Terence Powderly
Labor Leader, Civil Servant, Photographer

By William John Shepherd

Terence Vincent Powderly was the eloquent though flawed personification of the American labor movement during the late nineteenth century, specifically during his tenure, 1879–1893, as head of the Knights of Labor union, the largest organization of American workers in that era. He was a major celebrity, an “American Idol,” who captured national attention. Unions were especially important in Powderly’s native Pennsylvania, and his reform efforts on behalf of the worker found a sympathetic political audience. At age twenty-nine he was elected mayor of Scranton. Later he came to Washington where he put his reformist ideas for labor and immigration to work for the federal government.

Powderly was born a Catholic and observed the basic tenets of his faith despite his well-known differences with the institutional Church. Although he resented the attitude of many Church leaders of his time toward unionism, he maintained close relations with progressive bishops like John Ireland and John Keane. He also gained surprising support at a crucial period from Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore. Further emphasizing his Catholic roots and progressive outlook, Powderly was a strong supporter of Irish nationalism, serving as a member of Clan na Gael, a secret society committed to Irish independence, and the Irish Land League, a political organization that sought to abolish Irish landlordism in favor of the tenant farmers.

Powderly lived the last third of his long life in Washington where, in addition to his lengthy government career, he wrote a popular autobiography that outlined his complex relations with the Church while finding time to become an accomplished photographer of the capital scene.

EARLY YEARS

A product of the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania, Powderly was born on January 22, 1849, in the industrial community of Carbondale to Irish immigrants. He reported that his immigrant father had said of his native land, “let us leave this damn country and go to America where a man may own himself and a gun too, if he wants to.” Accordingly, the newly-wed couple left County Meath in 1827, landed in Montreal, and lived briefly in Ogdensburg, New York, where Terence Senior worked on a farm. In 1829 the family relocated to Carbondale where the elder Powderly worked as a coal miner. He was successful enough to open his own mine in 1845, though it went under by 1858 when he was forced to secure employment as a mechanic with the Delaware and Hudson Railroad.

With seven brothers and four sisters young Terence had scant opportunity for more than a rudimentary education. He was employed at age thirteen as a switchman for the Delaware and Hudson and at age seventeen apprenticed as a machinist under James Dickson, a master mechanic who had, in turn, apprenticed under the Englishman, George Stephenson, the inventor of the steam locomotive. After completing his apprenticeship, Powderly eventually found work in the machine shops of the Pennsylvania
Coal Company and later with the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad in Scranton.

Powderly once stated that the strike and subsequent mine fire in Avondale, Pennsylvania, that killed 110 miners in September 1869 were major influences in his life. Resolved to do what he could to help his fellow workers, he joined the International Union of Machinists and Blacksmiths in 1871, the first year he achieved the minimum age for enlisting in a union. He also read widely, impressing people with his writing and speaking abilities. As a result, he was elected both local president and corresponding secretary of his union in 1873.

These union activities and the depression of 1873 left him jobless and blacklisted as a union agitator. Over the next two years he was repeatedly unemployed and traveled throughout the Midwest and Canada searching for work. He was often separated from his family and wife, Hannah, who he had married in 1872. His depressed circumstances finally eased in 1875 when he found employment in Scranton, only to have his wages cut the following year. In 1877 he was discharged once more, never to work as a machinist again. He had also suffered a personal tragedy in 1875 when his wife, whom he refers to in his diary as “my little darling,” almost died when she delivered their only child, a girl who died a few days later. Her grieving father “took the baby to the graveyard...and buried it.”

LABOR LEADER

In 1876, while still employed as a machinist, Powderly joined the Scranton Local Assembly #88 of the Order of the Knights of Labor. Like many in the labor movement he looked to the organization of American workers in a national union. The Knights, organized by a group of Philadelphia garment workers, shared that vision. Powderly rose quickly in the Knights. He organized Scranton workers into an assembly and became their leader with the title of Master Workman. He also became Corresponding Secretary of District Assembly #5 in 1877 and assumed national leadership as Grand (later General) Master Workman in 1879.

A problem immediately arose for the new labor leader. The Knights operated as a fraternal organization with secret oaths and elaborate, vaguely Protestant, perhaps even Masonic, rituals. The Catholic Church was adamantly opposed to secret oaths and generally uncomfortable with having its members associated with any non-Catholic rituals.

Although Powderly met some priests sympathetic to the need for secrecy in labor organizing, he found himself increasingly at odds with Church leaders. Nevertheless his most meaningful achievement, greatly aided by Cardinal Gibbons, was to bring about reconciliation in 1888 between the labor movement and the Church. This action, which included recognition of unionism by the
Vatican, resulted in a virtual alliance of the Church with the American labor movement that has endured in some fashion until the present though Powderly himself remained alienated from the Church.

The Knights came into national prominence during Powderly’s tenure, peaking in membership and influence in 1886 with nearly 700,000, mostly Catholic, members. He was a popular leader. People greeted him with cheers when he traveled, wrote songs and poetry about him, and even named their children after him. Unfortunately, he also came under increasing assault from various political, economic, and religious interests. His soaring rhetoric and dedication to workers’ rights were often confounded by his innate caution and ineffective idealism. His aversion to strikes and insistence on racial reform through arbitration alienated workers who instead were anxious to strike for popular benefits like higher wages and shorter hours.

The prominence of the Knights in the American labor movement began to decline after the unsuccessful rail strike in 1886 and its link to the bombing in Chicago during a workers rally in that city’s Haymarket Square. Finally, the founding of the American Federation of Labor by Samuel Gompers, also in 1886, lured workers away so that by 1889 membership in the Knights had dropped to 120,000. Thereafter, the Knights were beset by a divisive power struggle resulting in Powderly’s removal in 1893 and eventual succession by his protégé and betrayer, John William Hayes.

A PROGRESSIVE CIVIL SERVANT

Since his early manhood Powderly had been active in local Pennsylvania politics. In the 1876 presidential election, he had supported the Greenback ticket, a largely agrarian reaction in opposition to the federal government’s currency policies in the wake of the 1873 depression. Political activism surged throughout the labor movement after the massive railroad strikes of 1877, resulting in the youthful Powderly’s election as mayor of Scranton. During his three terms in that office he worked to transform Scranton into a model progressive municipality. He did this by advancing and largely accomplishing an agenda that included, among other things, establishment of a board of health and a municipal sewage system as well as reform of the city’s tax structure. He also worked for paved roads and sponsored legislation against adulterated foods.

After forced from leadership of the Knights of Labor in 1893, Powderly was unable to find employment. His reputation as a labor leader led to his being viewed as a potential troublemaker in the workplace. Some advised him to go into the saloon business, but instead he studied law. He
was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1894 and eventually argued before both his state's supreme court and the Supreme Court of the United States. Unfortunately, he became convinced that the administration of justice was hindered by bias and technicalities. He decided to return to politics, and having previously been soured on third party infighting and electoral prospects, became a member of the Central Republican Club of Scranton.

Shortly thereafter, in the contentious presidential election of 1896 he advanced his own ambitions by avidly campaigning for the successful Republican ticket of William McKinley and Garrett Hobart.

As a reward for Powderly's support, McKinley appointed him Commissioner-General of Immigration, an important office in the Treasury Department. After a lengthy Senate confirmation battle, Powderly assumed his new position in March 1898. From the start his reformist tendencies were evident. He created a commission to investigate conditions at Ellis Island that resulted in nearly a dozen firings thereby creating several enemies determined on revenge. They did not have long to wait. Powderly's benefactor, President McKinley, was assassinated in September 1901 to be succeeded by the brilliant though bumptious Theodore Roosevelt. Powderly's name was effectively besmirched before the new president, who fired him in July 1902. Powderly, however, did not go down without a fight. He waged a vigorous campaign to exonerate himself before both the new president and the nation at large.

After an investigation, Roosevelt finally realized that the accusations were false and reinstated Powderly in 1906, this time naming him Special Immigration Inspector. Now representing the Department of Commerce and Labor, Powderly proceeded to investigate the chaos in European immigration to America. After extensive travel on the continent, he concluded that U.S. Immigration agents should be sent to Europe to identify prospective immigrants before they left their home countries and travel with them on ships bringing them over. Moreover, an effort should be made to distribute the newcomers more evenly throughout the country rather than see them congregate in wretched conditions in the crowded seaport cities.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER
During his years in Washington and following his first wife's death in 1901, Powderly became an expert and prolific photographer. While the over 300 photos of Powderly taken by others related to his career as a labor leader and featured several labor-related events and personages, his own work focused on his later career as a federal
official in Washington as well as his numerous travels across the country and internationally. Many sites and scenes caught his eye. In hundreds of pictures he presented fine portraits of the capital's many shrines and monuments along with the city's historically important buildings and churches. He was on hand to record historical events including three presidential inaugurations and even the great parade of confederate soldiers at their reunion in 1917. He apparently was a great fan of the Washington Monument, making nearly four dozen images of that beloved shrine.

Several thousand of these images, produced from about 1902 to 1921, survived in the form of nitrate based and glass negatives and glass lantern slides all enhanced by the preservation of his meticulous notes identifying persons and subjects as well as camera types and shutter speeds. In the 1970s, with generous financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Catholic University was able to transfer the unstable and highly volatile nitrate images to safety film and create reference prints with a card index for access. In more recent years over 1200 of the images have been digitized and made available online.

CONCLUSION
Powderly died in Washington on June 24, 1924. Until recently labor historians had dismissed him and the Knights of Labor as relics of the utopian traditions of the antebellum years. Such traditions were unsuited to the economic realities of the Gilded Age, especially in comparison to the rival American Federation of Labor and its more apolitical craft unionism. Powderly, famed leader of the Knights, was charged with being sensitive, vain, naive, a "pious windbag."

Recent studies of the Knights, especially by Craig Phelan, have transformed this view of the organization into that of an authentic working-class organization with a convincing critique of industrial capitalism. This has helped make the case that Powderly was not a pusillanimous utopian, but a worthy if somewhat flawed hero who articulated the progressive vision of the working masses in the face of the inhumanity of the industrial capitalist system.

With his reputation restored by historians, Powderly began to receive honors such as being inducted into the U.S. Department of Labor's Hall of Fame in 2000, joining such figures as rival Samuel Gompers, friend Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, and fellow Pennsylvanian labor leader Philip Murray. A fair and comprehensive biography encompassing his full career, especially his later years, is still awaited.

**William John Shepherd** has been an archivist for over twenty years at The Catholic University of America, home of the papers and photographs of Terence Powderly and several other Catholic labor leaders.


(About Our Cover, continued from page 2) is seen touching the Emancipation Proclamation which rests on a plinth that features on its surface several patriotic symbols, including George Washington's profile and a shield decorated with the stars and stripes. The symbolism continued with a background containing a cloth-draped whipping post. The face of the freedman was that of an actual ex-slave, Archer Alexander. Alexander's life story was known to many at that time because he was the subject of a popular account by the celebrated author, William Greenleaf Eliot.