred to what their brothers in the States intended doing for them.’89 Some of the leading figures of this order had the same surnames as the leaders of LA3504, and though this is not conclusive proof of links between the two organisations it nevertheless suggests that some connections existed at first.

In its first few months the new organisation certainly adopted some of the rhetoric of the American Order. ‘As an order they had a higher mission to serve than the forming of a mere political party,’ their first president claimed, and ‘by far the highest motive that concerned them was the education of the masses to that point where they would fully see, not only their wrongs and degradation, but a full and final solution of the labour problem.’90 At a meeting of one of their early branches they intended ‘to see that a man could secure a fair day’s payment for a fair day’s work,’ and noted the poor wages of workers employed on the Wear.91 The object of their branches, they claimed, was ‘to unite together all working men to form an organisation to assist one another in case of sickness and strikes.’92 Their first plan, in November

87 The Miner, May 1888.
88 Rules of the Amalgamated Order of the Sons of Labour, pp. 9–10; Dundee Courier, 1 February 1889.
89 Sunderland Daily Echo, 21 and 27 November 1888.
90 Sunderland Daily Echo, 11 December 1888.
91 Sunderland Daily Echo, 18 December 1888.
92 Sunderland Daily Echo, 21 November 1888.
1888, stipulated that for an entrance fee of 4d and weekly contributions of 3d, members received 6s per week in strike benefits, sickness benefits of 10s per week for the first 24 weeks and 5s thereafter, and £5 in funeral benefits.\textsuperscript{93}

With that plan in mind, this new northeastern order grew quickly. By July 1889, the All-England Royal Order of the Knights of Labour, whose name soon changed to the British United Order, boasted 18 branches and 4,000 members.\textsuperscript{94} By June of the following year that number reached 12,000.\textsuperscript{95} But with this growth they soon abandoned everything of the Knights except their name, and became indistinguishable from any other English friendly society. They kept titles and ritual, which these societies shared with the Knights, but their titles, from Grand National Presidents to Grand National Secretaries, could have been borrowed from any number of fraternal orders.\textsuperscript{96} The British United Order of Oddfellows was their most likely model – one of their members had served as its Grand Master, and they became a British United Order themselves.\textsuperscript{97} They made no attempt to compete with or even complement local trade unions. Instead they began to compete with more traditional forms of local social insurance, usually based around collections made at public houses.\textsuperscript{98} The appointment of a medical officer to oversee sickness payments, and an auditor to ensure the accuracy of the necessary bookkeeping, became in consequence the most important decisions facing the lodges of the British United Order.

The Order registered as a friendly society at the beginning of 1890.\textsuperscript{99} Their members joined marches with other friendly societies in church parades,\textsuperscript{100} in celebration of the opening of a new park in South Shields\textsuperscript{101} and in galas which brought together all friendly societies in the local area.\textsuperscript{102} They organised benefit concerts for the death of at least one member.\textsuperscript{103} At the ‘Annual Moveable Delegation’ of the British United Order in June 1890 – a term that owed nothing to the American Knights – the leaders themselves admitted, implicitly at least, that their order differed in name

\textsuperscript{93} Sunderland Daily Echo, 21 November 1888.
\textsuperscript{94} Sunderland Daily Echo, 9 July 1889.
\textsuperscript{95} Sunderland Daily Echo, 2 June 1890.
\textsuperscript{96} For the initiation of new members at a branch meeting in Monkwearouth, in Sunderland Daily Echo, 4 December 1889; for the opening ceremony of a new branch, see Sunderland Daily Echo, 29 December 1888.
\textsuperscript{97} Sunderland Daily Echo, 8 July 1889.
\textsuperscript{98} Morpeth Herald, 9 and 30 November 1889.
\textsuperscript{99} Sunderland Daily Echo, 11 February 1890.
\textsuperscript{100} Shields Daily Gazette, 20 July 1889.
\textsuperscript{101} Shields Daily Gazette, 16 June 1890.
\textsuperscript{102} Shields Daily Gazette, 7 August 1890.
\textsuperscript{103} Shields Daily Gazette, 1 October 1889.
only from any other local, rival society based on social insurance. Balance sheets and the ratio of contributions to payments, and nothing else, dominated all discussion. It only took just over a year for them to take the final step and replace their name with a more suitable English one. In 1891, the lodge at Shildon restyled itself, appropriately enough, as the Independent Order of St George. Other branches soon began styling themselves as ‘late Knights of Labour.’ Finally, in 1892, most of the lodges reorganised themselves as the Durham Conquerors Friendly Society though they did, initially at least, keep the phrase ‘late Knights of Labour’ in brackets at the end.

That did not immediately mean the end of this group of Knights in the northeast. As late as 1897, a friendly society calling itself the Knights of Labour marched in a procession alongside friendly societies in South Shields. This may have been the Independent Order of the Knights of Labour, created in Jarrow in 1889, which was organised along industrial lines; or else some lodges maintained their name and continued for some time without any notice from the press. As far south of Sunderland as Hull, a ‘Knights of Labour Recreation Club’ briefly flourished in 1893 and showed signs of affiliation with the British United Order, or at least its remnants. Like the Sons of Labour, those orders showed that the Knights of Labor were as flexible an instrument as Robert Weir has claimed. Their many changes to the Order’s model further illustrate how closely the Order’s British and Irish assemblies followed it. Actual Knights in Britain and Ireland did not dine à la carte from the Order’s menu of official guidelines, practices and methods. Yet they did depart in one crucial respect from their American brethren: and that departure concerned the place – or the absence – of women in their respective assemblies.

Gender and the British and Irish Knights

As we saw in the previous chapter, scholars rightly recognise the Knights of Labor as the first major experiment in multiracial organising in American labour history. They carried that effort into the realm of gender too. Female and black workers each represented around 10 percent of the Order’s total American membership in the mid-1880s. The Knights took that record
with them when they expanded abroad, with mixed results. Knights in New Zealand welcomed women and fought for female suffrage, and made repeated and relatively successful attempts to organise Maori workers. On the other hand, Knights in South Africa seem to have been exclusively male and prohibited black workers from joining their assemblies.¹¹⁰ The other non-American assemblies fell somewhere in between these two poles. Knights could use their order to include; they could also use it to exclude.

American Knights took the inclusion of women to unprecedented heights. More than 400 assemblies included women, two-thirds of them separately and the rest mixed with men, and all women became members on an equal standing with men. The Knights boasted around 65,000 female members in 1887, about 10 percent of the total membership. To put this in perspective, women made up around 10 percent of the total American workforce at this time.¹¹¹ Female Knights also rose to positions of leadership. Elizabeth Rodgers became Master Workman of Chicago’s District Assembly 24, composed of around 50,000 members, while at the same time raising ten children.¹¹² Eleven female delegates attended the Richmond General Assembly in 1886. That convention created a Department of Women’s Work, headed by Leonora Barry, an Irish-born widow and seamstress who toured the country lecturing and investigating the conditions of women workers. In the words of one contemporary, she became ‘to the women of the Order, what Terence Powderly is to the men.’¹¹³ The Knights also allied themselves with advocates of temperance and women’s rights. Famous early feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton joined the Order.¹¹⁴ Powderly developed close ties with Frances Willard, whose Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) became a significant body in the United States and opened branches throughout the English-speaking world.¹¹⁵

These achievements put them well ahead of their British and Irish sisters. Women joined some trade unions and attended Trades Union Congresses from the 1870s onwards, but their representatives there often faced contempt and hostility from the male delegates.¹¹⁶ The Women’s Protective and

¹¹⁰ Weir, Knights Down Under. Some scholars have even seen the South African Knights as contributors to the emergence of apartheid within the South African labour movement. See Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, p. 45.
¹¹¹ Levine, Labor’s True Woman, p. 106.
¹¹² Belfast News-Letter, 28 September 1886; Montgomery, Fall of the House of Labor, p. 147.
¹¹³ Quoted in Levine, Labor’s True Woman, p. 105.
¹¹⁴ Weir, Beyond Labor’s Veil, p. 7.
¹¹⁵ For the WCTU and its international branches see Tyrell, Woman’s World.
Provident League – whose founder, Emma Paterson, had been inspired to create the league through her experience of women’s trade unionism on honeymoon in New York in 1873 – tried to alter this picture, and enjoyed some small success in the nineteenth century. But they could not compete with the record of the Knights of Labor. One correspondent to the Women’s Union Journal, the organ of the Women’s Protective and Provident League, urged her sisters to heed the Order’s example. ‘The men and women of that noble order work side by side,’ she wrote. ‘They do not try to crush the women and also what is quite as important the women don’t crush the men in the way of working for less wages while doing the same work.’ She suggested that they get more information from the Knights themselves, adding that ‘some help may be gained even if we do not follow quite in their footsteps.’

The Order’s advanced position on the inclusion of women, and the relatively backward position of the British trade unions, should have given the young British and Irish assemblies ample reason to organise sisters as well as brothers. Yet they failed to follow in the footsteps of their own order. When James P. Archibald told an audience of Knights at Cradley Heath that ‘he hoped assemblies of women would be formed, for by their elevation the men would become more successful, and homes would be made happier,’ they responded with applause. But they did nothing more than repeat demands that women should receive equal pay for equal work. The only evidence we have for women Knights in Britain comes from George Barnsby, who remarks that an assembly in Lye had ‘a separate female section.’ The only other women present at assembly meetings were the friends or the wives of male members. Ironworking Knights at Lye actually went on a number of strikes to expunge female labour from their industry. Even when they supported the organisation of women in public, they did not suggest their order as a possible home. James Brown of LA3504 voiced his support for female trade unionism in 1891, but only as part of the

118 The Women’s Union Journal, 15 November 1887.
119 Preamble of the British National Assembly, p. 52.
121 In one suggestive passage, ‘only members of the Order and their wives’ were admitted to hear a speech from Henry George at Smethwick in 1888. See Smethwick Telephone, 8 December 1888.
Female Workers’ Union of Great Britain. Nor can we argue simply that the Knights organised exclusively in male-dominated trades, which they did, for that leaves open the question of why they failed to target industries where women were numerous. American Knights practised gender inclusion; British and Irish Knights most certainly did not.

This difference would be easier to explain if the British and Irish Knights did not follow their order’s example in most respects. Paradoxically, they did their best to follow that example on gender questions too. While the Knights went further when it came to organising women than any of their contemporaries, they were, of course, hardly the avant-garde of a gender-neutral, post-patriarchal utopia. Many American Knights, Susan Levine writes, ‘did not accept their sister Knights willingly.’ Knights only admitted women as members from 1881, and then only due to local initiatives which the next General Assembly accepted as a fait accompli. Even those who were more willing to organise women workers usually still viewed them as only temporary sojourners in the workforce who would, as the conditions of life improved, return to their ‘natural’ place in the home. As Levine argues, even female Knights, along with many nineteenth-century feminists, ‘believed in a particularly feminine sensibility, one that upheld the values of hearth and home and that could at the same time infuse the public world with a more moral, humane, and cooperative character.’ For Levine, the great achievement of the Knights was that they viewed women as productive citizens not only during their short stay in the labour market, but also through their domestic functions, and reconciled the private, feminine domestic sphere with the public sphere of the labour movement.

That complicated brew failed to survive the journey across the Atlantic, and visiting American Knights did not make it any easier to understand. At the same time that Archibald called on Knights in Cradley Heath to form female assemblies, he told them that it ‘was revolting to see women forging red hot iron in that country, and he hoped the day would not be far distant when it would be illegal for women to do such work.’ When Leonora Barry visited Cradley Heath in 1889, on her way to the Paris Exposition as part of a delegation of representative American workers, she ‘considered it a disgrace to civilization that women with babies should be engaged in making chain, and that their children should be practically reared in the chainshops.’

123 Sunderland Daily Echo, 15 April 1891.
124 Levine, Labor’s True Woman, p. 111.
125 Levine, Labor’s True Woman, p. 121.
126 Midland Counties Express, 12 September 1889.
127 Dudley Herald, 10 August 1889.
Chain makers agreed that the solution to problems in their industry lay in the prohibition or restriction of women from their trade.¹²⁸

British Knights took a very similar view. Ironworkers at Lye opposed female labour on very similar grounds to the chain makers: local ironmasters employed women on their machines and thus directly threatened the livelihood of their male co-workers.¹²⁹ Samuel Reeves adopted the same logic at a meeting of Bootle’s LA₄₄₃ in December 1889. ‘At the present time,’ he claimed, ‘male labour in many branches of the trade was being rapidly supplanted by females.’ If women were not given equal pay to men or, preferably, were removed from paid employment altogether, Reeves argued that the very world of gender relations would be turned completely, and disastrously, upside down. ‘In a large number of industries,’ he explained, ‘the husbands had to remain idle while the wife was forced to become the bread-winner.’¹³⁰ Men must exclude women from the labour market before the reverse became true. And Reeves was only echoing Archibald’s claim, made at a meeting at Bootle two months earlier, that ‘in many of the industries in America – particularly in the weaving sheds and shoemaking – women were driving their fathers, husbands, and brothers from the field, and were taking their places.’¹³¹ As with other questions of culture and organisation, British and Irish Knights followed what they thought their American representatives were saying on the subject of gender. Archibald and Barry, after all, seemed to echo the views of local trade unionists who wished to exclude women workers from the labour market altogether, rather than recruit them as members.

Wider differences between the American and British assemblies also encouraged different outcomes when it came to female membership. The American Knights emerged from, and remained closely linked to, an American reform tradition that made some room for the concerns of women.¹³² Women played a major part in the work of the Grangers, a reformist society devoted to the interests of farmers, from the 1860s onwards.¹³³ The second congress in 1868 of the National Labor Union, a predecessor of the Knights, publicly called for women to ‘join our labor

¹³⁰ *Halfpenny Weekly*, 7 December 1889.
¹³¹ *Bootle Times*, 28 September 1889.
¹³² One recent synthesis of the tradition which, though it tends to overemphasise the egalitarian tendencies of American reformers compared with the distinctly non-egalitarian tendencies of the immigrant socialists, does demonstrate the links between women’s rights and wider reform, is Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International*.
unions or form protective unions of [your] own,' and the women's suffrage movement formed close links with the NLU before it collapsed at the beginning of the next decade.\textsuperscript{134} The Knights built on these precedents, ensuring that they were willing from the outset to consider the possibility of female members, and could count on active support in this regard from significant women's organisations such as the WCTU\textsuperscript{135}

British Knights swallowed their order more or less whole, but they remained cut off by the width of the Atlantic from this reform tradition and its implications for female membership. As Robin Miller Jacoby argues, at this time women trade unionists had fewer middle-class allies in Britain than the United States, leaving them more isolated within the wider labour movement. Electoral calculations played an important role here. American feminists operated in a political system with universal male suffrage and naturally appealed to working-class women, and the labour movement in general, in order to win female suffrage. In Britain, with limited male suffrage, many feminists were more inclined to seek suffrage for women with the same property qualifications as men and so had less need of working-class women as allies than in the United States. The infrastructure of interlocking organisations and causes that brought women's suffrage, temperance and women themselves into the heart of the American Knights of Labor did not exist to anywhere near the same extent in Britain and Ireland.\textsuperscript{136} Many British trade unions, for their part, kept organisations like the Women's Protective and Provident League at arm's length and often tended to view women workers as part of an unorganisable residuum.

In the absence of this reform tradition, and the institutional infrastructure that made it so (relatively) successful, it is not surprising that Knights in the British Isles ended up emphasising certain aspects of their order's gender stances and downplaying others.

These differences also ensured that they interpreted other inheritances from their order in particular and male-only ways. British and Irish Knights faithfully adopted the secret and fraternal forms of the Knights of Labor in their own assemblies, and nineteenth-century fraternalism was very much a masculine affair on both sides of the Atlantic. Many fraternal orders, particularly those of lower-class origins like the Oddfellows, had begun on the basis of 'conviviality,' which essentially meant group (male)

\textsuperscript{135} Even as late as 1893, for example, Willard and Powderly continued to exchange correspondence and promote an exchange of newspaper columns and fraternal delegates between their two organisations. See particularly Frances Willard to Powderly, 25 August 1891, Box 68, TVP; Frances Willard to Powderly, 8 August 1893, Box 80, TVP.
\textsuperscript{136} Jacoby, \textit{Women Trade Union Leagues}, p. 2.
drinking. Even after the temperance movement challenged these traditions from the mid-nineteenth century, fraternalism still provided an alternative male social world, free of both the saloon – in situations where the public consumption of alcohol was no longer socially accepted – and the feminised, domestic world of the home. ‘The fraternal order,’ Mary Ann Clawson writes, ‘provided a way for men to comply with the norm of temperance without acceding to the attack on the male social world that it could imply.’

Indeed, these orders played a vital role in the construction, maintenance and development of masculinity in the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic. ‘Friendly societies,’ Simon Cordery concludes, ‘contributed to the nineteenth-century move toward excluding women from public space.’

A joke that appeared in newspapers during the 1890s, on both sides of the Atlantic, made this gender segregation very clear. A woman’s hopes to bring friends over in the evening are soon dashed by the very active fraternal life of her husband. ‘No my dear, I must attend the meeting of the Ancient Order of Foresters to-night,’ he says to Monday evening. Tuesday is reserved for the Ancient Order of United Workmen; Wednesday the Oddfellows; Thursday the Knights of Labour; Friday the Royal Templars of Temperance; Saturday a special meeting of the Social Circle; and Sunday, the Grand and Ancient Order of Christian Fellowship. The woman then delivers the punchline. “But you have forgotten another society, John,” she says, “of which you were once a member.” “What’s that?” he asks. “Your wife’s.”

The Knights of Labor reflected the masculine assumptions behind this fraternal tradition. Like men in other fraternal orders, some male American Knights resented a female presence in their assemblies and claimed that women, supposedly natural gossips, would inevitably betray the secrets of the Order’s ritual and ceremonies. From the standpoint of female American Knights, fraternal culture was both unfamiliar and uncongenial. Even Robert Weir, who bucked the historiographical trend with his argument that fraternalism ‘built community’ and encouraged solidarity in a way that material self-interest could not, points out that the Order’s fraternal culture never attracted women.

138 See especially Clawson, Constructing Brotherhood; Carnes, Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America.
139 Cordery, British Friendly Societies, p. 181.
140 Northeastern Gazette, 28 November 1892.
141 Weir, Beyond Labor’s Veil, p. 52.
all ritual from their meetings.\textsuperscript{143} In the face of these powerful social norms it is surprising that as many women flocked to the Knights as they did. Among friendly societies and fraternal orders, the Knights were unique even in their own, home context.

Prospective female Knights in Britain and Ireland faced an additional problem. In Britain, probably more than in the United States, friendly societies and fraternal orders maintained close connections with public houses and hotels, which in turn provided private lodge rooms for their use. A meeting of a fraternal order was already considered a masculine space; the hotel and the public house was a masculine space in its own right. The pub, as Geoffrey Best writes, remained ‘a power base distinct from that of the home’ and, in the words of Valerie Hey, even served as ‘female substitutes’ that offered men ‘plentitude, availability, warmth, food, and companionship, [and] a servicing of male needs.’ These included sexual needs, and the association of female patrons with prostitution further marked out pubs and hotels as places that respectable women should avoid.\textsuperscript{144} These trends slowly began to change. Towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, wives began to join their husbands at the pub or husbands drank at home.\textsuperscript{145} But in the late nineteenth century pubs remained, as Hey entitled one of the chapters of her work, ‘masculine republics on every street.’\textsuperscript{146}

British Knights met at these places to keep their identities hidden from hostile employers. By doing so, however, they made it virtually impossible for respectable women to attend their meetings, except as the wife of a member at certain social occasions. The very air of these spaces also choked off any desire of any women to enter them, literally and metaphorically. News reports described the ‘tobacco-laden atmosphere’ in which meetings of the British assemblies were held.\textsuperscript{147} Female American Knights certainly complained about the prevalence of smoking and tobacco chewing among their male counterparts. They, at least, had the option of all-women assemblies and alternative meeting places to escape these habits; aside from a single adjunct to an assembly in Lye, women had no such option in Britain and Ireland.\textsuperscript{148}

In time the British and Irish assemblies may have found ways to encourage women to join their ranks. It took 12 years, after all, for the American


\textsuperscript{146} Hey, \textit{Pub Culture and Patriarchy}, ch. 1.

\textsuperscript{147} Walsall Observer, 10 May 1890.

\textsuperscript{148} Levine, \textit{Labor’s True Woman}, p. 117; Weir, \textit{Beyond Labor’s Veil}, p. 55.
Order to admit its first female member. But Knights across the Atlantic were denied that luxury. Had they grown further they might have become able to forge alliances with women trade unionists and the wider women’s movement. They might then have managed to build local centres, as they hoped to do in Birmingham and briefly did at Derry, which in time could have provided an alternative to the male-only spaces of the lodge rooms. But this is only conjecture. Knights in Britain and Ireland took what they saw to be their order’s message and methods, compared them with local practice, and ended up with assemblies of men and men only.

British and Irish Knights also lacked the powerful stimulus of social conflict that led American Knights to encourage female membership. Their immersion in an American reform tradition where women’s issues were given some credence does not explain why they organised so many women in such a short space of time in the mid-1880s. In those years the Great Upheaval became a social explosion that surpassed its predecessor in 1877. And social upheavals of that kind create spaces where women can emerge as independent actors in ways considered unthinkable at other times. The French and Russian Revolutions, the Paris Commune, the struggles of the 1960s and the protests on Tahrir Square, among others, all bear this point out. So does the Great Upheaval. The women who joined the American Knights of Labor benefited from this temporary loosening (certainly not an abandonment!) of gender divisions in the public sphere. The masculine bonds which restricted female membership in the Order also loosened for a time, although they strengthened again, of course, as the Upheaval subsided and the Order declined.

This powerful intersection between class struggle and gender relations has a British precedent too. Robert Owen’s Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, as we saw in Chapter 1, resembled the Knights in its aim to organise all workers under a single banner and its reliance on some level of secrecy, oath taking and fraternal rites. It also set out with enthusiasm to organise women workers into its ranks. Like the Knights it rose and fell in the midst of a social upheaval which in time produced the Chartists. The judgement of J.L. Hammond concerning the Grand National is reminiscent of the Knights: that union, he wrote, organised ‘classes like agricultural labourers and women workers for whom combination seemed impossible except under some unusual stimulus of despair or excitement.’ Throughout

the nineteenth century, in other words, large-scale and integrated female participation in the labour movement remained an exception to a set of very powerful rules. Only in the fires of mass struggle – Hammond’s ‘unusual stimulus of despair or excitement’ – would these rules lose some of their power, and only for a brief time. The American Knights and the British Grand National, in their own times, showed that these rules could be overcome, however briefly.

The British Knights went through no such upheaval. Even in the upsurge of British trade unionism in 1889–91 they played only a minor role. They remained bound to the masculine characteristics of their order even as Knights in America temporarily qualified – but did not entirely drop – them. But the fact that they never had their Great Upheaval should not distract us from the fact that the British Knights missed an obvious chance to make a far greater contribution to the British labour movement – and to boost their own numbers – than they eventually did. Viewed through the lens of their British and Irish history, the American Knights of Labor, for all of their faults and shortcomings, appear even more impressive and unique in their attitudes towards women in the workplace than when viewed from a solely American perspective.

Conclusion: Lost in Translation?

In 1888, the Journal of United Labor carried an unusual story from across the Atlantic. A Bishop Burrows of London, called on to deliver his 1887 Christmas sermon, addressed his congregation as ‘fellow citizens’ and promised to start with a scriptural injunction from the Epistle of James: ‘Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.’ In the course of a dramatic speech the bishop attacked the Church, declared that he had been living in a fool’s paradise and announced his intention to renounce his bishopric, his palace, his seat in the House of Lords, his £10,000 stipend, ‘devote his life to the cause of suffering humanity’ and henceforth preach socialism on Trafalgar Square. Terence Powderly hailed the bishop’s conversion as an outstanding symbol of the righteousness of labour’s cause; numerous enquiries reached London from Americans anxious to read more sermons from the infamous and presumably now ex-bishop. Yet Bishop Burrows, much to the consternation of his admirers across the Atlantic, was none other than Herbert Burrows of the Marxist Social-Democratic Federation. His sermon was a small literary effort in Justice, the SDF’s weekly newspaper. The result, as the New York Times’s English correspondent related, was that ‘a great deal of amusement has been caused in Socialist circles here.’ Justice, for its part, commented
on the degree of American confusion and gleefully added that the sermon would ‘shortly be republished with notes and additions.’\textsuperscript{151}

There are few better symbols of transatlantic misunderstandings than this one. And as we have seen in this chapter, these misunderstandings could run across the ocean in both directions. A transnational order like the Knights, with its many contradictory stances and practices across a wide range of cultural, economic and political issues, was in greater danger of being misunderstood than most. That is not to say that British and Irish Knights did not do their best to adapt themselves to their new order as much as the other way around. They took the Order’s secrecy more seriously than most American assemblies. They left the titles and the ritual of assembly room practice intact. They relished the educational goals of their order and did their best to follow the American example and turn their assemblies into centres of local working-class social and cultural life. They followed the cultural prescriptions of the Order as far as they could and yet they departed so far from that order when it came to half of the human race.

That departure occurred partly because the American Knights emerged from a tradition favourable to the organisation of women that the British and Irish Knights did not share. It also occurred because American Knights did not – perhaps could not – adequately explain to their brothers in the British Isles the many complexities and contradictions that attended their own stance on gender questions. Left largely to their own devices, British and Irish Knights took what they could and reconciled it with local custom. This was true when it came to economic questions, it was true when it came to fraternal culture and it was true when it came to meeting at hotels and pubs. In each case they understood what they could of their order’s positions and ended up excluding women altogether.

As a series of misunderstandings, this far outdid the prank that ‘Bishop Burrows’ inadvertently played on Powderly and the \textit{Journal of United Labor}. That only cost the General Master Workman a few blushes. The absence of women in the British and Irish assemblies cost them the chance to play the role that many local radicals, feminists and trade unionists thought and hoped they would play – to advance the cause of female trade unionism on a par with the relative triumphs of their American brothers and sisters. But perhaps that is too harsh a verdict. The uniqueness of the Knights on gender as on racial issues was so much a product of the environment in which it rose and fell. The American Knights provided the institutional form for one of the great social upheavals of the late nineteenth century. The British and Irish Knights remained a graft from a successful American Order. In the light of these differences we find yet another reason to suppose that

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Justice}, 20 October 1888; \textit{New York Times}, 5 August 1888.
principles and contexts are important, but material conflicts and struggles are just as, if not more, important when it comes to practical and not merely rhetorical support for gender equality, or some moves towards it.

Not all British workers in this story found that misunderstandings became a problem. Coal miners in Lanarkshire took what they knew and wanted from the Knights of Labor’s model and used it to build the Sons of Labour. Half secret fraternal order, half conventional coal miners’ union, the Sons of Labour allowed the Lanarkshire miners to revive some kind of organisation after their strike was defeated in 1887. The Knights also lent their topical name to the British United Order in Sunderland and then the wider northeast, which initially looked as if it might ape the practices of its namesake but quickly became a run-of-the-mill English benefits society. When the name lost its appeal they soon found a suitable English one instead. These examples, and even George Mitchell’s attempt to build a copy of the Knights of Labor among the agricultural workers of Somerset, demonstrate the flexibility of the Order which Robert Weir emphasises so strongly. Indeed, it could function well enough even if it was misunderstood or if its methods were only partially followed; even if it led to the \textit{de facto} exclusion of women as a body. The next chapter, which looks at the Knights and industrial relations broadly conceived, further develops these arguments and sees how Knights interpreted the industrial methods and aims of their order in the workplace as well as in the lodge room.