Knights Across the Atlantic

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In February 1887, representatives of ironworkers throughout the Black Country met at Brierley Hill to discuss whether they should attend a conference organised by trade unionists in the north of England. A delegate from the Corngreaves works in Cradley Heath suggested that they form assemblies of the Knights of Labor instead. The representatives then debated the relative merits of each organisation and argued over the costs that each would impose on their members. One delegate then introduced a new theme into the discussion. ‘He objected,’ one newspaper reported, ‘to the introduction of politics in trade matters.’ Many of his colleagues voiced their agreement. ‘The Knights of Labour,’ he continued, ‘were always interfering in politics.’ After his speech, the meeting then voted to attend the conference instead of joining the Knights. The speaker’s fears were also confirmed by the Order’s history in Britain and Ireland. Over the course of that history the Knights of Labor certainly interfered in politics.

American Knights always remained ambivalent about the Order’s political role. Terence Powderly saw it as something ‘more and higher’ than a political party. Partisan loyalties had often divided the American labour movement in the past, most notably the Order’s predecessor in the 1860s and 1870s, the National Labor Union. Powderly and other leading Knights enjoined their members to keep party politics out of the assemblies, and counselled further education in the principles of philosophy and political economy instead. Practical political concerns found their way into the Knights of Labor anyway. The glassworkers of LA300 paid Ralph Beaumont to lobby the Houses of Congress for legislation in the working-class interest. Knights pioneered the practice of ‘rewarding friends and punishing enemies’ whereby they encouraged members to vote for candidates who endorsed the

1 Birmingham Daily Post, 1 March, 1887.
Order’s programme, which later became the stated policy of the American Federation of Labor. The Knights never officially aligned themselves with a political party until the mid-1890s, when the last surviving assemblies briefly cast their lot with the Populist Party. All the Order’s leaders, however, dabbled in partisan politics at some stage. Uriah Stephens resigned as Grand Master Workman to run for Congress as a Greenback-Labor Party candidate; Powderly, his successor, became Grand Master Workman while already serving as the Mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania.³

The assemblies also led an unprecedented political mobilisation of American workers during the Great Upheaval. In 1886 and 1887, American workers created dozens of new, independent labour parties in almost every state of the Union, or wrested control of their local Democratic or Republican parties from the political elites that controlled them.⁴ The most famous campaign centred on the mayoralty of New York, where Henry George ran in 1886 as a candidate of the new United Labor Party. He polled nearly 70,000 votes, only 20,000 less than the Democratic candidate Abram Hewitt and more than the Republican candidate, one Theodore Roosevelt. Many workers believed that Hewitt, and the infamous Tammany Hall machine that supported him, only defeated George thanks to widespread electoral fraud.⁵ And New York was not the only place where the old political order appeared on the verge of collapse. The newly minted United Labor Party won more than a quarter of the vote for the mayoralty of Chicago, the People’s Party won the mayoralty of Milwaukee and similar results poured in from virtually every state in the Union. A small number of Knights even won election to the House of Representatives.⁶

That political mobilisation subsided towards the end of the decade, along with the membership of the American Knights of Labor; yet their enthusiasm infected Knights all over the planet. Anarchists, single-taxers and advocates of working-class politics in Australia seized on the Order as a vehicle for their propaganda.⁷ South African Knights attempted to form a political movement that would end the symbiotic relationship between De Beers and the governance of the Cape Colony, and they hoped to vote out of office the chief symbol of that relationship, Prime Minister and De Beers director Cecil Rhodes.⁸ Knights in Belgium became active in the...
agitation and protests for universal male suffrage throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The Order’s New Zealand assemblies enjoyed the greatest political victories of all. More than a dozen Knights entered the colonial legislature and John Ballance, the Premier of the colony between 1890 and 1893, joined an assembly as well. The assemblies became powerful political machines, and their lobbying was instrumental in the passage of landmark legislation, from female suffrage to laws mandating compulsory arbitration and conciliation, that earned New Zealand world recognition as a pioneer in social legislation. Few Knights across the world followed Powderly’s injunction to keep their order out of politics.

British and Irish Knights never built political machines on anything like the scale of their American cousins. They never came close to equaling the legislative record of Knights in New Zealand. But they did become part of one of the great stories of British labour history: the birth of the British Labour Party as an independent force, distinct from the Liberal Party. Labour historians have constructed a compelling narrative to explain that story. As the franchise widened to include working-class electors in the second half of the nineteenth century, British trade unionists forged an alliance with the Liberal Party. As many as 12 Lib-Labs were returned to Parliament in 1885. In the following year Henry Broadhurst became the first trade unionist to serve as a junior minister in a British government. The rise of the British socialist movement, however, combined with the extension of trade unionism beyond the skilled trades hitherto organised within the TUC – the ‘new unionism’ – encouraged a growing number of trade unionists to consider the possibility of organising independently of the Liberals. Keir Hardie’s independent campaign for the Mid-Lanark by-election of 1888, the creation of the Scottish Labour Party later that year, the formation of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 and the birth of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 remain the key events and institutions that marked the road from the Lib-Labs to the Labour Party.

A number of historians have recently subjected that account to severe criticism. Some dismiss the significance of British socialists in this process. Others insist on the continued power of working-class Liberalism (and


working-class conservatism) well into the twentieth century. Still more, and particularly the contributors to Alastair Reid and Eugenio Biagini’s landmark collection of essays *Currents of Radicalism*, see the Labour Party as the natural outgrowth of the Lib-Lab movement rather than a divergence from it. Where the writers of the classic interpretation of the British Labour Party saw ruptures with existing patterns of working-class politics, revisionists see their continuation. Continuity and change, however, need not be placed in such stark opposition; out of necessity, the new arises out of the old. The British Labour Party emerged from the Lib-Lab politics of the nineteenth century; it also emerged from opposition to the Lib-Lab pact. Knights in Britain and Ireland became involved in both trends.

This chapter explores the political history of the British and Irish Knights of Labor. It looks firstly at the political affiliations that Knights brought with them into the British and Irish assemblies, so far as we can discern them. It then charts the political record of the assemblies at a municipal level. Finally, this chapter explores the engagement of British and Irish Knights with politics at a national or parliamentary level. In all these cases, as we will see, the Knights became active in many of the landmark events, institutions and currents that ultimately led to the British Labour Party.

**The Politics of the Knights of Labor**

At the 1886 General Assembly in Richmond, Terence Powderly later wrote, ‘Protectionists, Free Traders, Single Taxers, Socialists, Anarchists, Bellamyites, and Blatherskites as well as some trade-unionists, had stated openly that it was their intention to capture the Knights of Labor at Richmond and make use of it as a field for their propaganda.’ It was Powderly’s aim, he wrote, ‘to hold the Knights of Labor organization for Knights of Labor.’ That task was fruitless as well as impossible. Like any large, broadly representative labour movement, the American Knights were composed of many competing political factions, particularly but not only the ones that Powderly named. The Order’s programme outlined a series of principles, from land reform and the nationalisation of the railway and telegraph lines to their vague aspiration to ‘make industrial and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and national greatness,’ which all the factions at various points claimed as their own. That heterogeneity caused problems, as political tendencies struggled for control over the Order, but it also allowed the Knights to become the first national working-class movement in the United States.

11 Reid and Biagini, *Currents of Radicalism*.
The Knights of Labor established their assemblies in Britain and Ireland just before, and particularly during, the mass working-class political action in the United States that formed part of the Great Upheaval. That political action, particularly the Henry George campaign in New York, and to a lesser extent the other political campaigns that took place across the United States in 1886 and 1887, became major news on the other side of the Atlantic. Respectable opinion, as measured in the editorial pages of *The Times*, condemned George’s movement as ‘fooling with anarchy.’ Reynolds’s *Newspaper* saw the George campaign as the beginnings of a rejuvenation of radicalism on both sides of the ocean: ‘There was St. George; there was George Washington; there is Henry George … the platform of the Labour Party on which Mr. George stands ought to be carefully weighed by the working men of this country.’ Friedrich Engels welcomed the arrival of the American working class as an independent political force, and hoped that they would soon leave figures like Powderly and George ‘out in the cold with small sects of their own.’ Even in 1891, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling made a prediction that sounds strange to modern ears. ‘The example of the American working men will be followed before long on the European side of the Atlantic,’ they wrote. ‘An English or, if you will, a British Labour Party will be formed, foe alike to Liberal and Conservative.’

The years of the Great Upheaval, as Henry Pelling writes, ‘constitute one of the few periods when the state of political organization of the working class as such in America could be regarded as more complete than that of the British workers.’ To most British observers that unusual state of affairs was strongly associated with the Knights of Labor. *The Times* commented before the New York mayoral election that if George won, Powderly and the Knights would be to blame. Many Liberals, as one newspaper remarked in 1888, feared that the Order’s introduction into Britain would lead to independent labour candidates and a split in the Liberal vote. Reynolds’s saw the George campaign as the Knights’ first step to ‘tak[ing] possession of the political machinery of the country.’

13 *The Times*, 13 October 1886.
14 Reynolds’s, 24 October 1886.
18 *The Times*, 17 October 1886.
19*Halfpenny Weekly*, 9 June 1888.
20 Reynolds’s, 24 October 1886.
British and Irish workers of various different political backgrounds were drawn to this example, and to the Knights themselves. Some came from the radical and working-class wing of the Liberal Party, who admired and agreed with the emphasis that Knights placed on arbitration and negotiation instead of strikes, and on education and moral self-improvement. Jesse Chapman, the Master Workman of LA10227, became the secretary of the Smethwick Liberal Association in 1890 and turned it in a radical direction.\(^{21}\) The Revs Harold Rylett and T.T. Sherlock both supported the Knights in their early days in Birmingham and the Black Country, and were also strongly associated with the radical wing of the Liberal Party there. David Ben Rees describes William Newcomb, one of LA443’s early leaders, as a ‘typical Liberal/Labour social reformer.’\(^{22}\)

Socialists also entered the assemblies. In 1881, Friedrich Engels insisted that the trade unions were condemned to fight a losing struggle for higher wages and shorter hours unless they also fought the wage system itself. ‘At the side of, or above, the Unions of special trades,’ he wrote, ‘there must spring up a general Union, a political organisation of the working class as a whole.’\(^{23}\) Socialists in the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), and in the Socialist League, which split from the SDF at the end of 1884, adopted a similar attitude. Some wanted to dispense with trade unionism altogether and focus all energies on political agitation, while others insisted that the trade unions, or some new general union, must organise all workers and not simply the crafts then grouped together in the TUC.\(^{24}\) The Knights of Labor, who loudly proclaimed their opposition to the wage system, and whose members inaugurated the great American political movements of the mid-1880s, appeared to many socialists to be precisely the kind of ‘political organisation of the working class as a whole’ that they wanted to create. Marx and Aveling even described the Order’s opposition to the wage system as ‘pure and unadulterated Socialism.’\(^{25}\) The SDF’s organ, *Justice*, and

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\(^{21}\) *Smethwick Telephone*, 12 July 1890 and 9 January 1892.


\(^{24}\) For the attitudes of British socialists towards the trade unions see, amongst others, Crick, *Social-Democratic Federation*; Thompson, *William Morris*; Rabinovitch, *British Marxist Socialism*.

\(^{25}\) Marx and Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America*. 
the Socialist League’s *Commonweal*, both printed the Order’s *Declaration of Principles*. H. Halliday Sparling of the Socialist League, as we saw in Chapter 2, even asked *John Swinton’s Paper* for advice on how to organise assemblies, although he and other British socialists, along with Engels, regularly condemned Powderly and the Order’s leaders as opportunist.

J.T. Tanner, one of the SDF’s most prominent voices in Birmingham, briefly associated himself with Knights there. Samuel Reeves, a fellow SDFer and Liverpool’s best-known contemporary socialist, led Bootle’s LA443. Charles Chamberlain appeared on SDF platforms in Birmingham that called for the eight-hour day. Chamberlain, along with Tanner, Haydn Sanders and James P. Archibald, appeared at the SDF’s ninth annual convention held at Birmingham in 1889. Knights in the short-lived assembly at Preston maintained contact with the Socialist League and many of its members subscribed to *Commonweal*. Haydn Sanders, who one enemy claimed had at turns been a ‘flaming Bradlughite, a Freethinker, a Malthusian, a Spiritualist, a Liberal, a Radical, a Socialist or soloist, and goodness knows what else besides,’ also settled on the Socialist League in 1887. He formed the League’s first branch in Walsall and, in addition to his agitation around the Black Country, he became ‘responsible for the first socialist propagandist effort in north Wales to be recorded in print.’ As we will see, Sanders and other socialists in Walsall were responsible for the creation of LA454.

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26 In one meeting of the Birmingham Trades Council, Tanner described Henry Broadhurst as a sweatshop operator; at another, he described him as a traitor to the labour cause, after which he was briefly expelled from the Council (see *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8 April and 6 May 1889). Yet John Corbett writes that ‘he deserves to be remembered’ alongside John Burns and Tom Mann as one of the outstanding leaders of the ‘New Unionism’ (J. Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council: 1866–1966* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1966), p. 51). Tanner is described as a member of the Knights in *Birmingham Daily Post*, 17 June 1889.


29 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 August 1889.

30 James Riley to the Socialist League, 18 June 1887, 2572, Socialist League Archives, IISH.

31 *Walsall Free Press*, 19 January 1889. Sanders was able to appear on SDF platforms in 1889 mainly because, though the split between them and the Socialist League was rather pronounced in London, there were often no barriers between them elsewhere in the country; indeed, Sanders is listed in Martin Crick’s work on the SDF as one of the Federation’s members elected onto municipal bodies in 1889 (Crick, *Social-Democratic Federation*, p. 56).

32 For examples of Sanders reports, see *Commonweal*, 7 May, 4 June, 16 and 23 July, 3 September, 8 October, 1887. For his Wales trip see *Commonweal*, 22 October 1887. For his role as secretary see Haydn Sanders to the Socialist League, 22 August 1887, 2632, Socialist League Archives, IISH; M. Wright, *Wales and Socialism: Political Culture and National Identity, c.1880–1914* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cardiff, 2011), p. 39.
Other Knights became attracted to the Fabian Society. That organisation, composed mainly of intellectuals, fused socialist principles with the English radical Liberal tradition, and early Fabians welcomed the Order’s growth and hoped that it might soon incorporate all the American trade unions within its folds. Arthur Nadin combined his role as recording secretary of Rotherham’s LA1266 and organiser for that town’s DA256 with his position as district secretary of the Rotherham branch of the Fabian Society. Samuel Reeves left the SDF at the turn of the decade and became a leading Fabian in Liverpool. Finally, in Scotland the first openly socialist MP, the colourful aristocratic radical Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, briefly aligned himself with the assemblies around Glasgow.

Some followers of Henry George and his single tax also joined the British and Irish Knights. The strong association between George and the Order, even though their relationship remained fraught and broke down soon after the 1886 mayoral election in New York, undoubtedly encouraged single-taxers to enter the British assemblies. So did the willingness of Knights to include land reform in their Declaration of Principles. A supporter of the Knights told the Birmingham Daily Gazette in 1889 that ‘there is not an assembly in the neighbourhood of Birmingham which is not thoroughly familiar … with the main principles advocated by Mr Henry George in his work on “Progress and Poverty.”’ Further, he added, ‘that book is practically the text-book of the Knights of Labour in this country.’ One of the most strident single-taxers in the Black Country, Zebulon Butler, became a Knight and his many letters to local newspapers defended both George and the Order.

Links between the Knights and the single tax were even closer in Scotland than in England. Irish immigrants appreciated George’s advocacy on behalf of the Irish Land League, radicals who defended the Highland crofters supported George’s land reform proposals, and both filled the Scottish assemblies. James Shaw Maxwell, the future Master Workman of Scotland’s DA203, was a devotee of Henry George who stood in 1885 as a

34 Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 19 February 1891; Rees, pp. 67–71.
35 For a biography of Cunninghame Graham see C. Watts, R.B. Cunninghame Graham (Boston: Twayne, 1983).
37 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 22 February 1889.
38 For Butler’s support of George, both in terms of his New York electoral campaign and the single tax, see especially Labour Tribune, 6 and 20 November 1886. For his participation in Liberal groups see Dudley Herald, 25 January and 24 May 1890.
parliamentary candidate for the Scottish Land Restoration League, a body created after George visited Glasgow in 1884. Richard McGhee, another prominent Scottish single-taxer and one of George's closest British friends, received an organisers' charter from assemblies in the Black Country.

The British and Irish assemblies never became the province of any one of these political tendencies. Radical Liberals, Lib-Labs and single-taxers, often the same people, comprised most of the Order's members in the Black Country, aside from Walsall. There, and to an extent in Liverpool and Rotherham, leading Knights tended towards socialism. Socialists and single-taxers, again often the same people, dominated the Scottish assemblies. In Ireland, so far as we can see, most Knights were single-taxers and Irish Nationalists, which generally meant that they stood on the radical wing of the Liberal Party. These disparate political views could coexist within the Knights of Labor because the Order's programme offered something to all of them, and because they all shared one central demand: the need for more working-class representation at all levels of government. Whether British and Irish Knights worked for that goal through the Liberal Party, one of the socialist groups, an organisation of their own making, or independently of all existing parties, the principle of electing workers to represent workers remained the central theme of their history in the political arena. Naturally enough for an order whose bedrock was the local assembly, the Knights concentrated most of their political energies on municipal affairs.

The Knights and Municipal Politics

Local government in Britain changed immeasurably over the course of the nineteenth century. After the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, which reformed and regularised the governance of towns and boroughs throughout England, councils and local authorities gradually obtained an increasingly wide range of powers concerning local issues from public health and education to the provision of parks, libraries and swimming pools. As workers slowly gained voting rights towards the end of the century, they looked as much to local as to national government for ameliorative measures.

42 D. Fraser, Power and Authority in the Victorian City (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), esp. ch. 6.
and political representation. Electing one of their number as a councillor or a member of a school board was, after all, cheaper and more likely than electing them to Parliament. Local bodies could also deliver tangible and immediate improvements to the lives of working-class communities, from better street lighting to relief work for the unemployed, that need not wait on a parliamentary majority. As Shelton Stromquist writes, ‘local stories provide the building blocks for national political narratives.’ But these local stories also ‘embodied a politics of local autonomy and grassroots democracy that was tied directly to workers’ lives and their immediate, concrete needs.’ Historians of British labour have uncovered many such local stories in towns and cities across the United Kingdom, all of them showing the growing awareness of trade unionists and political activists, from Fabian advocates of ‘municipal socialism’ to SDFers like John Burns, that the conquest of municipal power was both a stepping stone to the House of Commons and an end in itself.

Assemblies of the Knights of Labor emerged in Britain and Ireland as the movement for working-class representation in local government, independent of the Liberals and Conservatives, began in earnest. Annie Besant’s election to the London School Board in 1888, and John Burns’s election to the London County Council in 1889, both on a socialist ticket, provided famous contemporary victories for that principle. Numerous trade unionists also sat on councils and school boards across the United Kingdom as Liberals or Conservatives. But in the 1880s their achievements were all outdone by the political campaigns of trade unionists, Knights particularly, across the Atlantic. Indeed, the Knights fought the vast majority of those struggles at a municipal level, against urban elites who controlled their local branches of the Democratic and Republican parties. As Leon Fink and other recent scholars have made clear, the Order’s emphasis on organising workers along geographical as much as occupational lines might have complicated industrial relations at times, but helped them to build local political movements. The Knights arrived in Britain and Ireland as the representatives of a movement with an enviable record.

45 Some notable examples include Fink, Workingmen’s Democracy; Oestreicher, Solidarity
of winning municipal contests and with an internal structure well suited to local political action.

The British and Irish assemblies needed to attract a sufficiently large membership, however, before they could exert any meaningful political influence. The first mixed assembly, LA7952, only began in June 1886 and the first district assembly, DA208, only appeared the following year. British Knights were thus unable to seize immediately on the publicity generated by their American cousins for their own political ends. Indeed, many assemblies, such as those in Wales, Ireland and Liverpool, never held sufficient members for long enough to mobilise them for political action or, especially in the Irish case, never managed to overcome the sectarianism that plagued Northern Ireland and made politics there so problematic. The British Knights only began their first political venture in Smethwick and West Bromwich, where they organised around 2,000 workers, at the end of 1888.\textsuperscript{46} At a meeting of LA7952 in December, an unnamed delegate urged Knights to make ’a new departure,’ by which he meant a break with the Liberal Party. The following speaker came straight from campaigning for Annie Besant’s election to the London School Board, and suggested that the Knights ‘put a definite programme before the labour party in this country, and make their power felt.’\textsuperscript{47} With Besant’s example fresh in their minds, and with one of their Master Workmen, Jesse Chapman, serving as the headmaster of a local school, the Knights decided on the West Bromwich School Board as their first target for political action.\textsuperscript{48}

The new Board was due to be appointed, or elected if there were more candidates than vacancies, in the middle of 1889. At the beginning of that year the Knights chose two candidates for the Board, both on an independent labour ticket: Charles Chamberlain, one of their local organisers, and a Mr Cox, who was a member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, not the Knights, but sympathised with the Order’s goals.\textsuperscript{49} As it turned out, they never even had to test their political strength. The Mayor of West Bromwich wanted to avoid the costs involved in organising an election, and after he, Chamberlain and Cox conducted negotiations with the existing members of the Board, they decided to appoint Chamberlain to join them. His politely phrased assertion that if it came to an election the Knights were confident that they could elect two members of the Board instead of one, probably had

\textsuperscript{46} West Bromwich Free Press, 23 February 1889.

\textsuperscript{47} Smethwick Weekly News, 1 December 1888.

\textsuperscript{48} Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 321.

\textsuperscript{49} Smethwick Weekly News, 2 March 1889.
an effect – and the Knights ended their first political campaign in victory without even going to the polls.  

Chamberlain told one interviewer that he would sit on the Board ‘with the simple object of watching the interest of the working classes … [and to] see that a strict economy was practised, but not at the expense of efficiency.’ He also promised to ‘work thoroughly in harmony’ with the other members of the Board. Chamberlain certainly kept that last promise. He also maintained a good attendance at Board meetings. Yet the minutes of those meetings contain no instance where he proposed or seconded a motion, and his only legacy to the Board was that it chose another worker, William Rathbone, to replace him. Chamberlain also dismissed as ‘premature’ the suggestions of one interviewer in March 1889 that ‘the Knights had determined to have a representative on every public body in the borough.’ There were, he said, ‘few members of their Order who had the necessary property qualification for the West Bromwich Guardians, and even those who had could not leave their work to attend the meetings either of the Guardians or the Town Council, which were always in the day time.’

Knights in Smethwick and West Bromwich soon abandoned direct political action of their own. They tried instead to build up a voting bloc that could help elect candidates representing other bodies, such as the local Ratepayers Association. In one case, an aspiring councillor in nearby Birmingham actually targeted the Knights as a potential source of hundreds if not thousands of votes. Jack Tanner, an SDF member and firebrand on the Birmingham Trades Council who ran in every council election between the mid-1880s and '90s – and usually came dead last – stood in the Rotton Park Ward in 1889 on an SDF ticket. He evidently hoped that the Knights, ‘said to be strongly posted in that quarter,’ would catapult him onto the city council. Tanner’s hopes were dashed; but the idea of the assemblies as potentially significant voting blocs survived his defeat.

50 Several newspapers carried detailed transcripts of this meeting. See, for instance, West Bromwich Free Press, 23 February 1889; Midlands Advertiser, 23 February 1889; Birmingham Daily Post, 19 February 1889.

51 Smethwick Weekly News, 2 March 1889.

52 West Bromwich School Board Minutes, 3 February 1891, Sandwell Local Council Archives.

53 Smethwick Weekly News, 2 March 1889.

54 Smethwick Weekly News, 29 March 1890.

55 Incidentally, Tanner pressed within the SDF for dispensation to run on a wider platform during the 1880s, but the national leadership insisted that all SDF members running for election must do so on the Federation’s ticket. See Crick, Social-Democratic Federation, p. 54; Birmingham Daily Post, 17 June 1889.
Knights in Wolverhampton worked with other trade unionists through the Wolverhampton Trades Council to elect working-class representatives to the council. The Order’s assemblies, as Jon Lawrence writes, strengthened ‘the position of the “advanced” wing of the local labour movement’ when it came to political action, and they supported the chairman of the Trades Council, W.F. Mees, who remained an ardent supporter of working-class representation on municipal bodies.\(^{56}\) Knights on the Trades Council, immediately upon joining that body in August 1889, called for ‘labour candidates’ to run for local election independently of the Liberals and Conservatives. They hoped that these candidates would demand the ‘recognition of Unionist principles by public bodies,’ pay municipal employees higher wages and thereby set an example to workers in the private sector.\(^{57}\) As neither Liberals nor Conservatives showed any interest in fielding working-class candidates, two local trade unionists, both nominated and supported by the Knights on the Trades Council, ran for the Wolverhampton Town Council in 1890 and were only narrowly defeated. The following year, however, a working-class representative was returned unopposed to the council, along with two representatives on the School Board.\(^{58}\) Having strengthened those factions in the Wolverhampton Trades Council that made these victories possible, the local assemblies soon fell into decline and played no further role in the political life of the town.

Knights in other parts of Britain also ran their own municipal campaigns. In Sunderland, James Brown, the head of LA3504, stood for the town council in 1889 as a candidate of the Labour Electoral Association (LEA), an organisation that championed trade unionists for public office and features later in this chapter. Brown promised to steer clear of partisan rivalries, to press for a union rate of wages for all Council employees and to encourage public works, especially a new bridge, that would provide employment in his ward.\(^{59}\) Despite support from the Sunderland Trades Council, Brown was not elected.\(^{60}\) At a subsequent meeting of the Sunderland branch of the LEA he ‘announced his intention to come forward time after time until he won’; the branch immediately put him forward as a candidate for the


\(^{57}\) *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 30 August and 27 September 1889.


\(^{59}\) *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 22 October 1889.

Board of Guardians. He was unsuccessful. In 1891 Brown ran again for the town council and again he lost, despite the support of the local Liberal Association, after a Radical candidate siphoned off much of his potential vote. Brown was both persistent and unlucky. In any case, enthusiasm like his was needed for the cause of working-class political representation, which faced the opposition of well-established and well-organised Liberals and Conservatives and was bound to suffer numerous defeats before it could hope to win victories on a regular basis.

The Knights came closest to realising that principle, and to building a successful local political movement of their own, in Walsall. That town was not the most promising context for the development of independent labour politics. The economy of Walsall was characterised by many small trades and industries and a correspondingly low level of trade union organisation well into the twentieth century. Liberals dominated local politics and few contested elections took place before 1910. One of the exceptions to that trend occurred in October 1888 when a socialist, Haydn Sanders, won election to Walsall Town Council. Walsall became, as the Walsall Observer remarked with some chagrin, ‘the only town in the kingdom, we believe, in which a Socialist has been elected.’ Sanders’s election rested on several unusual developments. Local authorities had broken up his meetings during earlier election campaigns in 1888, and Sanders finally won in October on a platform that defended free speech and assembly as much as it advanced socialist principles. The Walsall Observer also hinted darkly that he received the votes of local Conservatives who wished to upset the Liberals.

After his election Sanders did his best to antagonise the politicians and journalists of the town. He harangued his fellow councillors at length on subjects ranging from the poor state of housing and the hours and wages of municipal employees to, as the report of one meeting put it, ‘fleecers, bondholders, shareholders, light men and dark men, fleabites, and other “relevant” matters.’ On at least one occasion he was expelled from the council for repeatedly speaking over other councillors, whom he described at a meeting of the Birmingham Trades Council as ‘bald-headed, pot-bellied

61 Sunderland Daily Echo, 29 November 1889.
62 Sunderland Daily Echo, 23 October 1890; 14 October, 3 and 4 November 1891.
63 Dean, Town and Westminster, pp. 2–5.
65 Walsall Observer, 3 November 1888.
66 Walsall Observer, 3 November 1888.
67 Walsall Free Press, 16 March 1889.
old town councillors, who were fonder of guzzling than of justice.' The *Midland Counties Express* deplored his ‘radicalism and unsavoury behaviour,’ and the *Walsall Observer* admitted that Sanders had succeeded ‘in perplexing almost beyond endurance the journalists of the town.’ Sanders also made enemies in the local labour movement, some of whom exchanged angry letters with him through the pages of local newspapers. But he also won the admiration of many others in Walsall for his willingness to raise many serious local issues at council meetings. Sanders, claimed one, was ‘a man whom I have learned to respect and admire for his earnest endeavour to improve the condition of his fellow-men.’ If nothing else, the socialist town councillor from Walsall proved successful in shaking up the consensual political atmosphere that dominated the town.

He and his socialist supporters also looked to build on their victory. ‘Having been deprived of all public speaking places in the borough,’ the *Halfpenny Weekly* later reported, ‘the Socialist party turned their attention to the next best work that lay to their hands. They finally hit upon and decided to start the Knights of Labour.’ Where Jack Tanner had looked to the Knights as a ready-made constituency for his own election campaign, Sanders and his supporters founded LA454 to create their own political constituency. That assembly grew rapidly and by the end of November 1888, Reynolds’s described the Knights as ‘a force in the town and district’ of Walsall. They decided to test their political strength at the next council elections in 1889, and selected two candidates to run as representatives of the Knights of Labor in separate wards: Frederick Eglington, president of the Bit Makers’ Union, an organisation affiliated with the Order, and W.H. Sanders, father of Haydn, who owned a small lockmaking concern and shared his son’s penchant for radical and labour politics.

The election campaign polarised the town. ‘On the one hand we have an active Socialistic and trades’ unionist propaganda, leaving no stone unturned to catch every possible vote,’ the *Walsall Advertiser* explained, ‘and on the other hand two candidates, estimable men in themselves; but who, as far as I can learn, have not even gone to the trouble of issuing an address to the electors.’ This was not entirely true. Differences between Liberals, however radical, and Conservatives miraculously collapsed as they faced this

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69 *Midland Counties Express*, 2 November 1889; *Walsall Observer*, 23 February 1889.
70 *Walsall Observer*, 2 March 1889.
71 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 4 January 1890.
72 Reynolds’s, 24 November 1888.
73 *Walsall Observer*, 12 and 19 October 1889; *Justice*, 19 October 1889.
74 *Walsall Advertiser and Newspaper*, 2 November 1889.
new challenge, and the local press abandoned any pretence of neutrality.\textsuperscript{75} ‘In view of the disaster of last November,’ editorialised the \textit{Advertiser}, ‘it behoves every burgess to interest himself in the matter, and to see that the character of the Council is maintained.’\textsuperscript{76} Newspapers repeated rumours that the campaign was causing splits amongst local Knights.\textsuperscript{77} Libellous leaflets circulated through the town. One, which claimed to quote Benjamin Dean, a local miners’ leader, questioned Eglington’s working-class credentials; another accused W.H. Sanders of embezzling the proceeds from a concert held to raise money for a local hospital. Both accusations were false. Dean later denied any involvement in the attacks on Eglington, and Sanders won a court action against his libellers, but in both cases they were vindicated too late to influence the election.\textsuperscript{78}

One of the Knights was nearly elected nevertheless. W.H. Sanders received only two-thirds of the votes of the second successful candidate in his ward, but Eglington polled 706 votes against the 771 and 767 received by the two successful candidates in his.\textsuperscript{79} Haydn Sanders certainly regarded that outcome as a sign that working-class representation was gaining momentum in Walsall. ‘If they made as much progress in the next twelve months as they had done in the last,’ he told one meeting immediately after the election, ‘they “would make the bosses sit up.”’\textsuperscript{80} Walsall Knights quickly set about creating an institutional framework for future campaigns. In January 1890, Eglington and J.T. Deakin, a local socialist, created the Walsall Labour Representative Wages Fund to subsidise Sanders’s activities as a town councillor and as an agitator for the Knights of Labor.\textsuperscript{81} That fund was probably based on the Battersea Labour League, which provided financial assistance to John Burns, the famed socialist agitator, during his time on the London County Council.\textsuperscript{82} At least several bodies of workers contributed generously to the fund in the early months of 1890 after Sanders satisfactorily resolved their disputes. The leading English socialist H.H. Champion even spoke at a meeting organised by the Knights to publicise and raise money for the fund.\textsuperscript{83}

As in West Bromwich the Knights failed to keep this momentum going. In mid-1890, Sanders left Walsall for Rotherham to lead a strike by Knights

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Halfpenny Weekly}, 23 November 1889.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Walsall Advertiser}, 19 October 1889.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Walsall Free Press}, 26 October 1889; \textit{Walsall Observer}, 26 October 1889.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Walsall Free Press}, 7 December 1889. The defendants in the libel case were ordered to pay £25 and costs. See \textit{Walsall Observer}, 22 March 1890.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Walsall Observer}, 2 November 1889.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Walsall Advertiser}, 9 November 1889.
\textsuperscript{81} Walsall Labour Representative Wages Fund, Walsall Local History Research Centre.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Walsall Free Press}, 8 March 1890.
The Knights and Politics

in the stove-grate industry there and vacated his seat on the council. His many local enemies were delighted. ‘We may breathe freely,’ the Walsall Advertiser remarked, ‘in the hope that our Town Council – fast drifting into a bear garden – will resume its former peace and dignity now that its enfant terrible has taken his departure.’ Without his oratorical skills and energetic campaigning style the Walsall Knights quickly faded as a political force in the town. In November 1890, J. Hykin, like Eglington a Knight in the bit trade, did win election to the town council but his victory was due to the newly reconstituted Walsall Trades Council rather than to the assemblies. The Knights were the first to make independent working-class representation an important political issue in Walsall, and the first to seriously apply that principle in practice; but they remained too dependent on a single charismatic individual, and their assemblies rose and fell too quickly, to make a more lasting impression on the political life of the town.

Sanders took his political activism with him to his new home in Rotherham. With the help of local Knights and the members of the new National Union of Stove-Grate Workers, which was established after the successful conclusion of their strike and elected Sanders as its president, he won election to the Rotherham School Board in November 1890. Knights continued to support Sanders even as he neglected them in favour of the Rotherham Trades Council and the Stove-Grate Workers’ Union. A meeting of DA253 in September 1891, pledged the assembly to ‘use every endeavour’ to support his upcoming candidature for Rotherham Town Council. Sanders failed to win election. Rotherham’s Knights supported him during the next council election in 1892. By this time, however, their assemblies were in severe decline, and Sanders was again unsuccessful. With that anticlimactic defeat the last municipal campaign waged by British Knights came to an end.

What had those campaigns achieved? Knights in Smethwick and West Bromwich made a promising start but failed to build on it. In Rotherham they never made any impression at all. Knights persisted (unsuccessfully) in attempts to elect trade unionists to the council in Sunderland, and they played an important, if brief, role in the wider (and more successful) movement to elect trade unionists onto local bodies in Wolverhampton. The only place where British Knights built a political movement of their own that came close to winning an election was in Walsall. Superficially, at least,

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84 Walsall Advertiser, 31 May 1890.
85 Walsall Observer, 8 November 1890.
86 Rotherham Advertiser, 26 September 1891.
87 Leeds Mercury, 3 November 1891.
88 Rotherham Advertiser, 29 October 1892.
the movement led by Haydn Sanders and the Walsall Knights resembled that of John Burns and the Battersea Labour League in the same period. Both possessed a charismatic, popular and controversial leader. Both fought for the election of working-class candidates to local government. And both established mechanisms to pay for successful candidates and coordinate their future election campaigns. At this point, however, the analogy breaks down. The Walsall Knights already possessed one sitting councillor when they began their agitation and never succeeded in electing another; the Battersea Labour League helped elect John Burns to the House of Commons. Where that League continued to shape local politics into the twentieth century, the Walsall Knights remained a significant political force for little more than a year. Once Haydn Sanders left for Rotherham, their influence soon disappeared.

For an order whose American assemblies had won majorities on numerous local bodies across the United States, and not just isolated councillors or School Board representatives, this was a disappointing record. But it was also understandable. As the British assemblies grew between 1886 and 1889 they remained too small to play any meaningful role in local politics; after 1890 their decline left them unable to play any such role in the future. British Knights had influence over municipal affairs only in 1889 and 1890, and only in areas where the assemblies became large enough to influence an election result. Within these restrictions, they did their best to bring the issue of working-class representation to the centre of political debate in several important industrial towns.

The Knights and National Politics

We saw at the beginning of this chapter that two main roads led to, and converged upon, the British Labour Party. On the one hand, that Party emerged from the Lib-Lab tradition, and its emphasis on working-class representation in the House of Commons and in town and borough councils across Britain and Ireland. On the other, the Labour Party arose out of the rejection by a growing number of workers of any electoral alliance between trade unionists and the Liberals, an alliance in which the unions were consigned to a junior role, and out of a related desire for workers to organise independently of all the existing parties. The Knights, as we have seen, contributed in a minor way to the growth of independent labour politics at a municipal level. Paradoxically, they played a more important

role in the development of that politics on a national stage. Not all of their attempts to influence parliamentary politics ran in that direction: in some cases, Knights worked for the election of more conventional Liberal politicians. But British Knights also participated in the LEA, a leading Lib-Lab organisation, and attempted to steer it towards independence from the major parties. They were active in many of the major events and movements that accelerated the growth of independent labour politics in the late nineteenth century. Their narrative also divides rather cleanly along national lines. English Knights generally concerned themselves with Liberal and Lib-Lab politics while Scottish Knights generally took the independent course. In both cases, and in their different ways, all of them were part of the political ferment in trade union circles that eventually culminated in the British Labour Party.

British Knights recognised that their assemblies needed to become involved in parliamentary as well as municipal politics. ‘As the ends aimed at by the Order in England can only be obtained by legislation,’ one of their supporters told the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* in 1889, ‘it is the duty of all, regardless of party, to assist in nominating and supporting such candidates for Parliament and other representative bodies as will support the measures the Order considers necessary for the attainment of its objects.’ They did not consider it sufficient for these candidates to have impeccable working-class credentials. Their ideal candidate ‘had a good intellectual grip of the Labour problem, and he would have to prove that he had grit enough in him to withstand the corrupting social influences which are so powerful in Parliament.’90 And while one of Haydn Sanders’s enemies on the Sheffield Trades Council claimed that he held ‘a great aspiration to become a paid MP’ – although MPs were not paid until 1908 – British Knights generally recognised that they would not initially find their ideal parliamentary candidate from within their own assemblies, and looked for other ways to achieve their political objectives.91

Knights in Birmingham and the Black Country reached for what Norman Ware described as the most characteristic political weapon of the American Order: the lobby.92 Their supporter, when interviewed in the *Daily Gazette*, explained that ‘it is certain that the Order will insist upon the adoption by all the candidates who seek its support of a much more drastic programme of social legislation than either political party has yet announced.’93 When pressed to provide an example of the issues that Knights would present to

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90 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 22 February 1889.
91 *Rotherham Advertiser*, 23 July 1892.
92 Ware, *Labor Movement in the United States*, p. 358.
parliamentary candidates he raised the question of mining royalties. These were, in effect, rents that large landowners charged mine owners who extracted minerals from their lands.\textsuperscript{94} It was also an issue, as one Knight claimed at an assembly meeting in West Bromwich, that Liberals, with the notable exception of the Rev. Harold Rylett, failed to address in their lectures or manifesto.\textsuperscript{95}

They now searched for a parliamentary candidate willing to accept some if not all of their programme. Thanks to Jesse Chapman, the Master Workman of LA10227 and the secretary of the Smethwick Liberal Association from 1889 onwards, they settled on H.G. Reid, a Gladstonian Liberal. In October 1890, Chapman ensured that the Liberals nominated Reid as their candidate for the 1892 general election in the Handsworth parliamentary division, where the oldest and largest local and district assemblies in Britain were located.\textsuperscript{96} LA7952 officially endorsed Reid’s campaign the following month.\textsuperscript{97} By July, Knights throughout the area followed suit along with the other large local labour organisation, the Midland Counties Trades Federation.\textsuperscript{98} Most observers expected Reid to win the election. But he went down in a surprise defeat to the Liberal Unionist candidate, Henry Meysey-Thompson, even as the general election saw a large swing from the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists to the Gladstonian Liberals.\textsuperscript{99} Superstitious Knights must have wondered if they were cursed to lose even their most promising electoral campaigns.

English Knights never abandoned the idea of the lobby or electing MPs favourable to their cause. The constitution of the British National Assembly, hammered out by delegates from assemblies in Rotherham and the Black Country in the summer of 1891, charged its new Executive Council with taking ‘such action as it thinks advisable to secure the attention and support of Members of Parliament to all measures or bills introduced into the House of Commons in the interests of Labour,’ and with supplying to the district and local assemblies sufficient information on all these measures and bills ‘as may enable the members to understand the issue of every question involved.’\textsuperscript{100} By the time the British National Assembly was formed, however, the assemblies had lost most of their members and were struggling to survive, let alone lobby Parliament for new legislation.

\textsuperscript{94} Birmingham Daily Gazette, 22 February 1889.
\textsuperscript{95} Smethwick Weekly News, 1 December 1888.
\textsuperscript{96} Smethwick Weekly News, 1 November 1890.
\textsuperscript{97} Smethwick Telephone, 6 December 1890.
\textsuperscript{98} Smethwick Weekly News, 4 July 1891.
\textsuperscript{99} Smethwick Telephone, 23 July 1892.
\textsuperscript{100} Preamble of the British National Assembly, pp. 3, 23–24.
English Knights fared better with the LEA. The LEA emerged out of a decision by the TUC of 1887 to promote the election of trade unionists to all levels of government. T.R. Threlfall, a compositor who served as the TUC’s president in 1885 and also served on the Southport Town Council, became its secretary and moving spirit. Threlfall represented Lib-Lab traditions within the labour movement and, as David Howell observes, the Association ‘operat[ed] typically under Lib-Lab auspices.’ But the LEA also supported working-class candidates for political office regardless of their party affiliation, and Threlfall worked especially hard to recruit the Knights for his association. Knights also appreciated the fact that he publicised their activities through his weekly column on labour affairs in the Liverpool *Halfpenny Weekly*, which in 1889 and 1890, before the paper ceased publication, became the main clearing house for news on the Order’s British activities. In February 1890, Threlfall invited the Order’s British assemblies to attend the next congress of the LEA in April.

The congress was attended by six delegates representing local and district assemblies from Birmingham, Liverpool and the Black Country, and a seventh Knight as a delegate from the Wolverhampton Trades Council. The most prominent of them were Sanders of Walsall, Reeves of Liverpool, Thomas Dean of Smethwick and Zebulon Butler of Dudley. Henry Pelling writes that ‘they presumably attended for the sake of converting the Association to a more radical policy, as other Socialists had done at earlier conferences, though without success.’ But the main theme that the Knights, socialists or otherwise, consistently pressed at the congress was the need for independent labour representation. Sanders argued that ‘their experience of Liberals and of Tories showed that they must expect nothing of those parties, except on the same line as a traveller was kindly disposed to a pack of wolves that were following him.’ Reeves called for ‘no compromise with either the Liberal or the Conservative party’ lest workers be ‘dragged at the chariot wheels of either party’; radical Liberals, he added, often proved to be ‘the most determined sweaters.’ Instead of calling on the LEA to adopt socialist principles, Reeves argued for ‘putting

102 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 18 May 1890; Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 327.
103 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 22 February 1890.
104 For the Wolverhampton delegate, see *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 2 April 1890.
106 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 327.
forward a Labour candidate with a substantial programme.\textsuperscript{109} Zebulon Butler, the single-taxer from Dudley, put the same case in a different way. ‘A fair representation of Labour in the House of Commons,’ he told the congress, would involve ‘the classes … represented by nine members, and the masses – the producers and workers – by the remainder.’\textsuperscript{110}

Finally, it seemed, the English assemblies had combined their forces to push forward the cause of independent labour politics within one of the major political organisations of the British labour movement. They received a sympathetic hearing from the other delegates at the congress. But, as with all of their other political ventures, they lost their momentum at the very point when it began to build. Sanders and Reeves, their two most significant political leaders, left the Knights between the LEA’s congresses in 1890 and 1891. Other leading Knights were more concerned to halt the decline in the Order’s membership over that time than to attend a political convention, and only two Knights, representing DA248 of Cradley Heath, attended the next congress of the LEA in 1891.\textsuperscript{111} Neither said anything that made it into the official proceedings. No Knights ever attended any subsequent congress of the LEA. Once again, the speed with which the English assemblies rose and fell ensured that their political influence was concentrated in only two years, 1889 and 1890 – and as with their municipal campaigns, that was too short a period to leave a lasting impression on the LEA.

A very different story unfolded in Scotland, however. The Scottish labour movement, as James D. Young argues, had long found inspiration from political institutions and movements in the United States.\textsuperscript{112} Early efforts by Scottish workers to enter politics on an independent basis in the 1860s and 1870s, for instance, were based on what American workers were doing at the time. The miners’ leader, Alexander MacDonald, wrote back glowingly of American labour politics while on holiday there in 1868.\textsuperscript{113} In the 1880s, as we have seen, Scottish radicals became profoundly influenced by the theories and personality of Henry George. As the events of the Great Upheaval thrust the Knights into global prominence, important figures in the Scottish labour movement also began to see the Order as a profitable example to follow. And Keir Hardie, whose candidacy for Mid-Lanark in 1888 on an independent labour ticket is widely considered one of the great precursors to the Independent Labour Party, and then to the British Labour Party itself, was at the forefront of them.

\textsuperscript{112} Young, ‘Changing Images,’ pp. 69–89.
\textsuperscript{113} Marwick, \textit{Short History of Labour}, p. 75.
In the July 1887 issue of his journal, The Miner, Hardie presented a lengthy analysis on the subject of ‘Labour Representation.’ He began with a rhetorical question: ‘Do either of the existing parties fairly represent [the workers] aspirations and desires?’ Hardie’s answer was a resounding ‘No.’ The Conservatives offered them nothing. Liberal Unionism existed simply ‘to keep Mr Gladstone out of office.’ Gladstonian and Radical Liberals promised no more than a series of minor adjustments. Even their working-class representatives, Hardie argued, ‘are content to follow in the train of the Liberal party, whithersoever it may lead.’ The LEA was a promising beginning, with its aim ‘to promote the return of working men to Parliament,’ but, Hardie added, ‘what difference will it make to me that I have a working man representing me in Parliament if he is a dumb dog who dare not bark, and will follow the leader under any circumstances?’

With the help of Robert Chisholm Robertson, another coal miners’ leader, Hardie drafted the programme of the Sons of Labour, a document modelled on the Declaration of Principles of the American Knights of Labor.114 The only major difference between these documents, as J.H.M. Laslett argues, was that Hardie anticipated a greater role for the state than most American Knights were prepared to contemplate.115 It was with this basic programme in mind that Hardie made the fateful step of running as an independent labour candidate at the Mid-Lanark by-election in April 1888, after being disowned by the local Liberal Association there. A direct line thus connected the Knights of Labor with that most famous event in the origins of independent labour politics in Britain.

Nor was Hardie alone in seeing the Knights and their programme as directly applicable to Scottish labour politics. The Knights, after all, were closely aligned with movements seeking Irish Home Rule, a cause that appealed to the many Irish immigrants concentrated in western Scotland. The Order’s programme explicitly called for the nationalisation of land. This plank fit well with the concerns of supporters of the Scottish Land Restoration League and reflected the sympathies of many working-class Scottish radicals for the single tax theories of Henry George. John Ferguson, an Irish Nationalist based in Scotland and with single tax sympathies of his own, began to call in 1888 for the introduction of the Knights of Labor into western Scotland unless the Liberals brought about land nationalisation and an eight-hour working day, itself another demand strongly associated with the Order. In this he was supported by James Shaw Maxwell, another single-taxer with close ties both to the Land Restoration League and the Scottish labour movement.116

115 Laslett, Colliers Across the Sea, p. 170.
Their threats were not immediately carried out. But all these figures, Hardie included, gave their political ambitions an institutional form, the Scottish Labour Party, in September 1888.\textsuperscript{117} All of them were present at the meeting on 25 August that brought into being this new body – which James J. Smyth claims marked the moment when ‘Labour politics, as we understand them even today, first emerged.’\textsuperscript{118} The Party, after all, possessed one sitting MP in the form of Robert Cunninghame Graham, the aristocratic Liberal-turned-socialist who became closely aligned with the Scottish Knights as well. And while the coal miners of Lanarkshire turned the programme of the Sons of Labour into an order centred on organisation at the workplace and based explicitly on the Knights, the Scottish Labour Party slowly grew. In 1889 the Sons of Labour quickly rose and then just as quickly declined in Lanarkshire. In the same year assemblies of the Knights of Labor, directly affiliated with the American Order, began to appear in Glasgow and Ayrshire.

The relationship between the Knights and the Scottish Labour Party was close from the outset. In September 1889 the Party opened a branch in Glasgow.\textsuperscript{119} Three months later the Knights in that city held their first annual ‘festival.’\textsuperscript{120} Both events were held at the same venue. Many of the notable attendees at both meetings were also the same people. Shaw Maxwell acted as the chairman of each, and Hardie was present to support the Knights just as he helped lead the Party meeting. A Mr Burns, representing the Order, was also on hand to participate in the birth of the Party’s Glasgow branch. From the very beginning, then, Scottish Knights cast in their lot with local struggles for independent working-class political representation. And there were other links between the two organisations. In February 1890, Shaw Maxwell wrote to Powderly, asking him to draw up a letter explaining the Order’s support for the eight-hour day. This was, Shaw Maxwell assured him, in support of a bill promoted by Cunninghame Graham in the House of Commons that would enforce an eight-hour day for miners. ‘A statement from you to him that it is the general wish of the workers of America would greatly strengthen his hands,’ he claimed.\textsuperscript{121} In this way Scottish radicals tried to conscript the American Order in support of British labour politics.

\textsuperscript{117} *The Miner*, September 1888.


\textsuperscript{119} *Glasgow Herald*, 28 September 1889.

\textsuperscript{120} *Glasgow Herald*, 28 December 1889.

\textsuperscript{121} Shaw Maxwell to Powderly, 27 February 1890, Box 59, TVP.
The leaders and friends of the Scottish Knights did operate in some respects like their English comrades. In the 1890 election for Partick, a parliamentary seat in northwestern Glasgow, Cunninghame Graham quickly recognised, as Knights in other places had in their turn, that the Order’s assemblies could give the right candidate a decided electoral advantage. In this case he hoped to use this advantage to the wider benefit of his young party. A three-way series of negotiations soon commenced between Cunninghame Graham for the Scottish Labour Party, Shaw Maxwell for the Glasgow Knights of Labor and Edward Marjoribanks, the Gladstonian chief whip. The first two, according to a report in *The Times*, issued a manifesto to the voters of Partick that

> The Scottish labour party advises its adherents in the Partick Division, especially the organisation of the Knights of Labour, to record their votes for the Liberal candidate in consequence of an interview with Mr. Marjoribanks in which he assured their representatives that Greenock and two other labour seats to be subsequently agreed upon, should be left to the labour party to try the fortune of labour candidates.

Marjoribanks denied making such an agreement. The sheer fact that he considered it ‘was the worst bit of electioneering he ever did in his life,’ according to one Glasgow newspaper, for it allowed the Liberal Unionist candidate to triumph over the Gladstonian one.

Yet again an attempt to use Knights as bargaining chips in the parliamentary process ended in failure. Cunninghame Graham soon departed the House of Commons as well, after losing on a Scottish Labour Party ticket in an 1892 election for the seat of Glasgow Camlachie. Ironically, it was the same Irish nationalists who had encouraged the development of the Knights in Scotland, as a way to pressure the Liberals into a firmer stance in favour of Home Rule, who abandoned their support for labour and socialist candidates when the Liberals signalled their desire to put Home Rule back at the top of the agenda. Irish nationalism temporarily made and then unmade the fortunes of the Knights and of the wider working-class political movement in Scotland. In the course of those two years, moreover, the Scottish assemblies quickly disappeared along with their political significance. Yet their erstwhile leaders continued to agitate for independent labour politics.

122 Cunninghame Graham often appealed directly to the Knights in this election. See, for instance, *The Scotsman*, 28 January 1890; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 January 1890.

123 *The Times*, 1 March 1890.

124 *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 8 March 1890.

Shaw Maxwell, who continued for some time to keep in contact with American Knights, although he moved from Scotland to London in 1891, became the first secretary of the Independent Labour Party in 1893.\footnote{JUL, 5 March 1891.} Hardie quickly became the ILP’s president, and most branches of the Scottish Labour Party followed them into the new body.

The creation of the ILP, in October 1893, also provides a bridge between the stories of the English and Scottish Knights. By then, few Knights remained in a shrinking number of assemblies, all of them concentrated around Rotherham, Birmingham and Cradley Heath. They would all be gone within a year. But former Knights, particularly Samuel Reeves in Liverpool and Haydn Sanders in Rotherham, were amongst the first to welcome the new party. Sanders even claimed, at an ILP meeting in 1894, that ‘the Labour party had existed as an independent organisation in Rotherham, at all events since his advent into the town,’ and that ‘even if they had not adopted the term “Independent,” they had carried out the programme of the Independent Labour Party with more or less success.’\footnote{Rotherham Advertiser, 24 February 1894.} Reeves became the President of the Liverpool branch of the Independent Labour Party in the same year.\footnote{Liverpool Mercury, 23 July 1894.}

We should not, of course, attribute too much to the Knights in these cases. But as with the stirrings of independent labour representation in Scotland in 1887, with Keir Hardie’s Mid-Lanark campaign in 1888, with the creation of the Scottish Labour Party in the same year and with the development of the Independent Labour Party in 1893, the influence of the Knights of Labor, and the presence of their leaders and supporters, was undeniable. English Knights also participated in Lib-Lab movements which promoted working-class political representation and, as revisionists have argued, operated in their own way to bring the Labour Party a little closer. The Knights of Labor, in other words, were present and active in some of the defining movements and moments in the early political history of the British labour movement.

**Conclusion:**

**The Knights of Labor and Anglo-American Labour Politics**

In 1894, at the annual convention of the American Federation of Labor at Denver, Colorado, the delegates of the affiliated unions set down to vote on a political programme. This programme was drafted by Thomas Morgan, an Englishman by birth and the socialist head of the Chicago Trades and
Labor Assembly. Morgan had presented its preamble and 11 planks, which contained proposals for independent political action by the American trade union movement along broadly socialist lines, at the 1893 convention. Morgan explicitly praised the British labour movement for its action in the field of independent labour politics and called for American trade unionists to follow the ‘British road.’ In the year between the two conventions, the AFL’s affiliated unions overwhelmingly approved Morgan’s programme, with only the Bakers’ union rejecting it outright and a small number of others rejecting plank ten, the demand for ‘the collective ownership by the people of all the means of production and distribution.’ On the other hand, AFL President Samuel Gompers and his allies remained thoroughly opposed to the programme. He and his supporters managed through skilful management of the proceedings, and by convincing enough delegates of the dangers to the trade union movement of political action, to turn the majority against it. At the opening of the convention most delegates pledged themselves to support Morgan’s proposals. By the end, they voted against it by 1,173 to 735. 129

The AFL never came so close to endorsing independent political action again. That is not to say, however, that the AFL stayed out of politics altogether, as early historians of the movement often suggested. A formidable body of scholarship now insists that the AFL, even Gompers himself, sought not to remain aloof from politics but to engage in politics without committing the Federation to supporting an independent party. AFL leaders lobbied governments at local, state and federal level for favourable legislation and particularly, as legal scholars have explained, to protect themselves from a hostile judiciary. 130 They presented demands to the Democratic and Republican parties at election time and called for AFL members to elect those congressmen, senators and state representatives who most pledged themselves to those demands, and called them to vote against representatives who appeared hostile to the trade unions. Eventually, just as the Knights aligned themselves did with the Populist Party, the AFL aligned itself with


the Democrats during the Wilson administration, from 1912 onwards. It is no exaggeration to say that the AFL leaders followed to a great extent the political methods of those who once led the Knights of Labor.

But Gompers in particular also claimed other precedents, as Neville Kirk has observed. Just as Morgan called for the AFL to follow what he saw as the British model of independent labour politics, Gompers insisted that the AFL should follow its own ‘British road.’ This, Gompers claimed, was based upon the parliamentary lobbying practised by the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and not, as Kirk notes, the political activities of the TUC’s Lib-Lab MPs. A focus on lobbying, Gompers felt, would protect the American labour movement, as it had the British, from the dangers of partisan politics – the same dangers which he claimed had fatally undermined the Knights and their predecessors, the National Labour Union. Gompers, in his selective reading of Anglo-American labour history, at least partially based the future of the American labour movement’s political strategies on the basis of the British labour movement’s past.131

The other side of this parallel was equally striking. In the 1880s, and even into the 1890s, those British trade unionists and radicals who sought to substitute independent working-class action for Lib-Lab politics looked in part to the United States for their inspiration. In particular, they looked to the political struggles of the Knights of Labor. The fact that Powderly and other leading Knights tried to keep the Order aloof from partisan politics, or that many complexities attended the political history of the American Knights, were not so important to British workers and radicals. They saw only that the victories and near-victories of independent labour parties across the United States in the middle years of the 1880s were profitable examples to follow. Gompers found in the British experience a justification for his retreat from independent political action. Many British workers and radicals found in the Knights more justification to hasten its arrival.

British Knights, as the ironworker at Brierley Hill feared, often interfered in politics. They first engaged in political struggles at a municipal level. In Wolverhampton, in Sunderland, in West Bromwich, in Walsall and in Rotherham they brought the principle of working-class representation on town councils and the School Board to the electors, even if they generally met with defeat. At a national level, they attempted to bring the weight of their numbers to bear in two parliamentary divisions, though they were unsuccessful in both cases. They participated at the LEA, but decline prevented them from becoming an influential part of that body. Most importantly of all, the struggles of American Knights during the Great Upheaval helped inspire Keir Hardie’s political programme for the Sons

131 Kirk, Comrades and Cousins, ch. 1.
of Labour, the same programme that he ran with in his unsuccessful, but highly significant, campaign in 1888 at Mid-Lanark. Most of the leading figures in the Scottish Labour Party were also Knights, and these same figures were instrumental in the creation of the ILP. The long road to the Labour Party was paved, at least in part, by the hands of Knights of Labor.

British trade unionists created the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. The formal establishment of the Labour Party followed six years later. The British assemblies of the Knights of Labor had disappeared before either, and in no way were they directly involved in the meetings and conventions in which they were formed. But in their own struggles at all levels of politics they formed part of the movement, based around the principle of working-class representation, independent of Liberals and Conservatives, out of which both bodies emerged. The future of American labour politics drew in part on an understanding of the British past; the future of British labour politics drew in part on an understanding of the American past. Nor was this the only transatlantic parallel to attend the history of the Knights of Labor in Britain. In the next chapter, as we will see, the Knights played a similar role in the history of the British trade unions themselves, and with similar consequences for labour on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.