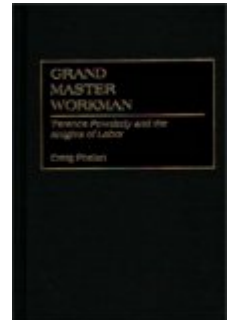




**Craig Phelan.** *Grand Master Workman: Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor.*  
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Few labor leaders have been vilified more than Terence Powderly. Most historians endorse Norman Ware's 1929 assessment that Powderly was a "windbag" and accuse him of misdeeds ranging from authoritarian control of the Knights of Labor to cowardly sell-outs of strikes. Powderly is conventionally seen as an incompetent leader who was against all strikes, opposed to third party political action, and paranoid over radicalism. Most accounts blame at least part of the Knights' demise on Powderly's ineffectual leadership.

Craig Phelan, a lecturer at the University of Wales, Swansea, finds this odd given that no union head "before or since has even approached the level of respect and adulation accorded Powderly" (p. 1). While scholars of John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, or Cesar Chavez might accuse Phelan of hyperbole, his is an overdue corrective to the historical community's uncritical acceptance of Ware's thesis. (Which was based largely on information provided by Powderly's arch-betrayer, John Hayes.) If we look closely at the evidence, a very different Powderly emerges. Rather than the destroyer of the Knights of Labor, Powderly trans-

formed it from a fringe group to the largest, most powerful, and most diverse labor organization of the nineteenth century. In fact, Phelan opines, only a man of Powderly's extraordinary talent could have headed such an unwieldy organization.

Phelan attempts -- with varying degrees of success -- to demolish Powderly myths. Powderly was not a small-town moralist, he argues, rather a "child of industrial America," (p. 37) whose early life was shaped by Catholicism, his machinist's training, political squabbles within Scranton, Pennsylvania, the Panic of 1873, and the railroad strikes of 1877. Powderly's active role in the Knights of Labor began in 1878, when he resolved a potentially crippling debate over ritual (which he disliked) and by 1879, Powderly headed the organization, though he was also the mayor of Scranton.

Phelan praises Powderly's tireless efforts to bring the Knights to prominence. Troubled by quinsy for his entire life, Powderly often sacrificed his own health to build the organization. As Phelan correctly notes, the early KOL had no cen-

tral office, no staff, and a constitution that decentralized authority beyond the means of any single individual to dictate policy. It was chronically short of money as local assemblies were reluctant to pay their assessments. Were it not for Powderly's dogged determination, the Knights might have died in 1881, when membership dropped precipitously.

Phelan notes that the discontent that marked the Knights in the 1880s was a product of Powderly's ability to bring to the fold men and women from various ideological persuasions, not intolerance or rigidity on his part. Nor is there evidence to sustain charges that Powderly failed to support strikes. Phelan convincingly demonstrates the differences between what Powderly counseled in private and how he conducted himself publicly once conflict arose. For example, when Pittsburgh glassblowers struck in 1883 and KOL funds proved too meager to sustain the fight, Powderly threw his own energies into raising necessary funds. In nearly every strike the KOL conducted, Powderly supported the rank and file. Most that failed, Phelan claims, did so because of lack of resources or because they were ill-advised, not because Powderly sold out workers.

One by one, Phelan refutes charges laid at Powderly's doorstep. He was not against third parties per se, rather he saw lobbying as a more effective alternative. He did not understand cooperation all that well, but lent his authority to efforts to raise money for experiments. Phelan even argues that Powderly was never controlled by or cooperated with the Home Club, largely by claiming that trade union malcontents exaggerated the power of the New York City-based kickers. Phelan also blames trade unions more than the Knights for the bad blood that existed between them. It was Samuel Gompers, not Powderly, who sandbagged peace overtures.

Phelan deftly gives context to many of the decisions for which Powderly has been criticized during the Great Upheaval. He argues that the

KOL's structure was simply "too fragile" (p. 172) to sustain the furious capitalist counter-assault its own modest successes unleashed. In 1885 alone, the KOL endured simultaneous crises of anti-Chinese riots in Wyoming, a coal strike in Indiana, a strike against Jay Gould's railroads, and clashes with carpet weavers' and cigarmakers' unions. This was typical of what Powderly and the Order faced for the next three years. The organization was neither rich nor powerful enough to stand up to organized capital. Phelan credits common sense in Powderly's attempts to salvage what he could from futile battles (like the 1886 Chicago packinghouse strikes) and to distance the KOL from public relations nightmares (like association with the Haymarket anarchists).

Phelan feels the KOL would have been stronger if it had given Powderly power to centralize authority. The Knights rejected this overture in 1886, however, and though he gained some measure of personal control in 1888 -- which Phelan too rosily calls "a necessary evil" (p. 234) -- it was too late to save the KOL. The last five years of Powderly's tenure were unpleasant ones marked by internal intrigue, lost strikes, shrinking membership, and financial hardship for both Powderly and the KOL. Phelan makes Powderly's 1893 ouster seem like a mercy killing, and he skips quickly over the remainder of Powderly's life. In an ironic coda, Phelan echoes Ware's assertion that the Knights of Labor were an experiment in democracy, though he sees decentralized democracy as the source of jurisdictional battles, money crises, and factionalism. The KOL's demise was not Powderly's fault, rather the failure of "horizontal unionism" (p. 273) to take hold in a Gilded Age context.

I admire this book, Phelan's loving attention to detail, and his challenges to long-held stereotypes. I have, however, reservations about various parts of it. (In the interest of full disclosure I note that Phelan takes aim at some of my work in his book, especially as it pertains to the Home

Club.) In a word, the book lacks nuance. He sets up straw men throughout. Why does being a "child of industrial capitalism" preclude Powderly from being a "small town moralist," as I and others have charged? Couldn't he be both? (Think William Green or Philip Murray.) In a similar vein, Powderly's ideological opposition to strikes is so well-documented that it's almost perverse to paint Powderly as an ardent strike supporter. Contemporaries like Joseph Buchanan and Eugene Debs admirably led strikes they personally opposed. Phelan should have played off the delineation he made between Powderly's counsel on strikes and his leadership once they occurred.

Phelan is far too enamored of his subject and tries to rationalize unseemly character flaws. A lovable Terence Powderly is as inaccurate as Ware's windbag. While it is true that Powderly was beloved by many, so too was he hated by legions. His correspondence with men like Theodore Cuno, Charles Litchman, and Henry Sharpe oozes venom and Powderly was not always the aggrieved party. He could be charming, but he was also vain, cruel when angered, and a schemer. Nor does Phelan's whitewash of Powderly's Haymarket response ring true. Powderly was one of the very few labor leaders who did not endorse clemency and historians rightly condemn his cowardice on this score. And if Powderly was as principled as Phelan asserts, why didn't he make good on threats to resign over core issues like trade union policy, centralization, or the makeup of the executive board?

I disagree with Phelan's take on the Home Club. Suffice it to say that what he rejects as "fan-ciful" requires a more improbable explanation. It's hard to imagine that men as level-headed, scrupulous, and as close to the truth as George McNeill, Joseph Labadie, and Joseph Buchanan could be seduced by a myth. Phelan categorically denies the Home Club ever controlled the KOL, but how does one define "control?" During the crucial years of 1886 and 1887, Powderly champi-

oned rapprochement with trade unions, centralized authority, and curtailing strikes. He led an organization that endorsed the opposite. That just happens to be the core of the Home Club's agenda and sounds like "control" to me.

Though this is hardly a flawless book, it points us in the right direction for critically reassessing Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor. Phelan asks incisive and probing questions. Who, he asks, could have done as well as Powderly in such a difficult position? What sort of labor organization would have met laborer needs better than the KOL's horizontal unionism? (Certainly not the parochial craft perspectives of the Gompers clique.) Was it even possible for workers to win the "lockout crusade" of the late 1880s? Phelan challenges us to stop demonizing a single man and take a harder look at systems of capitalist accumulation.

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