Knights Across the Atlantic

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Published by Liverpool University Press

Parfitt, Steven.
Knights Across the Atlantic: The Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland.
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Conclusion
The Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland

In 1896, M.J. Bishop, the General Worthy Foreman of the Knights of Labor, drew the attention of the General Assembly to ‘the attempt to form an international organisation of longshoremen, dockworkers and men employed generally on the waterfront, with the avowed intention of forcing their interests to the fore regardless of all others.’ Bishop attacked ‘the folly of the whole proceeding’ in withering terms. ‘We are entering upon an era of competition in the labor market which has never had a duplicate on the earth,’ he told the assembled delegates, ‘in very skilled occupation inventive genius is putting the craftsman upon a level with the common labourer.’ Under these circumstances, he claimed, ‘any combination, based upon the lines of trade, craft or occupation, which has for its main purpose an intention to force its views upon employers through a strike, must meet with sudden and disastrous failure.’ Bishop concluded that ‘the trade union methods which the Knights of Labor were originally formed to obviate and supersede, will no longer serve to protect the toiler from the greed and oppression of unscrupulous employers.’

In the same year the General Worthy Foreman also became a participant in a transatlantic slanging match with James Mawdsley, a veteran of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the general secretary of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Cotton Spinners. Mawdsley was not a typical TUC leader – he resigned from the Parliamentary Committee in 1890 in protest at the rising socialist influence within the Congress and later stood alongside Winston Churchill as a Conservative parliamentary candidate for a two-member constituency – but his words still carried some weight. Mawdsley visited the United States in 1895 and relayed his

1 Proceedings of the GA (1896), pp. 20–21.
impressions to Reynolds’s Newspaper. One report in particular raised the ire of Bishop and other leading Knights, when Mawdsley wrote that ‘the “Knights” have, during the past five years, been going down as all systems built on folly must do in the long run.’ The Journal of the Knights of Labor attacked his ‘concentrated pig-headed presumption and asinine assumption of “know-it-all-iveness.”’ Bishop responded in the pages of Reynolds’s by referring to the ‘large following’ that the Order supposedly still had in Britain and Ireland. ‘Were it not for such methods’ as Mawdsley’s, he argued, ‘we would now have a much larger one everywhere.’ The British trade unionist, however, had the final and decisive word. ‘An organisation which cannot publish its number of members and its annual income,’ Mawdsley concluded, ‘need not be given much thought to by the workers at large.’

There was nothing that Bishop could say to refute Mawdsley’s allegation that the Knights of Labor was an order in terminal decline. His broadside against the new international organisation of waterfront workers proved similarly ill-timed. Glass bottle makers from across Europe had created what Justice described as ‘the first really International Trades’ Union’ in 1886. The British Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union had recruited members in various countries along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts in the late 1880s. After the London Dock Strike in 1889, in which foreign assistance, particularly but not only from Australia, played a major role in ensuring victory, waterfront workers in Britain began to establish connections with others in western and northern Europe. The organisation that Bishop attacked eventually became the International Transport Workers’ Federation, a body that survived into the present day. That federation was not alone. Between 1890 and 1910, workers in a variety of trades and industries created International Trade Secretariats (ITS), bodies designed to promote the international dissemination of information relevant to each craft, to facilitate the international exchange of union cards for migrating workers and to offer support for strikes and prevent foreign scab labour from preventing those strikes. Dubbed ‘postbox internationals,’ because they acted mainly as centres for correspondence, by 1900 there were ITSs among hatters, glovers,

3 Reynolds’s, 29 December 1895.
4 JUL, 16 January 1896.
5 Reynolds’s, 29 March 1896.
6 Reynolds’s, 5 April 1896.
7 Commonweal, 23 October 1886.
9 Busch, Political Role of International Trade Unions, pp. 15–16.
shoemakers, miners, glass workers, tailors, metal workers, textile workers, lithographers, transport workers and other smaller trades.\(^{10}\)

Bishop, in other words, aimed his attack against the future direction of the international labour movement. In the process he also ignored the contributions the Knights made to that movement. The Universal Federation of Window Glass Workers was created by LA300 five years before any of the ITSs, and two years before the international union of glass bottle makers. ‘It was an American idea, this world-wide Union,’ John Swinton wrote in July 1885. Swinton’s prediction that ‘by and by other industries will have like Unions, to take up world-wide questions, and decide them too,’ was borne out by events, but only partly, because the Universal Federation went much further than the ITSs ever did.\(^{11}\) The postbox internationals only sought to keep their affiliates abreast of news in other parts of the world; the Universal Federation aimed to regulate the labour market’s trade on a global scale, and for some time the Federation succeeded. The Universal Federation, as with the Order as a whole, represented what Marcel van der Linden describes as subnational internationalism, a tradition that social, economic and political trends were rendering obsolete. But traditions of that kind are never hermetically sealed. The Knights of Labor may have arisen out of older patterns of working-class internationalism, but their global expansion anticipated newer patterns as well. The Knights represented both an end and a beginning, even if Bishop refused to see it.

There were further ironies in his position. In 1888, longshoremen in New York announced their desire to form a National Trade District within the Order and then further declared their intention to send delegates to Britain to lay the groundwork for ‘the organization of an international organization.’\(^{12}\) Knights in Boston hosted Richard McGhee, the president of the NUDL, when he visited the city in 1890. McGhee’s goal, the Journal of the Knights of Labor reported, was ‘to study the situation of the longshoremen and freight handlers, to the end that he may form a grand world-wide alliance of the men following those callings.’\(^{13}\) The fact that McGhee had once worked as an organiser for Knights in the Black Country, before founding a union that shouldered aside Liverpool’s LA443, made that irony only more exquisite. Nor would Bishop appreciate the fact that the Knights of Labor, an order dedicated to eradicating craft and other prejudices, grew in Britain and Ireland thanks to LA300, the most restrictive craft union in the United States.

\(^{10}\) Milner, Dilemmas of Internationalism, p. 44.
\(^{11}\) John Swinton’s Paper, 10 July 1885.
\(^{12}\) New York Evening World, 29 February 1888.
\(^{13}\) JUL, 31 July 1890.
The Knights also provided an alternative to the development of the international labour movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Lewis Lorwin divided that movement as it stood in 1914 into three parts. One was the ITSs. Another was ‘the association of various national labor federations.’ The third was ‘international associations of political labor parties and groups.’ We have dealt with the first. In terms of the second, the single worldwide order which the Knights hoped to build, an order in which all workers would share the same ritual and answer to the same General Assembly, hardly resembled the loose confederation of national union centres that eventually became known as the Amsterdam International. At the same time, industrial unionists and syndicalists in America and abroad regarded the Knights as one of their own and more illustrious ancestors.

In regard to the third, leading Knights remained firmly outside the Second International of labour and socialist parties that became a powerful political force in the years leading up to the First World War. Powderly assured the 1889 General Assembly that he would never have attended the socialist congresses in Paris that year, one of which, dubbed the ‘Marxist’ congress, was later regarded as the founding meeting of the Second International. Paul Bowen and Jesse Chapman attended the ‘Possibilist’ Congress, but that meeting was not the one that led to the new International. In any case, Knights like Powderly preached their own brand of radicalism, one that was distinct from the socialism that drove the Second International and more akin to that which animated the British trade unionists who had helped create the First. A wide gulf separated Bishop from Karl Kautsky and the other leaders of the new International.

In short, the Knights of Labor provided precursors and alternatives to future trends in the international labour movement. That serves as the epitaph of the British and Irish assemblies in the labour histories of those countries as well. The Order arrived in Britain in 1883, and more decisively in 1884, with Robert Layton and other leading Knights predicting that assemblies would soon extend throughout all the towns and cities of Britain and Ireland. Those predictions, like all the grand prophecies that attended the rise of the Knights of Labor around the world, never came true.

But from their base among the glassworkers, and among the unskilled workers and craftsmen of Birmingham and the Black Country, the Knights gradually extended their assemblies into new parts of Britain and Ireland. They benefited from the image of their order that was forged during the Great Upheaval, from the material and human assistance that American

Knights gave them and from the manifold connections between the Irish diaspora in the United States, Britain and Ireland itself. On the question of Ireland and Irish workers in Britain, the Knights remained far ahead of the British trade unions. Coming from outside the imperial social, economic and political framework that kept Ireland subordinated to Britain, they were able to appeal to Irish immigrants around the latter in a way those unions could not match. They did this without obviously antagonising non-Irish workers in the Midlands, Yorkshire and in northwest and northeast England, although they were less successful in sectarian lowland Scotland and Northern Ireland. In general, where workers – especially unskilled workers – were disorganised, where they were seeking ways to end that disorganisation and where the Order’s organisers visited and spoke, the Knights and their assemblies were usually not far behind. By 1889, only five years after A.G. Denny formed LA3504, their movement appeared to have a bright future ahead of it.

In the five years after 1889 their dream came abruptly to an end. The decline of the American Knights prevented them from giving any further assistance to their British and Irish assemblies, and fewer workers wished to attach themselves to an order whose American base was in such obvious decline. The embezzlement cases involving Charles Richards and Charles Chamberlain drove hundreds of workers from the assemblies and made them appear an insecure investment of workers’ money. The assemblies found their growth impeded by several craft unions in the 1880s; in the 1890s the new unions shouldered them out of the way. British and Irish Knights never faced the same level of opposition and repression from employers and the state as their American counterparts, but enough employers, carrying sufficient weight in their respective industries, fought against them to stymie their growth. In the all-important case of the window glass industry, opposition from employers led to the destruction of LA3504 and, in turn, to the end of the Knights as a movement with a viable future. The economic downturn in the mid-1890s only created new problems and deepened their old ones.

The British and Irish assemblies faced one central problem throughout their history: how to adapt a foreign organisation to local conditions. American Knights, Powderly in particular, decided to err on the side of flexibility. They let their recruits across the Atlantic make changes to their methods and principles as they saw fit. For their part, British and Irish Knights tried as best they could to make arbitration work and adopted the cultural practices handed down to them from America almost in their entirety. In some cases, the philosophy of the Knights suited local conditions, particularly around Birmingham and the Black Country where workers were sympathetic and accustomed to arbitration. In other cases, most graphically
around Liverpool, Knights urged arbitration on newly militant dockers with predictably poor results.

Knights adapted local conditions to their foreign organisation, as it were, rather than the other way around. That does not mean that ‘Americanisms,’ as Robert Weir terms them, lay at the heart of the Order’s failures in Britain and Ireland. Rather, Knights there enacted the principles of the Order in an inflexible way, more so than most American Knights, and that inflexibility became a problem when trade, trade unionism and militancy increased at the end of the 1880s. Further research will show whether that kind of dogmatism is common among workers who join a foreign organisation. British and Irish Knights, at least, seem to have believed that by imitating their American cousins as much as possible they would be more likely to build a similarly powerful movement at home. Unfortunately, that belief was misplaced. Henry Pelling even concluded that ‘they provided the workers and their leaders with more lessons of what to avoid than of what to imitate.’

But the history of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland is more than a litany of failures. Their assemblies reached into all the nations that then made up the United Kingdom: England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Perhaps as many as 20,000 men – though not, it must be said, many if any women – passed through those assemblies at some point between 1883 and 1894. If we add the organisations that plagiarised the Order’s model or name, the Sons of Labour and the British United Order in particular, that number reached upwards of 40,000. The Knights attracted figures of great significance in the social and political life of Britain and Ireland, such as Michael Davitt and Robert Cunningham Graham. They attracted others of more localised fame, such as Haydn Sanders, James Shaw Maxwell, Samuel Reeves and Harold Rylett. Some Knights would go on to become leading trade unionists and parliamentarians, like Ben Turner, James Sexton and Richard McGhee. Their assemblies became part of one of the great international working-class movements of the late nineteenth century, and functioned, for a time, as part of the largest contemporary labour organisation in the world. They collapsed in the renewed depression of the mid-1890s, but in the wreckage of unions and labour bodies in those years they were hardly alone. Their influence, moreover, outlived them.

When Terence Powderly came to write his autobiography in the 1910s, he took great pains to explain that the Knights ‘did not live or speak or work in vain.’ Examine ‘the statutes of the United States and of the various states,’ he wrote, ‘and stamped there – indelibly it may be – you’ll find plank after plank of the platform of the Knights of Labor.’ Turning to the Order’s foreign

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17 Powderly, The Path I Trod, p. 56.
branches, Powderly added that ‘though no local assemblies of Knights of Labor exist in any of these countries now, the principles of the Order still live and continue to inspire men and women to strive for the betterment of industrial conditions.’

Powderly’s autobiography might have been little more than an exercise in self-justification. His suspicion of the historian, who ‘weaves the warp of fancy into the woof of fact and gives us the web called history,’ reflected his anger at early labour historians who characterised his order as utopian and doomed to fail and put much of the blame for its demise at his feet. Powderly’s assessment of the Order’s long-term influence, however, whether in the United States or in the other countries where assemblies appeared, was probably more correct than even he knew. The Order became as central to the narrative of Canadian labour history as it did to that of its southern neighbour. Knights helped to lay the foundations of New Zealand’s political system, and lobbied for and enacted landmark legislation there. The Order left a lasting impression on the methods and numbers of the trade union movement in Belgium.

The situation in Britain and Ireland was no different. The new unionism followed the Order’s example when it came to organising unskilled and female workers, and to building greater unity within the trade union movement. American Knights showed British and Irish workers that both aims were achievable as well as desirable. British and Irish Knights pioneered both objectives themselves in Derry, Liverpool, Glasgow and the Black Country in particular. The Knights were an influence on and a part of the new unionism. They performed a similar if less direct role in the field of labour politics. British and Irish Knights enjoyed some small success in municipal elections, thanks especially to the oratorical abilities of Haydn Sanders in Walsall and Rotherham, but their main impact came at a national level. The political ventures of American workers during the Great Upheaval, Knights prominently among them, had a tremendous effect on many workers in Britain and Ireland. These ventures led directly to Keir Hardie’s Sons of Labour programme, modelled on the Knights, on which he ran in the famous Mid-Lanark by-election of 1888. Knights also featured prominently in all the other early landmarks along the road to the British Labour Party, from the birth of the Scottish Labour Party in 1888 to the first congress of the Independent Labour Party in 1893.

In these fields, the principles that the Order espoused took greater root in Britain and Ireland than in the land of its birth. We should remain careful not to claim too much. The new unionism and the Labour Party would almost certainly have come about without the Knights. But they contributed

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18 Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, p. 66.
to the context in which both occurred. Far from providing British and Irish workers with things to avoid, as Pelling argued, the Order provided them with many things that they could and did choose to imitate. That record demands that we integrate the Knights of Labor into the mainstream of British and Irish labour history, in the same way that Robert Weir has placed the Knights at the centre of the early social and political history of white New Zealand. The main task that remains for the Order’s historians is to provide it with a truly international history, one that leaves students of the Knights in no doubt that its foreign assemblies cannot be reduced to footnotes, and that these assemblies were influential and important in their own right. That history remains to be written. Its contours remain vague and imprecise. But as we continue to uncover evidence of assemblies in different parts of the world, that picture will start to acquire a more distinct shape and carry with it implications for what we know of the history of the Knights in their North American home, not to mention for labour history around the world.

That history certainly has implications for the idea and the reality of American exceptionalism. The achievements of the Knights of Labor undermine any assumption that American workers must inevitably remain less organised and more politically marginal than workers in other industrial societies. The Order also stood at a unique crossroads in the relative histories of the British and American labour movements. Just as American industrial development lagged behind Britain for most of the nineteenth century, American unions followed in the wake of their British counterparts and imitated their development, albeit slightly later and on a smaller scale. In the 1880s, however, American industrial output caught up with Britain and the American labour movement, through the Knights, did likewise. Their American assemblies organised more workers than all the British trade unions combined during the mid-1880s.

It is true that the Knights failed to hold this position for very long. In the twentieth century the American labour movement fell behind its counterparts in Europe and elsewhere in the industrialised world. Kim Voss’s contention that American exceptionalism was not inevitable but was made, and that it began when the Order’s defeat encouraged American trade unionists to retreat from politics and into the skilled trades, even as labour movements elsewhere went in the opposite direction, fits into this narrative especially well. And the history of the British and Irish Knights allows us to take that argument further still. Even as the Order’s American decline led to the rejection, at least temporarily, of independent labour politics and of a labour movement designed to represent the entire working class in the United States, its British and Irish assemblies contributed towards the greater acceptance of a labour party and a truly mass labour movement
across the Atlantic. American exceptionalism is based on a comparison between the United States and Europe, after all, and rests on the strength and progress of European labour movements as well as the weakness and backwardness of American ones. Knights on both sides of the Atlantic had a hand in its construction.

The Order stood at another historical crossroads too. American workers might usually have looked across the Atlantic, or to newly arrived British immigrants, for the latest innovations in trade unionism. What Henry Pelling broadly called the British left, on the other hand, took its political cues for most of the nineteenth century from the United States, where it found the republican institutions and universal male suffrage it still lacked at home. Yet the attraction of the American Republic for British radicals began to wane in the closing decades of that century. The rise of the great American trusts and corporations, the development in the New World of Old World evils like mass unemployment and extreme forms of inequality, and the outbreak of class conflict on a national scale in the United States, convinced a new generation of radicals on the other side of the ocean that more than the franchise and clean republican government would be needed to build a truly democratic society. 20 William Clarke spoke for them when he concluded that ‘new institutions were of no use along with the old forms of property … a mere theoretic democracy, unaccompanied by any social changes, was a delusion and a snare.’ 21

The defeat of the Knights of Labor accelerated this seismic shift in British radical thought. Many of the British trade unionists who had looked to the Knights for inspiration in the 1880s looked to America in the following decade with growing apprehension as the unions there retreated and the hegemony of the monopolies seemed assured. They assumed, as John Lovell writes, ‘that the current state of affairs in America represented the future state of Britain,’ and this assumption encouraged them to strengthen their industrial and political organisations before they suffered the fate of the American unions. 22 It was left to Dodo, whose columns in Reynolds’s during the 1880s had celebrated American republicanism and the Knights in equal measure, to bring together their mutual demise. Dodo lamented the Order’s transformation into ‘a merely political party aiding the abominable wire-pulling of machine politicians.’ He claimed that it failed when ‘the central authority sought tyrannously to impose its will’ in every trade dispute. He then posed a question. ‘When is the revolution going to break out in that caricature of a Republic, the United States,’ Dodo wrote, ‘with its cast-iron Constitution,

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20 Pelling, British Left, chs 4 and 5.
21 Quoted in Pelling, British Left, p. 65.
designed expressly by the middle class founders of the States to ward off the encroachments of Democracy? That question was rhetorical, of course. It contained all his disappointment with the Knights and his disillusionment with the American Republic.

The fall of the Knights of Labor presaged the end of several eras and the beginning of several new ones. The Knights represented a continuation of older patterns of working-class internationalism and became both a precedent and an alternative to newer ones. They became instrumental in the changing relationship between working-class movements in Britain and the United States, and in the gap that widened between the movements of those two countries in the following century. They failed at a time when British radicals increasingly viewed the United States as something to avoid rather than imitate. The history of the British and Irish Knights of Labor, in other words, is the history of epochal changes that took place on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and wrested the transatlantic world from the nineteenth into the twentieth century.

That history should also guard us against anachronism, against reading the present back into the past. The presence of an American working-class movement on British soil remains a powerful corrective against the idea that the special or Anglo-American relationship is a thing only of prime ministers, presidents, corporations and military alliances. The Knights, like other working-class movements before and since, proved that that relationship included radicals and trade unionists too. It is also a potent cure for any easy assumption that this radical and working-class relationship only went one way – westwards from Britain to the United States.

It seemed less clear, until very recently, whether these cures and correctives still had any use in the present. Mass unemployment, economic depression and the evisceration of labour movements on both sides of the Atlantic seemed to rule out a speedy revival of the transatlantic radical tradition. The rise of Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom in 2015, however, has changed all that. A revival of Anglo-American radicalism now seems close as well as likely. It will probably not be based on the rather archaic model of the Knights of Labor. But their enthusiastic and deep-seated internationalism, and their desire to substitute cooperation for competition, still mark the way for their descendants in the twenty-first century.

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23 Reynolds’s, 9 May 1897.