



KNIGHTS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

by Steven Parfitt
(A Book Review)



KNIGHTS ACROSS THE
ATLANTIC
The Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland
STEVEN PARFITT

At a time when some works passing under Transatlantic Studies or Transnational U.S. Studies and History are rather comparative or elite-centered, *Knights Across the Atlantic* is not only a refreshing lesson in precise scholarship in transatlantic labor history but also a compelling example of how to use and interpret archival and online sources.

In seven concise chapters, Parfitt's sleek book tells the history of the rise, struggles, fall, and influence of the U.S.-based Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland, and recovers its credentials as a transnational movement that spurred the British labor movement to new heights in the twentieth century. His first chapter provides the historical context for the expansion of the Knights into the British Isles with a special view to the motivations of the U.S. Order of the Knights of Labor for doing so. American Knights originally reached across the Atlantic to organize their British and Irish counterparts both from an impulse to practice "universal brotherhood" and with the aim of regulating migration to their own shores by establishing and coordinating with workers' organizations in those countries—an approach that Parfitt incisively terms "brotherhood from a distance" (43, 62).

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In its second chapter, *Knights Across the Atlantic* charts the arrival and rise of the Knights in the British Isles and discusses how Irish migration and diaspora across the isles and the Atlantic fed the Order's popularity not only due to its endorsement of the nationalization of land and Irish Home Rule, and several of its recruiters' ethnic backgrounds, but also because the U.S. Knights' approach of organizing across some racial and ethnic lines put the Order in the position of a dispassionate outsider on the Isles. Yet the Knights' refusal to subscribe to the anti-Irish racism of the British Empire did not spare them from the challenge of sectarianism in lowland Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Parfitt investigates how the British and Irish Knights applied the U.S. organization to their needs. It could be expected that they selectively adapted American principles and practices; what is surprising is that, as Parfitt demonstrates, British and Irish workers chose to closely follow U.S. approaches and praxis in fraternal rituals and industrial relations, even as they chose not to organize women into their assemblies. Knights on the Isles insisted on negotiation and arbitration with their employers even when this approach put them into direct conflict with the more militant and strike-prone workers' bodies of the new unionism of the 1890s. Parfitt is right to conclude that even with American calls for flexibility, the centrifugal force of this transnational movement bound those on its outer reaches to the center even more than it did its U.S. Knights.

Parfitt's Chapters 5 and 6 masterfully trace the actions, influence, and legacy of the British and Irish Knights in politics and unionism. From the ambiguity of the U.S. Order about labor in politics, the Knights of the Isles not only fashioned an approach to municipal power, they also played a role in national and party politics. While British and Irish Knights never had the numbers to assert their power through elections, their ideas and programs exerted an influence over some key players like Keir Hardie who used the Order's ideas in his role in the Scottish miners' organization the Sons of Labour as well as his establishment of the Scottish Labour Party in 1888. After moving to London, Hardie's fellow Knight and comrade in the Scottish labor movement James Shaw Maxwell served as first secretary of Britain's Independent

Labour Party. Through such personal and ideational links, Parfitt demonstrates that the Knights of Labor served both as catalyst and agent in the coalescing of the independent labor movement in British politics. Arriving in the Isles at a time of labor disorganization and economic depression, the Knights' rise was fast but short-lived; their conciliatory approach to industrial relations and their awkward position between the local, old and new national workers' unions allowed them to be a catalyst in but not a beneficiary of the upswing and advance of the British labor movement. Parfitt argues that the Knights served as a training ground, meeting place, and inspiration for British and Irish labor members but not as a sustainable, dominant labor organization.

In his final, seventh chapter, Parfitt outlines the reasons for the decline of the Knights in the Isles. In addition to their inability to find a niche among labor organizations, the Order's adherence to American principles and approaches eroded their standing in the face of nationalist criticism; their dependence on U.S. financial support made them founder when the money dried up, and several high-profile embezzlement cases sullied their movement's reputation. The Order attempted to root itself nationally too late to halt or reverse its own decline, but its approach to internationalism also made it an anachronism in the new climate of "national internationalism" (Marcel van der Linden quoted in Parfitt, 216).

Truly transnational scholarship is a tall order for anyone not in the least because the dominant Western nation-bound scholarship, thinking and archiving have made it especially difficult and costly to locate, access, and productively utilize enough sources. Parfitt excels in this endeavor. In addition to major online archival collections, he conducted research in archives in regional centers in the United Kingdom and 'global cities' such as Liverpool, Amsterdam, and Washington, D.C. His careful attention to union journals and newspaper coverage yielded impressive results; his use of correspondence to and from U.S. Order leader Terence Powderly (including in his personal papers in Washington, D.C.) is a crucial part of his evidence; his deployment of union reports, proceedings and manifestos provides crucial proof for his claims.

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He makes the best of his admittedly thin primary sources—and not only in accessing them.

“We should remain careful not to claim too much” (229). Parfitt’s judiciousness in interpreting sources and circumstantial evidence is refreshing in a field where early career scholars are often given (sometimes trained) to overstate their case. Parfitt’s care in articulating reasonable claims and delineating his ground actually increases the persuasive power of his analytical arguments. His admission that the Knights’ international records are thin only highlights the author’s skills in making his case with evidence from less obvious sources.

Knights Across the Atlantic indeed fills a gap in scholarship: with it, Parfitt contributes to what he calls “a truly international history” of the Knights of Labor (6, 230). His writing style is geared towards this: in the beginning of every chapter, his focus moves in concentric circles by discussing the chapter’s topic in the U.S. movement then in countries already studied by other scholars (especially Belgium, Australia, and New Zealand), before zooming in on the British Isles. More importantly, Parfitt reconstructs an important piece in the puzzle of the fin de siècle as a major transition period in transatlantic and international labor history. In the process, he productively complicates notions of “American exceptionalism” in these fields. Building on Kim Voss’ claims in her 1993 book *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century*, Parfitt argues that the example of the Knights shows that the “exceptional U.S. conditions” which have long been faulted for the difficulties of the country’s labor movement were not a given but were *constructed* by labor unions’ choices and fortunes as much as historical forces. As Parfitt shows, the fate of the Knights in the U.S. resulted in the retreat of American labor into craft unionism and away from politics; yet the Order’s meteoric presence in the British Isles spurred their new unionism in the opposite direction. While Parfitt’s intervention in debates about American exceptionalism could be updated and further problematized, both this and his attempt to shift the focus from the elites to the workers in studies of the Anglo-U.S. “special relationship” make his book to be of definite interest to both students and scholars of Transatlantic Studies

and Transnational American Studies. The publication of Parfitt's book at a time when both the United States and the United Kingdom are on a quest to dramatically redefine their role in regional and global systems of trade and migration should also make *Knights Across the Atlantic* of interest to all critical readers on both sides of the Atlantic.

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WORKS CITED

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