Knights Across the Atlantic

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On 31 December 1889, the members of LA443 in Bootle met with their wives and friends to bring in the New Year. As the band played, and as the partiers danced, the assembly seemed secure and the new decade seemed to promise only better things to come. LA443 planned to open new preceptories in various parts of Liverpool, and these would in time become assemblies themselves. Knights elsewhere in Britain and Ireland approached the new decade with similar optimism. New recruits swelled the ranks of the Scottish assemblies. Knights secured a strong foothold in Belfast and Derry. The assemblies in the Black Country seemed to be overcoming earlier problems with local trade unions, and LA454 of Walsall in particular led a powerful local political and industrial movement. Assemblies in Rotherham, even in Derby, grew rapidly in size and number. The total membership of the British and Irish assemblies at this time stood between 10,000 and 15,000. But these assemblies had all disappeared by 1894, except for one or two that struggled on for another year or two. Only four years separated their peak from their end.

Many of the causes of this decline have appeared in earlier chapters. Secrecy and ritual were not to everyone’s taste. The insistence of many Knights on arbitration regardless of context often caused problems, either with employers who refused to negotiate or with workers, often members, who preferred to strike whether it be under the Order’s banner or not. Sometimes, when Knights led them and they failed, these strikes destroyed assemblies; sometimes assemblies were crippled when their leaders refused to countenance a strike. In some cases, employers were determined enough to keep the assemblies away altogether, as Pilkington’s did most successfully and most consequentially for the history of LA3504. Most importantly of all, the assemblies invariably lost ground whenever they threatened the jurisdiction of a trade union with any national stature. In this chapter, we approach the question of the British and Irish assemblies’ decline from a wider, international point of view.
Time was always an enemy in the international history of the Knights of Labor. Clifton Yearley writes that ‘the order expanded so swiftly between 1885 and 1887 that all of its energies were dedicated to the task of assimilating and consolidating domestic gains, and little attention could be spared to proposals for international action.’ After that point, he adds, ‘a rapid decline in membership made it increasingly unlikely that it could save itself, let alone the workers of the world.’ The Knights emerged in Britain, and then in Ireland, at the high point of the Order’s American growth. They grew as the American assemblies began to shrink. They reached their peak membership at a point when their parent body was unmistakeably in decline, and in the 1890s they had to rely on their own initiative and resources. That was easier said than done, however, because the British and Irish Knights had prospered in the 1880s thanks in large part to the organisers and money sent to them from the United States, and to the powerful image that the American Order projected across the intervening ocean. The Order’s American decline encouraged similar trends among their assemblies across the Atlantic.

Time was an enemy. But the Order’s national origins were not, when it came to organising on an international scale at least. In his study of the Knights in New Zealand, Robert Weir rejects the idea that the Order’s American origins – and its ‘Americanisms,’ as he puts it – impeded its development elsewhere in the world. But if Weir rejects arguments from any kind of national exceptionalism, he concedes that what he calls ‘localism,’ a general aversion to outside persons, organisations and sometimes ideas, could become an important limit on the Order’s international growth. British and Irish Knights were certainly not hamstrung by any kind of exceptionalism. Localism, on the other hand – or regionalism and nationalism if you prefer – did play an important role in the growth and then the decline of the British and Irish assemblies. Some workers refused to join a foreign order; others criticised it on that ground. Knights there, unlike in some other countries, only created a national body comparatively late and when their assemblies were already in serious trouble. They suffered further when their erstwhile officials appeared in police court, charged with embezzling money from the assemblies. Regional splits emerged as the British National Assembly took shape in 1891, and that body ultimately arrived too late to save the assemblies. As we trace the development of the British and Irish assemblies and their attempts to remain inside or escape from their transnational movement, it is often difficult to separate the opportunities they missed to halt their decline from the more or less insoluble contradictions that they faced.

1 Yearley, Britons, p. 65.
Those assemblies did not linger on as some American ones did. Most histories of the American Knights of Labor end in 1893 or 1894, when a coalition of western farmers and eastern socialists removed Terence Powderly from his post as General Master Workman and then, less than a year later, split among themselves and soon ensured that the socialists left the Order as a body. Membership fell from 76,300 in 1893 to 54,000 in 1897 and continued to drop further afterwards.³ We have examined in various ways the events and trends that brought American Knights to this point; but the Order formally continued to exist in the United States until 1917, when its last General Master Workman, former Secretary-Treasurer John W. Hayes, dumped its surviving documents in a leaky shed behind an office in Washington, DC. Its last years mixed tragedy with farce: two rival General Assemblies, each with their own set of general officers, met at Birmingham, Alabama, in November 1900 and ultimately resolved their split through the courts.⁴

The later history of the American Knights of Labor has yet to be properly written, probably because they returned to absolute secrecy in their final years, because their numbers remained so low and because the role they once played in the American labour movement was very firmly assumed, in various ways, by the American Federation of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World. The secrecy and small size of the British and Irish assemblies makes the task of writing their history difficult enough in the years of their growth. These problems multiply at an exponential rate when it comes to the years of their decline. The leaders and members of most organisations, after all, are keen to promote their successes but not their defeats, and certainly not their dissolution. With these problems in mind, we finally turn to the last years of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland, as best we can uncover them. If the Order arrived there with great expectations it expired, not in some glorious final struggle, but amidst the apathy and disillusionment that more commonly accompanies the death of a social movement.

American Decline and the Fracturing of a Transnational Movement

The growth and development of the British and Irish assemblies was always conditioned by the fate of Knights in the United States. For most of the 1880s Knights in the Old World benefited from the victories and assistance of their colleagues in the New. Powerful assemblies like LA300 were able to organise glassworkers across the Atlantic. The events of the

⁴ New York Times, 14 November 1900.
Great Upheaval highlighted the inadequacies of British trade unions and encouraged workers in Britain and Ireland to form assemblies themselves. Organisers and financial assistance from the United States encouraged this growth further. From the end or even the middle of the decade, however, all these trends began to reverse themselves. The Order’s precipitous American growth soon turned into an equally dramatic decline. The treasury that once allowed cheques and organisers to travel across the oceans ran empty. All the advantages that Knights in Britain and Ireland derived from their connections with the United States now appeared to be disadvantages. The transnational movement the Knights had built began to fracture and, in time, shattered completely.

There were early premonitions of the effect that the Order’s American defeats could have on its British and Irish assemblies. When craftsmen from the Black Country built the Midland Counties Trades Federation in 1886, instead of forming assemblies, one newspaper explained that ‘recent reverses the Knights have sustained do not seem to have influenced this decision in any way.’ English migrants to the United States who opposed the Order also weighed in at this time. In November 1886, one such correspondent to the *Labour Tribune* urged Black Country workers to ‘beware of the designing intrigues of the Knights of Labour, who only want your money, and not your disputes.’ For several more years it was possible to see these reverses as a temporary blip in the inexorable upward march of the Knights of Labor, and to view these criticisms as the bad-natured rumblings of their rivals.

In 1888, however, the Knights became the target of criticism from publications and workers who had earlier or might otherwise have supported them. The *Labour Tribune* and the *Ironworkers’ Journal*, as discussed in the previous chapter, both paid special attention to the Order’s American decline as part of their appeals for ironworkers to leave the assemblies for their new union. Knights long remembered this supposed betrayal, as J. Brettell of Stourbridge noted in 1891. ‘Many good, union men of the K of L, have withdrawn their support from your paper,’ he wrote to the *Labour Tribune*, because ‘the Tribune was against the K of L.’ The socialist press publicised the Order’s decline too. Henry F. Charles, an American socialist, wrote for the *Commonweal* in July 1888 that ‘the “Knights of Labour” organisation is

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5 *Dundee Courier*, 30 April 1886.
6 *Labour Tribune*, 20 November 1886.
7 One Knight claimed that the quoted correspondent was a paid official of the American Federation of Labor: *Labour Tribune*, 5 February 1887.
9 *Labour Tribune*, 11 July 1891.
practically ruined; all the different district assemblies have been reduced to about one-fifth of their previous strength.’ Charles, like many socialists and anarchists on both sides of the Atlantic, hated Powderly for his opposition to his comrades and wrote him off as an ‘unscrupulous scoundrel … on the look-out for new boodle.’

In these papers, and in other socialist or working-class publications, letters and news reports favourable to the Knights began, towards the end of the 1880s, to be outnumbered by those which criticised the Knights and drew attention to the Order’s decline. In February 1889, *Justice* correctly pointed out that ‘the number of members of the Knights of Labour has now fallen to 175,000, and will, in the course of the winter, dwindle down to 100,000.’ In the following year the *Tribune* symbolised the Order’s loss of leadership over the American labour movement when it printed a report of the convention of the American Federation of Labor without mentioning that year’s General Assembly. Only Reynolds’s *Newspaper* continued to present the Knights in a favourable light even after their American assemblies were obviously in dire straits.

The mainstream papers paid equally close attention to the Order’s decline. The *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, in a five-part series in February 1889, exposed its secrets and framed the Order’s English activities in the context of its American problems. When *The Times* began a campaign in 1889 against the Irish Nationalist leader, Charles Parnell, Powderly was implicated, albeit unfairly, as a support of revolutionary violence in Ireland. The most damaging single report came later in the year, when Henry George, on a tour of the Birmingham area, told the *Gazette* that ‘the Order is decaying in America’ because ‘the chiefs prefer high salaries and a quiet life to active propaganda.’

These reports took their toll. According to the later judgement of another newspaper, the five articles in the *Daily Gazette* ‘completely pricked the bladder and produced a fatal collapse’ in the assemblies around Birmingham. Frederick Shrevee, the recording secretary of LA395 in Derby, wrote to the *Journal of United Labor* in 1889 about the ‘disintegration canard’ and added that ‘I am sorry to say that it has gotten into some of our papers that the Knights of Labor are going to pieces.’ He further hoped that ‘some able

10 *Commonweal*, 14 July 1888.
11 *Justice*, 16 February 1889.
12 *Labour Tribune*, 13 September 1890.
13 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 to 23 February 1889.
14 See, for instance, *The Times*, 23 November 1889.
16 *Smethwick Weekly News*, 11 July 1891.
brother will refute it.’ James P. Archibald did respond to claims of decline during his time in Britain and Ireland the same year, both in speeches and in print. The *Labour Tribune*, however, rejected Archibald’s ‘weak defence’ of the Order, and demonstrated the enormous extent of its decline in some detail.

The reverses the Knights suffered in the United States did not always or immediately translate into reverses for Knights elsewhere in the world. The Belgian assemblies managed to grow to between 20,000 and 30,000 strong in 1891, at a time when many American Knights contemplated the end of their order. New Zealand Knights peaked even later in the decade, and the Knights only arrived in France in 1893, just as the General Assembly planned to remove Powderly from his post as General Master Workman. British and Irish Knights were not simply the victims of their order’s American decline. Instead, this decline exacerbated the problems caused by their defeats in strikes, their failed competition with other trade unions and their commitment to arbitration at a time when newly militant workers sought confrontation more than compromise. As their rivals grew and became more attractive to British and Irish workers, the Knights remained tethered to an order whose time seemed to have passed. Unfavourable news reports were only part of the problem. The gradual withdrawal of direct support helped to fracture this transnational movement too.

The glassworkers of LA3504, with whom the history of the British and Irish Knights began, were hit especially hard by this withdrawal of support. Their assembly owed everything to the organising work and financial resources of LA300 and its Universal Federation of Window-Glass Workers. The leaders of LA300 had justified their assistance to the glassworkers of Europe on the grounds that the assembly could then regulate and restrict their immigration to the United States as necessary. Their lobbying for the Foran Act formed the other side of their strategy, and Marcel van der Linden argues that its passage soon rendered the Universal Federation superfluous. Yet American glassworkers continued to support the Federation over the course of the 1880s because, as one speaker at their 1889 convention put it, ‘in the years that the Federation had been in operation it had prevented hundreds of foreign workmen coming to this country.’

17 *JUL*, 10 October 1889.
18 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 31 August 1889.
19 *Labour Tribune*, 6 September 1889.
21 Van der Linden, ‘Labour Internationalism,’ p. 266.
22 *Smethwick Telephone*, 20 April 1889; ‘Fifth National Convention of Window-Glass Workers,’ p. 21.
Internationalism based on this kind of self-interest soon ran into problems on both sides of the Atlantic. Through the Universal Federation, LA300 allowed English and Belgian craftsmen to fill vacancies at new American glassworks. Even in April 1889, the Smethwick Telephone reported that ‘hundreds of people’ gathered to see off glassworkers from Spon Lane on their way to take up posts in the United States with the full blessing of LA300. When that assembly imported mainly Belgian members of the Universal Federation to work at a new glassworks in Jeanette, Pennsylvania in the same year, however, they were prosecuted for breaking the very contract labour law that they had lobbied for in Congress. Opposition to the Universal Federation grew among the members of LA300. The European affiliates of the Federation, on the other hand, felt that LA300 used it as a means to ‘keep them from going to America to work.’ When that assembly raised its initiation fee to $200 in 1889, even for members of the Federation, English and Belgian glassworkers deluged Powderly with their complaints. Representatives of LA300 responded in 1890 that they had the right to set whatever fee they wished. That same year they went even further and formally left the Universal Federation altogether. Albert Delwarte, the head of the Belgian glassworkers, attempted to keep the Federation together but his enthusiasm was no substitute for LA300’s enormous financial reserves. LA300 continued to provide LA3504 with some financial assistance in their strikes at Spon Lane and Sunderland, but the days when English glassworkers were part of an international movement based on mutual assistance were over.

The other British and Irish assemblies encountered a similar change in their relationship with headquarters in Philadelphia. Powderly and the General Executive Board never possessed the same determination and financial resources as LA300, or the time needed to properly coordinate a campaign for the international growth of the Knights of Labor, but for much of the 1880s they nevertheless managed to provide the British and Irish assemblies with some measure of assistance. Organisers like A.G. Denny, James P. Archibald and Michael Davitt were hardworking and capable and, in Davitt’s case, famous as well. The money that the General Executive

23 Smethwick Telephone, 20 April 1889.
24 Pittsburgh Dispatch, 28 November 1889 and 16 May 1890.
25 See, for instance, a letter by Simon Burns against the leaders of LA300, and an undated letter against the Universal Federation, presumably from the late 1880s, in an unnamed newspaper dealing with the glass trade, in Box 8, JHP.
26 Quoted in Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 318.
27 Albert Delwarte to Powderly, 7 August 1890, Box 61, TVP; James Brown to Powderly, 12 November 1890, Box 64, TVP.
28 C.H. Oaks to Powderly, 15 September 1890, Box 61, TVP.
Board sent to Knights in the Black Country in the 1880s allowed them to open more assemblies, recruit members and bring Kenrick’s, a major manufacturer, to the negotiating table. In the early days of the British and Irish assemblies this assistance had been a powerful asset; as the American Order entered into decline, and its assistance dried up, these connections became a dangerous liability.

In August 1889, as James P. Archibald countered yet more criticism of his order in the pages of the Birmingham Daily Post, he added that ‘it is not unlikely [that] a permanent organiser for Europe may be appointed by our next general assembly.’ British and Irish Knights must have hoped that, just as their appeals in 1887 for a ‘paid man among us beyond the reach of capitalistic vindictiveness’ had brought them Michael Davitt, they would soon greet Archibald’s replacement. But though both DA208 and DA248 asked the General Assemblies in 1889 and 1890 for such a replacement, they received none. The only exceptions were American Knights who arrived in Britain and Ireland on personal business, and John J. Bealin, one of Powderly’s enemies, who tried unsuccessfully to claim that the General Master Workman had issued him an organisers’ commission in England. Thomas Clarke, the Master Workman of an American assembly, lectured on behalf of Derry’s LA1601 while visiting relatives in the area. There are suggestions that Andrew D. Best, an Irish-born Knight, was sent as an organiser to Britain and Ireland sometime in the early 1890s but no further evidence rests behind it. This lack of help from America had serious consequences. William Stewart, the recording secretary of LA1601, told Powderly in 1891 that ‘no organizer would do us any good unless one from your side of the water.’

Not all Knights who travelled across the Atlantic proved to be of use to the assemblies there, either. Leonora Barry and Thomas Cavanaugh, both among the Order’s leading figures, visited the Paris Exposition in 1889 as part of a workers’ delegation organised by the Scripp Newspaper League, and spent time in England en route. Barry and Cavanaugh met with the

29 Birmingham Daily Post, 31 August 1889.
32 Powderly to Hayes, 17 September 1889, Box 1, JHP.
33 William Carroll to Thomas Clarke, 16 September 1891, Box 69, TVP; William Stewart to Thomas Clarke, 19 September 1891, Box 69, TVP; Thomas Clarke to Powderly, 2 October 1891, Box 69, TVP.
34 Washington Times, 11 August 1899.
35 William Stewart to Powderly, 23 November 1891, Box 69, TVP.
36 For both of them in Paris, after their English leg, see F. Veyssier to Powderly, 20 September 1889, Box 56, TVP.
Birmingham Trades Council and with representatives from assemblies in
the city.37 Barry visited the chainshops of Cradley Heath but, due to poor
health or other commitments, she did nothing in the way of organising or
lecturing for the Knights while there. Cavanaugh also failed to help any local
assemblies.38 William S. Waudby, a socialist and member of the (American)
International Typographical Union, received organisers’ credentials from
Powderly and Hayes when he went to one of the two International Labour
Congresses that convened alongside the Exposition. But Waudby, as he
warned Secretary-Treasurer Hayes, ‘may not be enabled to do much in the
way of actual organization of LÀs, owing to my official duties.’ In the end he
made no impression in Britain or Ireland at all.39 Paul Bowen of Washington
DC’s DA66 also visited the Labour Congresses, without the knowledge of
Powderly and the General Executive Board. He met with Engels in London,
but never met with Knights in the rest of the country except for when he
attended the Possibilist Congress in Paris alongside Jesse Chapman, who
represented DA208.40

But the absence of one Knight in particular provided the most damaging
blow to the morale of the British and Irish assemblies, and symbolised
the retreat of American Knights from their assistance to foreign branches.
Between 1887 and the end of the decade, Terence Powderly made a number of
private and public promises to journey across the Atlantic, work on behalf of
the Irish nationalists and visit Knights throughout Europe.41 Michael Davitt
predicted that Powderly would receive ‘enthusiastic receptions’ there and
that his visit would ‘be productive of wide-reaching results,’ both in terms
of Irish nationalism and the British labour movement.42 Powderly himself,
according to Reynolds’s Newspaper, expected ‘that his visit to England will
have the effect of arousing the industrial masses of that country to the
importance of enrolling themselves under the banner of the Knights of
Labour.’43 Given his international fame, the General Master Workman was
probably not exaggerating unduly; but in 1887 and 1888 Powderly failed to
keep his promise thanks to poor health and his propensity for sea-sickness,

37 JUL, 19 September 1889.
38 Dudley Herald, 10 August 1889.
39 William S Waudby to Hayes, 21 February 1889, Box 53, TVP.
40 Friedrich Engels to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 17 July 1889. From MIA. For Jesse
Chapman at the Second International see Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 325; Report of the
International Workmen’s Congress… 1889, Published by the Trade Unionist Members of the English
41 Some examples from 1887: Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 9 September 1887;
Newcastle Weekly Courant, 15 April 1887; Chicago Daily Tribune, 3 September 1887.
42 Los Angeles Daily Herald, 15 October 1887.
43 Reynolds’s Newspaper, 2 October 1887.
which meant, he told Davitt, that he ‘would be poisoning fishes before the ship on which I started would get half way over.’ British Knights, who had invited him to visit their assemblies, were naturally disappointed. The decision of the General Assembly in 1888 to appoint Powderly as the Order’s representative to the Paris Exposition of 1889, however, which he accepted, suggested that after a number of broken promises the British and Irish Knights would finally get to host their leader and, perhaps, have him lead a resurgence of their assemblies.

Powderly reassured Jesse Chapman that ‘I will most assuredly be with you.’ Knights waited for their leader with great expectation. Yet Powderly never made the voyage, and justified his decision to the General Assembly in 1889 on the grounds that ‘I could not see that any gain would accrue to the Order on either side of the Atlantic.’ Privately, he told Chapman that ‘I have had a longing to go over for a long time, but somehow I can never see my way clear to make a start, for about the time that I begin to prepare, something turns up to demand my presence and attention.’ To Thomas Dean, Master Workman of DA208, he explained that ‘while man proposes, Knights of Labor disposes of their GMW pretty much as they please.’ These explanations may have satisfied the individuals involved, but Powderly’s failure to make good on any of his promises did little for morale at a time when news of the Order’s decline was beginning to spread and as hostile newspapers like the Birmingham Daily Gazette subjected the assemblies to extended criticism and exposed their secrets to the newspaper-reading public. His visit may not have single-handedly safeguarded the future of the assemblies but it would undoubtedly have boosted their profile and added to their numbers in a way that Denny, Archibald and maybe even Davitt could not. Powderly’s broken promises symbolised and coincided with the point at which the affiliation of the British and Irish assemblies became more of a hindrance than a help.

44 Powderly to Michael Davitt, 6 April 1888, Box 99, TVP.
45 Three examples of these invitations: one from Preston (David Whittle to Powderly, 13 April 1887, Box 32, TVP); one from Smethwick (J. Chapman to Powderly, Jan 1889, Box 50, TVP); one from Sunderland (Joseph French to Powderly, 12 September 1887, Box 36, TVP).
47 Powderly to Jesse Chapman, 8 February 1889, Box 99, TVP.
49 Powderly to J. Chapman, 5 March 1890, Box 100, TVP.
50 Powderly to Thomas Dean, 6 March 1890, Box 100, TVP.
Knights and the Money Power, or the Power of Money

The financial history of the British and Irish assemblies followed a similar trajectory. The Knights of Labor developed in Britain and Ireland as an inexpensive alternative to local trade unions, most of which, at least before the rise of the new unions, combined high dues with a range of insurance benefits for members and often their families as well, and were led by paid officials. Knights proudly claimed that without these benefits and paid officials their order was run on very economical lines.  

Correspondence to General Secretary-Treasurer Hayes from LA9970 of Winson Green, Birmingham, indicates that Knights paid around 2d per week, with quarterly dues of 1½d and an annual per capita tax of 5 cents (or approximately 2½d). Other sources refer to an entrance fee for new members of 5s. Contributions were higher for the glassworkers of LA3504, who paid 1s 6d a month, presumably along the same lines as members of LA300. Each new assembly paid an initiation fee of £3 6s 7d to headquarters in Philadelphia. That sum paid for the various bureaucratic supplies that it needed, from membership cards to official stationery, as well as for the symbols that graced each assembly hall. The assemblies hired independent auditors where possible to keep their accounts in proper shape.

Even with these low dues some assemblies were able to quickly amass a sizeable reserve fund. In its first year of operation, LA7952 received £127 8s 9½d from members’ contributions, paid out £50 8s 11d, and kept £77 4s 10½d in reserve. Charles Chamberlain insisted in 1889 that ‘it is an easy matter for any of our lodges to accumulate £100 if they are of a saving disposition,’ and other reports in the same year bear this out. According to a report in the Journal of United Labor in 1887, this steady accumulation of funds resulted from the fact that English Knights ‘pay up their dues a great deal better’ than Knights in the

51 The recording secretary of LA443 told one newspaper that ‘we have no men with big salaries on the staff of the Liverpool K.O.L. All the officers belonging to L.A. 443 and P. 1, 2, and 3, give their time gratuitously for the benefit of their fellow workmen’ (Liverpool Courier, 10 February 1890).
52 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 325; Letter from C. Mullineux to Hayes, 22 July 1890, Box 26, JHP.
53 Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 26 September 1889.
54 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 325.
55 Walsall Observer, 28 December 1889.
56 JUL, 13 August 1887.
57 JUL, 13 August 1887.
58 Smethwick Weekly News, 2 March 1889. Reports that a number of assemblies boasted more than £100 in savings can be found in Smethwick Weekly News, 23 February 1889.
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United States. But their finances remained dependent, both in terms of inflow and outflow, on the links between them and headquarters. On the one hand, the British and Irish assemblies sent per capita contributions to Philadelphia, around £350 in total during 1889. British Knights were also subject to the ‘calls’ from the district and general assemblies, which ordered a certain amount per member when those bodies urgently needed funds for strikes, administrative costs or other reasons. On the other hand, the assemblies received financial assistance from headquarters. Charles Chamberlain described this financial link as the most important reason to keep the British assemblies affiliated with the United States. If they severed these ties, he told the Smethwick Weekly News in 1889, ‘in the first instance it would do good, but it would not in the end.’ By maintaining them, he added, ‘we shall receive treble what we are paying in capita tax, should the occasion arise.’

In 1889 this assumption began to unravel. DA208 and DA248 both appealed to that year’s General Assembly for financial assistance to resist employers who refused to recognise assemblies, and were told there was no money to give them. By 1890, the General Executive Board responded to pleas from DA248 with only a public appeal to the generosity of individual Knights. These decisions further encouraged the critics of the British and Irish assemblies. In 1887, a delegate of the ironworkers at Brierley Hill had rejected affiliation with the Knights because ‘he had greater faith in getting some of his money back from the North than from America.’ Samuel Welsh, a trade unionist from Walsall, was even more acerbic in 1889. He described the Order as ‘a clever Yankee speculation got up for the purpose of providing good berths for high-paid officials to fatten upon the industry of their dupes,’ and added that in return for their assessments to Philadelphia, local Knights ‘received goods – including tinselled lances and toy globes – not worth one-third the money.’

So long as the British and Irish assemblies received various kinds of aid from Philadelphia, whether in the form of cheques or organisers, they could justify their contributions to the United States to their critics. But as the money stopped travelling eastwards the ‘calls,’ which the Birmingham Daily Gazette claimed were large and frequent enough to prevent the assemblies

59 JUL, 31 December 1887.
60 Walsall Observer, 11 January 1890.
61 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 18 February 1889.
62 Smethwick Weekly News, 2 March 1889.
63 Proceedings of the GA (1889), pp. 5, 6.
64 JUL, 23 October 1890.
65 Birmingham Daily Post, 1 March 1887.
66 Walsall Observer, 11 January 1890.
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from amassing more sizeable reserve funds, became increasingly unpopular. The workers who joined the assemblies in 1889 ‘expecting half-crowns for shillings,’ as the Smethwick Weekly News later put it, were not inclined to stay when all the promises of support from the United States were not fulfilled.

The withdrawal of financial assistance led directly to the end of several assemblies. Even the glassworkers of LA3504 which, as the Journal of United Labor put it, received ‘large sums of good American money’ from LA300 as late as 1891, found themselves that year ‘continually asking how it is we receive nothing from the General Assembly.’ The sums of good American money, as we saw in Chapter 4, were not large enough to keep the strike at Spon Lane from falling apart and dooming LA3504 as a whole. The Belfast assemblies suffered even more. The ropeworkers of LA7566 went on strike in 1890, and the other local assembly, LA418, subsidised the strikers in the belief that the General Executive Board would reimburse them. The strike failed and LA7566 failed with it. The General Executive Board failed to respond to LA418’s appeals for money. Without financial assistance, LA418 followed LA7566 and its leaders disbanded the assembly and distributed its assets among the remaining membership. The history of the Knights in Belfast ended with it.

In nearby Derry, as we saw in the previous chapter, LA1601 actually sanctioned a strike in an attempt to disprove the claims of rival unions that it could no longer rely on financial assistance from the United States. Unfortunately for the Knights in Derry, these claims turned out to be true. William Stewart sent frantic letters to the General Executive Board in 1891 and 1892, one of which explained that ‘were it not for the proceeds of letting our hall to other unions we would have been out of existence nine months ago,’ and that if they were not bailed out soon ‘the Knights of Labour in Ireland will be a thing of the past.’ As noted in the previous chapter, the General Executive Board had misplaced the documents relating to LA1601’s appeals and had not yet rejected them. Regardless of the cause, however, the lack of financial assistance meant that Stewart’s prophesy came true in 1892.

Not all the financial failings of the British and Irish assemblies were so innocently conceived. The most disastrous chapter in their financial history came with the appearance of two of their officials at West Bromwich Police Court in 1889 and 1890 on charges of embezzlement. Charges like these were

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67 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 18 February 1889.
69 JUL, 10 November 1891; James Brown to Hayes, 17 September 1891, Box 10, JHP.
70 Boyle, Irish Labour Movement, pp. 104–06.
71 William Stewart to Powderly, 20 January 1892, Box 71, TVP.
72 Hayes to Powderly, 11 November 1891, Box 69, TVP.
all too common in the history of the American Order. In some cases simple mismanagement was to blame, as when Charles Lichtman rerouted money from the new Defence Fund to the new *Journal of United Labor* in 1880, only to find that his unrealistic forecasts left the Order deeply in debt.\(^\text{73}\) Other cases involved foolish expenditure, as when the General Executive Board moved their headquarters in 1887 to a palatial home that cost $50,000.\(^\text{74}\) These apparent symptoms of mismanagement and avarice on the part of the general officers certainly fuelled criticism of the Knights in Britain and Ireland.\(^\text{75}\) In other cases, leading Knights siphoned the Order’s funds into their own bank accounts or used them as collateral for their own private investments. General Secretary-Treasurer Hayes was the worst offender in this regard, although most of the other general officers also indulged in their own moneymaking schemes, either to restore the Order’s financial health or to survive at a time when the Knights could not afford to pay their salaries.\(^\text{76}\) In the United States these cases of fraud were generally symptoms of the Order’s decline and not its cause.

The two cases of embezzlement in the British assemblies were on a far smaller scale than in the United States, but they were very definitely a cause rather than a symptom of the Order’s decline there. In January 1889 the secretary of an assembly in the Birmingham area, Charles Richards, was charged with stealing £7 16s 3d, money intended for Jesse Chapman. In August 1890, Charles Chamberlain, the recording and financial secretary of LA7952, the Order’s representative on the West Bromwich School Board, and the Knight most interviewed by the local press, followed Richards into the dock. Knights claimed that he took £2 10s from LA7952 without any justification.\(^\text{77}\) In both cases local Knights faced a serious legal problem. To successfully press charges for financial disputes in criminal court, trade unions and friendly societies had to register with the Registrar of Friendly Societies and of Trade Unions under the Trade Union Acts. To register they needed to have their headquarters in Britain or Ireland.\(^\text{78}\) The Knights were not registered, nor could they register while they remained affiliated with the General Assembly.

The trials of Richards and Chamberlain illustrated the dangers of operating as an unregistered society. Richards claimed to have lost the money and offered to pay it back; in any case his defence counsel successfully


\(^{74}\) Ware, *Labor Movement*, pp. 371–73.

\(^{75}\) See, for instance, *Midland Counties Express*, 12 September 1889.

\(^{76}\) Weir, *Knights Unhorsed*, pp. 171–73.

\(^{77}\) *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8 August 1890.

\(^{78}\) Pelling, *Knights in Britain*, p. 326.
argued that since the Knights were not registered the court was under no obligation to decide the case.\textsuperscript{79} Chamberlain, on the other hand, argued that the assembly owed him the money as back pay for his work on behalf of local assemblies. Local Knights disagreed. Their prosecution, in an attempt to get around the fact that they remained unregistered, turned to novel legal arguments, such as the fanciful idea that the assemblies were, at turns, a profit-sharing enterprise, a joint-stock company and a friendly society. Their case was duly dismissed.\textsuperscript{80} In October they tried again, this time accusing Chamberlain of taking £5 10s. Chamberlain’s lawyer argued that there was no need to proceed any further as the Knights were not registered. This time, the prosecution introduced legal precedents dating from as far back as 1642 but to no avail. The judge dismissed the case for the second and final time.\textsuperscript{81}

The timing of these cases proved extremely unfortunate. In 1889 and 1890 the British and Irish assemblies reached their peak membership and widest geographical extent. The Black Country assemblies seemed to be reviving after the losses suffered at the hands of the Midland Counties Trades Federation, the Associated Ironworkers and the Engineers. The Chamberlain case, especially, exposed schisms within the Knights and suggested that members’ contributions to the assemblies were far from safe. ‘Investigations at Police Courts,’ as one paper aptly put it several months later, ‘never did and never will tend to the enhancement of any body of workers.’\textsuperscript{82} The assemblies suffered a ‘severe’ drop in membership soon afterwards.\textsuperscript{83} The two cases also came at an unfortunate point in the wider relationship between the British and Irish assemblies and Philadelphia. The assemblies became publicly vulnerable to embezzlement at the same time as they sent contributions to the United States and received increasingly little in return, and as the American Order itself appeared, even across the Atlantic, no longer as vibrant and successful but as divided and in serious decline. At such a crucial turning point in this transatlantic relationship, the financial misadventures of a single secretary became a major factor in the decline of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Birmingham Daily Post}, 30 January and 2 February 1889.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Birmingham Daily Post}, 9 August 1889.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Smeethwick Weekly News}, 4 October 1890.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Smeethwick Weekly News}, 16 May 1891.

\textsuperscript{83} Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 326.
Nationalism, Regionalism and Internationalism

Of all the objections levelled against the Order, Richard Hill told the Journal of United Labor in 1887, ‘the chief one is that the Knights of Labor is an American organization, and that our money has to be sent abroad instead of staying with us to do us good.’ The argument that the Order was a foreign organisation, and unsuited to British or Irish conditions, remained with Knights there until the very end. In 1891, the Smethwick Weekly News concluded, rather prematurely, that ‘a foreign society could never root itself kindly on English soil.’ What, the paper asked, ‘do we know of Master Powderly, and what has he to do with our trade disputes?’ Some went even further, and argued that the Knights ran directly counter to the interests of local workers. ‘The artisans in this country by sending subsidies to the organisation in America were injuring themselves,’ Samuel Welsh claimed in 1889, ‘because they were supplying funds which would be used in securing the election of representatives to Congress who would vote for the excluding of British manufactures from the American markets.

A letter in the Smethwick Weekly News made similar allegations against LA300 in 1891. That assembly sent ‘a very small levy per man’ to keep the strike going at Spon Lane, the writer claimed, and ‘that small levy is keeping Chance’s glass out of the country. Result: Good trade in America; bad trade here.’ This allegation was not completely untrue. LA300 supported the introduction of the McKinley Tariff of 1890, which protected American glass and other industries from foreign competition, at the expense of the very assemblies of glassworkers they organised through the Universal Federation. Welsh’s wider accusations also have some merit, at least superficially. ‘Touch not the tariff,’ Terence Powderly wrote in 1888, and ‘raise the duties so high that not a single article of foreign manufacture can come into the country.’ This was bluster, however, not an expression of what the Knights seriously hoped to achieve. Nor did Knights expand abroad out of a desire to line their pockets. Instead, as we saw in the first chapter, they organised in Britain, Ireland and elsewhere partly due to their commitment to universal brotherhood and partly in order to stem the tide of immigration. They practised brotherhood from a distance rather than extortion from across the Atlantic.

84 JUL, 30 July 1887.
85 Smethwick Weekly News, 11 July 1891.
86 Walsall Observer, 11 January 1890.
87 Smethwick Weekly News, 14 November 1891.
88 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 320.
89 Newspaper clipping from unknown source, in folder 1888 August 23–26, Box 46, TVP.
If the Knights arrived in Britain and Ireland for practical and principled reasons, and not for devious ones, their local representatives still needed to appear to be something more than a collection of branches that belonged to an American Order. We have already seen that British and Irish Knights benefited from their American connections in the 1880s more than they suffered from the American origins of the Order. They followed the guidelines and strictures – the Americanisms, perhaps – of American Knights, in terms of cultural practices and industrial policy, and yet their assemblies grew in their first half decade. Henry George might agree with the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* that ‘the American KL Constitution was quite unsuited for the English Knights,’ but then, as one of their supporters insisted, ‘the English Order does not endorse all that is done in America.’

British and Irish Knights needed, however, to portray their order as a British and Irish as well as an American one; and as decline set in, this need grew only more intense. They spent their last years attempting, unsuccessfully, to build a national movement out of their various local and regional ones.

The Knights of Labor, as previous chapters made clear, consistently proved their willingness to let members outside the United States adapt their assemblies to local conditions, provided they met a certain minimum standard of compliance with the Order’s programme. They also proved their willingness to let foreign Knights exercise more control over their own affairs. As early as 1884, delegates to the General Assembly proposed that Knights outside the United States should form their own general assemblies, with full control over revenues and methods of operation, with the American General Assembly left in control of ritual and with each general assembly entitled to send representatives to the others. The General Assembly rejected these proposals, and later ones in 1887, but Knights in Belgium created a State Assembly in that year which effectively operated as an independent national body, sent Albert Delwarte to the 1888 General Assembly in that capacity and severed direct ties with Philadelphia in September 1889 while continuing to work under the name Les Chevaliers du Travail. Knights in New Zealand similarly created their own National Assembly, sanctioned by the General Assembly.

British and Irish Knights were slow to follow their lead. Instead, DA208 asked the 1889 General Assembly ‘that the words “of America” be dropped

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92 *Proceedings of the GA* (1884), pp. 741–42.
from the name of the Order.' The General Assembly acceded to their request.\textsuperscript{94} The district assembly further asked that ‘a representative of the Order in America be sent over to that country for a period of twelve months to settle disputes and extend the Order generally throughout the United Kingdom.’\textsuperscript{95} The General Assembly refused this request, though it did allow DA208 and DA248 to control their own initiation fees and make some adjustments to the Order’s preamble.\textsuperscript{96} In each case, British Knights wanted the Order to become more international and less specifically American. Their commitment to remaining part of their transnational movement outweighed their desire to go it alone. The General Assembly appreciated their loyalty and nearly chose Birmingham (in England, not Alabama) as the site of their next annual meeting.\textsuperscript{97}

At the same time, the leaders of the British and Irish assemblies slowly began to weld their various local and district assemblies into a national movement. An ‘Inter-District Committee’ convened a meeting on 4 August 1890 for all the assemblies ‘to take into consideration what means can be devised for the further consolidation and strengthening of the Order here.’\textsuperscript{98} That meeting was overshadowed by the Chamberlain embezzlement case, which painfully illustrated the urgency of registering the assemblies under the Trade Union Acts. Thus energised, the delegates resolved to create a National Assembly, ‘draft an English preamble’ and raise membership dues in order to create a common reserve fund and supply funeral benefits.\textsuperscript{99} But many Knights initially shied away from any attempt to organise apart from the General Assembly. The leaders of DA208 submitted a copy of their rules to the Registrar at the beginning of 1891 in the hope of registering their district assembly without having to sever direct ties with Philadelphia; the Registrar responded that he would only consider registering the Order as a whole and not any one district of it.\textsuperscript{100}

The need to gain registration pushed British and Irish Knights towards independence from Philadelphia. Meetings in April and May 1891 brought together representatives from around 30 assemblies from the Rotherham, Birmingham and Cradley Heath districts as well as some unspecified other

\textsuperscript{94} Proceedings of the GA (1889), pp. 8, 18, 34.
\textsuperscript{95} Proceedings of the GA (1889), p. 44.
\textsuperscript{96} Proceedings of the GA (1889), p. 44.
\textsuperscript{97} Proceedings of the GA (1889), pp. 78–79. Such a move would have given much-needed publicity to assemblies there even if it remains unclear how an order with enormous financial problems could have paid the travelling costs of nearly 100 delegates voyaging across the Atlantic.
\textsuperscript{98} JUL, 3 July 1890.
\textsuperscript{99} Birmingham Workmen’s Times, 29 August 1890.
\textsuperscript{100} Smethwick Weekly News, 11 July 1891.
areas. At this stage the delegates resolved to get ‘registered in accordance with the laws of this country … [while] at the same time to keep as close as possible to the American order.’ Arthur Nadin described it as “Home Rule” for Great Britain and also Irish Knights of Labour,’ and insisted that ‘no separation … will take place between the Knights of Labour of this country and their brethren across the Atlantic.’ In August 1891 a meeting of delegates from assemblies across Yorkshire and the Midlands agreed to form the British National Assembly of the Knights of Labour, with its headquarters in Cradley Heath, and the new body was registered on 15 October 1891.

The Preamble of the National Assembly described it as ‘an off-shoot of the great American Organization, whose principles of action, and methods of work, it has largely endorsed.’ In its ritual practices, its strike policy, and the names and functions of its officers, the National Assembly followed existing practice in the American Order except for raising the initiation fees from 5s to 7s 6d, on top of 4d in weekly contributions. At the 1891 General Assembly, the General Executive Board gave the new body its blessing. It described ‘a growing feeling among our brothers in Great Britain and Ireland in favour of their being placed in a position to more fully control their own affairs,’ and the Board declared itself ‘favourably disposed toward anything they may find necessary in this direction.’

The National Assembly, Henry Pelling writes, came ‘too late to arrest the decline of membership.’ The economic upswing of 1889–90 was already subsiding, and the assemblies were subsiding with it. Conflict and competition with the trade unions had already taken their toll, as had desertions after failed strikes or the failure of Knights to support strikes when workers evidently wanted them. There had already been an exodus of members following the embezzlement cases. Indeed, it took more than a year after the Chamberlain case for the British National Assembly to gain registration. Knights could hardly point to any bureaucratic ineptitude on the part of the Registrar of Trade Unions. Instead, the National Assembly was delayed by deep splits between the assemblies attached to DA208 and those attached to DA248 and DA256. The former, as one newspaper reported, ‘wish to establish a National Assembly, with headquarters in England, under a charter to be obtained from Powderly;’ the latter, DA248 in particular,
'wish to cut the connection with America altogether, and make the Order an English trades union,' doubling dues to create 'a fund which would attract recruits, and enable any serious dispute to be properly fought.'

These disputes resulted in the cleavage of the British and Irish Knights at the very point when they could least afford a split. The assemblies of DA248 and DA256 combined under the banner of the British National Assembly. Those in DA208 remained under their existing constitution. Knights elsewhere in Britain and Ireland were not consulted. At one meeting in 1891, Arthur Nadin spoke of establishing 'further communications' with the Scottish assemblies, but there is no indication that Scottish Knights were involved in the National Assembly at all. In the northeast, the British United Order and the Independent Order remained aloof from assemblies elsewhere.

These regional splits illustrated one of the dangers facing a transnational movement like the Knights. Their British and Irish assemblies remained as oriented towards Philadelphia as to each other. Individual organisers, to be sure, often moved from one area to another: Thomas Dean of DA208 lectured in Liverpool and Rotherham, for instance, and Haydn Sanders travelled from Walsall to organise around South Yorkshire and the West Midlands. But Knights did not begin to conceive of themselves as more than a collection of local affiliates to an American movement, and as a national, British movement, until 1890 at the earliest. This was partially because the Knights only extended beyond the Black Country in 1888 and 1889, and partially, as we saw in Chapter 2, because as an ecumenical and successful international movement the Knights were able organise Irish and other workers in large numbers. But it was mainly because they had no other choice. Financial scandals required them to conform to the standards of the Registrar of Trade Unions if they wished to stop these scandals happening again. Yet the British National Assembly divided their ranks still further, and came too late to reverse the damage done to the Order's reputation or membership.

These conflicting pressures split the Knights at a moment when only absolute unity could offer them any prospect for survival. They also exposed the ways in which working-class internationalism had changed and were

110 Pelling, 'Knights in Britain,' p. 326.
111 Hayes to William Stewart, 7 August 1891, Box 67, TVP.
112 Rotherham Advertiser, 29 August 1891.
113 Pelling, 'Knights in Britain,' p. 328.
114 For Dean in Liverpool, see Liverpool Mercury, 27 May 1889; for Yorkshire, see Rotherham Advertiser, 21 December 1889. For Sanders see earlier chapters in this book.
changing. Marcel van der Linden, as we saw in Chapter 1, divides the history of this internationalism in the nineteenth century into several rough periods. The first, ‘sub-national internationalism,’ was dominant until the 1870s. It found its highest expression in the First International, with its alliances between workers of different countries at a local or subnational level and with the International itself creating branches in various countries. The second phase, ‘national internationalism,’ began to dominate from the 1890s and represented instead the coming together of pre-existing national bodies. Its highest expression, the Second International and the trade union bodies that surrounded it, exemplified this trend and the great development of national labour movements in the years between the two Internationals.¹¹⁵ “The national framework,” Geert van Goethem writes, became ‘the only reality for the labour movement as a whole, when it started to develop in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a mass movement.”¹¹⁶ The Knights of Labor emerged in the transition period between these two phases. Its dream of a single supranational organisation, bringing together local bodies of workers in different countries, resembled the First International much more than the Second.

We saw in the previous chapter how the Knights lost out to national trade unions, first the ‘old,’ then the ‘new.’ The new unions and new unionists also articulated the logic of ‘national internationalism’ with particular force. ‘When each Trade Union comprises the majority of the workers in its Trade, and when these unions are united in a National Trade Federation,’ Annie Besant explained, ‘then will come the time for the International Federation, which will mean the triumph of labor and the freedom of the workers everywhere.”¹¹⁷ John Havelock Wilson used this same logic against Knights in Bootle, as he simultaneously praised the American Knights and attacked their local supporters. ‘He believed that it would be more profitable for the working men of this country to organise themselves first,’ he told a meeting of seamen and dockers in 1890, ‘and then, if possible, to confederate with the Knights of Labour or any organisation which might exist.”¹¹⁸ The Knights proved acceptable as a national American movement but not as an international one.

The British and Irish Knights were caught in many contradictions between many conflicting pressures over the course of their history. This was one of the greatest. Their assemblies faced powerful and often new national

¹¹⁵ Van der Linden, ‘Rise and Fall of the First International,’ pp. 325–33.
¹¹⁸ Liverpool Weekly Post, 8 February 1890.
organisations in the 1880s and the 1890s, and their assemblies invariably lost. At the same time the whole conception of what internationalism meant in the working-class movements of Europe and the Americas was changing. Internationalism came to mean the alliance of national bodies and not the growth of a single, international one like the Knights of Labor. This is not to imply that Knights outside North America were inevitably doomed to failure. But their success depended in large part on their ability to adapt themselves to the new mood for national movements that would, in time, come together with those from other countries. Knights in Belgium and New Zealand successfully built national movements at a relatively early stage in their history. They survived into the twentieth century; the assemblies in Britain and Ireland did not.

Knights there waited until their assemblies fell into serious decline before trying to build their own National Assembly. They found that in the process of building it, their ranks split along a range of ideological and geographical lines. Regionalism, nationalism and internationalism bred changing and conflicting pressures that ultimately helped to tear the British and Irish assemblies apart. It is hard to see how it could have been otherwise. In the early years of the assemblies the American connection seemed to make the task of building a national movement unnecessary, even undesirable, or at least something that could be put off for several more years. When that task became necessary, after Charles Richards and Charles Chamberlain exposed the assemblies’ vulnerability to fraud, it was too late to avoid the divisions that opened between the leaders of the various district assemblies. These trends were not inevitable. Paradoxically, however, the very success of the Knights of Labor as a transnational movement in the 1880s made the task of turning their assemblies into a national movement in the 1890s that much harder, and that much less likely to happen in time to save the assemblies.

**Conclusion:**

**The Final Years of the Assemblies**

In the waning years of Terence Powderly’s tenure as General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, he and one of his closest associates hit upon a moneymaking scheme to make up for the salary that the bankrupt Order could not pay him. Using the printing presses of the *Journal of the Knights of Labor* they printed a *Labor Day Annual* in 1893, in an effort to cash in on the growth of Labor Day as the main event in the American working-class calendar. The publication yielded little profit for Powderly and his friends. It failed to sell well. It also alienated numerous workers who saw its advertisements and featured articles from some notoriously anti-union employers as a betrayal; its content, especially a chapter on ‘Labor in England’
by one Carey Taylor, was nothing less than delusional. In Britain, Taylor argued, ‘the lines of old-fashioned trades-unionism are too closely followed, and … British toilers, as a mass, have not yet comprehended the necessity for and the advantages of such an unification and amalgamation of forces as are presented by the Order of the Knights of Labor.’ Taylor added that ‘a more active and enthusiastic dissemination of its principles by our transatlantic brothers would so consolidate the ranks of English labor as to bring the subjugation of British capital within “measurable distance,”’ and claimed it was ‘inconceivable that the ablest leaders of the various British labor organizations could not unite in the adoption of the Knights of Labor platform.’

The Labor Day Annual symbolises many of the problems that afflicted the American Knights in the last years in which they could claim to speak for an appreciable fraction of American workers. The inability to pay salaries on time, the use of the Order’s resources for private gain and the almost predetermined failure of these ventures were all too common in the collapsing scenery of the Knights of Labor in the 1890s. Taylor’s arguments were reminiscent of the hopes that Reynolds’s Newspaper held out for the Knights in 1887, when its writer predicted that they would replace the TUC. In that year, at least, the Order in Britain was a young movement affiliated with the largest labour organisation in the world. By 1893, the British and Irish assemblies had missed any opportunity they might have had to assume a leading role in their labour movements. Now they teetered on the edge of dissolution.

Earlier chapters noted many of the causes of their decline. They lost strikes, or lost many members who wished to strike but were prevented from doing so by leaders wedded to arbitration at all costs. The trade unions defeated them and took their members, and the assemblies could not find a role between the national unions and the Trades Councils. Union opposition was perhaps the most consistently debilitating factor of all, more than opposition from employers, which was powerful in specific instances – notably at Pilkington’s – and absent in others. In this chapter we can add to the roll call of causes. British and Irish Knights suffered from their attachment to the American Order as it declined from the end of the 1880s onwards. They suffered in terms of reputation, as the local representatives of an order marching from defeat to defeat; and they suffered as American Knights became unable to give them financial assistance and supply them with organisers to replace Denny, Davitt and Archibald.

In these newly unfavourable circumstances the embezzlement cases encouraged an exodus from the assemblies. These cases pushed Knights to build their own National Assembly, but the process of building it divided

rather than united the remaining assemblies. It also came too late to spark their revival. At the end, the Knights of Labor remained wedded to a style of working-class internationalism that material conditions no longer supported, and which workers in Britain and Ireland, at least, no longer practised. The initiative lay with resurgent national movements who wished to come together but from a position of independence. The British and Irish Knights could not justify their continued existence in this context, unlike Belgian and New Zealand Knights. Their history as a movement with a future probably ended in 1891, even if their assemblies survived at least until 1894.

We can only guess as to the precise mechanics and timeline of decline for each individual local assembly. Most probably went the way of LA9770 in Winson Green, whose members faithfully paid their per capita tax to Philadelphia right up to the point when they folded, in July 1890.\(^\text{120}\) Other assemblies gradually disappeared. The Bootle assembly, LA443, whose members had welcomed the 1890s with such optimism and with plans to open new assemblies in Liverpool, held its last public meeting in October 1890, and seems to have folded soon afterwards.\(^\text{121}\) The Walsall assembly, LA454, whose growth had also been rapid and whose future prospects seemed bright in 1890, seems to have collapsed some time in the following year. Not much is known of the Scottish assemblies except that James Shaw Maxwell, by far their leading figure, moved to London in 1891 to restart a radical publication, the *People’s Press*.\(^\text{122}\) They likely faded away in 1891 without much in the way of publicity. Certainly, when the NUDL arrived to organise dockers at Ardrossan in 1892 the Order’s assembly no longer existed.\(^\text{123}\)

The assemblies in Belfast and Derry suffered from fierce conflict with powerful rival unions, with financial difficulties and the inability of the American Knights to bail them out. As we saw in Chapter 2, they also suffered from the same religious sectarianism that still plagues Northern Ireland today. Nationalists and Unionists, Catholics and Protestants, all fought for control within the three Irish assemblies and helped tear each of them apart, first the Belfast assemblies in 1890, then the Derry assembly in 1892.\(^\text{124}\) In the previous year Derry’s LA1601 had also endured its own

\(^{120}\) C. Mullineux to Hayes, 22 July 1890, Box 26, JHP.

\(^{121}\) *Bootle Times*, 18 October 1890.

\(^{122}\) Shaw Maxwell to J. Bruce Glasier, 13 March 1891, GP/t/1/ 98, J. Bruce Glasier Archives, Liverpool University. Shaw Maxwell also wrote a letter to the *Journal of United Labor* in February or March 1891 from London, not Glasgow (*JUL*, 5 March 1891). When Secretary-Treasurer Hayes wrote to James Brown in July 1891, he only claimed to have written to DA208, DA248 and DA256, making no mention of Scotland’s DA203. See Hayes to James Brown, 16 July 1891, Box 10, JHP.


\(^{124}\) Boyle, *Irish Labour Movement*, pp. 104–06.
version of the Charles Chamberlain scandal: its treasurer, Daniel McGaul, had embezzled £12 13s 1d from the assembly. Knights were unable to recover the stolen money, further worsening their already precarious financial position. With no funds left, the assembly soon collapsed.\(^{125}\)

As we saw in Chapter 4, the first major assembly anywhere in Britain and Ireland, LA3504, also came to an end in 1893. General Secretary-Treasurer Hayes advised its secretary, James Brown, in August 1892 that even in straitened times, the Order ‘ought to be a good organization to boom with, being so far in advance of the average trade union.’\(^{126}\) But LA3504’s few remaining members were by that stage unemployed. There was little chance of a bankrupt assembly of unemployed glassworkers becoming the base for a revival of the Knights of Labor in the Sunderland area, and LA3504 closed its doors some time in 1893, more through apathy than any kind of last-ditch struggle. The fire that ruined Hartley’s, at any rate, left the remaining Knights in the glass trade with no one to struggle against.

Many of the British Order’s leaders deserted the assemblies too. Shaw Maxwell left DA203 for London. Haydn Sanders left assemblies in Walsall and then Rotherham after he became president of the new National Union of Stove-Grate Workers. Samuel Reeves ended his association with the Knights after LA443 was wound up. Jesse Chapman turned all his attention to Liberal politics in the mid-1890s, and Zebulon Butler returned to his political obsession, the single tax. The departure of leading Knights further encouraged members to leave as well. Only stalwarts like Arthur Nadin in Rotherham, and Thomas Dean and Richard Hill in Birmingham, stayed at their posts to the very end.

DA208 and the British National Assembly both continued into 1894. From 1891 until then, both organisations, now rivals of a kind, tried to keep their assemblies running. They doubtless awaited a miracle from some quarter or other, maybe some sharp upswing of trade, the sudden collapse of their trade union rivals or even the revival of the American assemblies, who might then provide them with assistance once more. No miracle was forthcoming. Arthur Nadin did travel to Derry in an attempt to revive the assembly there, this time under the umbrella of the British National Assembly, and there are some indications that a new assembly emerged in Derry and continued, in a subterranean fashion, until as late as 1896.\(^{127}\)

Knights in Rotherham maintained a presence on their Trades Council and,

\(^{125}\) *Belfast News-Letter*, 26 May 1891.

\(^{126}\) Hayes to James Brown, 12 August 1892, Box 10, JHP.

in a last attempt to garner support in the town, they held ‘soup dinners’ for poor local children and their parents.\textsuperscript{128}

Knights in the Black Country met at Smethwick in April 1892 and planned to hold open-air demonstrations ‘at an early date.’ Another report, however, suggested that only a dozen people attended the meeting and concluded ‘that the order has had its day, and they would do better to let it rest.’\textsuperscript{129} The Knights no longer existed outside of these two centres. In 1890, the Order had numbered upwards of 10,000 members. When the British National Assembly submitted its first returns to the Registrar at the end of 1892 it claimed only 434 dues-paying members. According to a later report from the Registrar, it never again exceeded this figure and wound up in 1894.\textsuperscript{130} The last two surviving assemblies attached to the Trades Council in Rotherham, the last centre where the National Assembly maintained something like a public profile, dissolved themselves sometime in the same year.\textsuperscript{131}

The decline of DA\textsubscript{208} mirrored that of the British National Assembly. The despair that accompanied the fall of that assembly is all the more vivid for the correspondence that survives between Powderly and Richard Hill, its recording secretary, and Thomas Dean, its Master Workman. In February 1893, Dean informed Powderly that DA\textsubscript{208} now had only four local assemblies in good standing, one less than the minimum necessary to operate as a district assembly, and that Hill was seriously ill.\textsuperscript{132} At the same time Hill wrote to Secretary-Treasurer Hayes to seek advice and even suggested that Knights in Birmingham ‘simply allow DA\textsubscript{208} to be a thing of the past.’\textsuperscript{133} Powderly, at least, replied and gave Dean special dispensation to keep DA\textsubscript{208} in operation.\textsuperscript{134} By June, however, the four local assemblies had been reduced to three, and each, Hill told Powderly, ‘have held special meetings, attended by the District officers who have put the whole matter clearly before them, when resolutions have been passed, pledging themselves to stand by the Order, and to do what they can to assert the DA.’ Hill still hoped that this pledge would keep what remained of DA\textsubscript{208}’s membership.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{128} For the Trades Council see, for example, \textit{Rotherham Advertiser}, 18 March 1893. For the soup dinner see \textit{Sheffield Daily Telegraph}, 28 November 1893.

\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Smethwick Telephone}, 16 April 1892; \textit{Smethwick Weekly News}, 16 April 1892.

\textsuperscript{130} Report by the Chief Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade on Trade Unions, 1898, pp. 190–91. Found at: HCPP.

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Rotherham Advertiser}, 19 January 1895.

\textsuperscript{132} Thomas Dean to Powderly, 8 February 1893, Box 77, TVP.

\textsuperscript{133} Richard Hill to Hayes, 9 February 1893, Box 77, TVP.

\textsuperscript{134} Powderly to Thomas Dean, 20 February 1893, Box 104, TVP.

\textsuperscript{135} Richard Hill to Powderly, 25 June 1893, Box 80, TVP.
Powderly did not reply to this letter. Nor did he receive any more. Jonathan Garlock lists one English assembly, LA584 of Aston, as existing until 1896, and the Independent Order survived in Jarrow with less than 100 members until 1901. The General Assembly in 1895 urged the ‘necessity [of] building up the Order in England and other foreign countries as to place the workers in all lands in touch with each other,’ but this was as much of a dream as General Master Workman James Sovereign’s incredible claim, the following year, that there were 100,000 Knights in France.\textsuperscript{136} The end of the correspondence between Dean, Hill and Powderly signified the end of the Knights of Labor as a movement of any importance at all in Britain and Ireland.\textsuperscript{137} They ended, as Henry Pelling writes, ‘vainly demanding advice from Powderly on how to halt the decline.’\textsuperscript{138} But Powderly was not in any state to provide advice. By this time his attention was completely devoted to holding on as General Master Workman. The remaining American Knights evicted him from that post in 1894. And no pledge, no matter how powerful, could save the last assemblies in Birmingham from dissolution. They soon ended up in the well-populated graveyard of other failed movements, broken unions and defunct international organisations that are the subject of much nineteenth-century labour history.

\textsuperscript{137} Garlock, Guide to the Local Assemblies, p. 581.
\textsuperscript{138} Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 328.