Dhingra on Malhotra and Isitt, 'Able to Lead: Disablement, Radicalism, and the Political Life of E. T. Kingsley'

Review published on Thursday, February 24, 2022


Reviewed by Neil Dhingra (University of Maryland) Published on H-Disability (February, 2022)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=56848

A. M. Stephen’s 1929 novel, The Gleaming Archway, follows the young socialist journalist Craig Maitland, who ventures to the Squamish Valley in Canada. There, he is introduced to Tacey, a former railroad worker who had become a full-time socialist speaker and editor and “the idol of the Labour Party in British Columbia” (p. 37). Tacey means to build the Labour Party to win at the polls. Maitland joins Tacey’s weekly publication, The Beacon, and eventually engages in a conflict with a government spy who means to incite naive workers to violent disorder to discredit socialism and justify Mountie reprisal. However, Maitland ultimately leaves The Beacon, convinced Tacey has failed to recognize that humans are saved neither by institutions nor by economics. Maitland sails off to Atlantis and romance and Lord Tennyson, imagining “the Silent Watcher who stands at the end of dreams” (p. 295). Obviously, Stephen was not a Marxist.[1]

How is disability present in The Gleaming Archway? Tacey is based on E. T. Kingsley to the point that, as Ravi Malhotra writes, it “implies that Stephen personally knew Kingsley in the small world of radical British Columbia.”[2] Like Kingsley, Tacey was a big man who had been injured on his railroad job, in the case of Tacey through the loss of an arm. Like Kingsley, Tacey never speaks of his disability. Stephen, however, may subtly suggest that Tacey is not hampered by having only one arm. To the contrary, “The stump of his [Tacey’s] left arm, bulging at an odd angle beneath his white cambric shirt, suggested a torso in keeping with his leonine head” (p. 37). Upon confronting that government spy, a “battering-ram of flesh and blood” who could subdue an “amateur wrestler among the longshoremen,” Tacey even lifts “a massive iron inkstand near to his hand” and throws it at the brutish agent provocateur (pp. 272, 245, 215-16). He nearly hits him.

Although they only briefly describe Stephen’s novel, Malhotra and Benjamin Isitt, in their thorough biography of Kingsley, brilliantly show why Stephen may have tried to offset his character’s disability. The real-life Kingsley was born in 1856 in New York, went West, married in Hudson, Wisconsin, and began work as a brakeman in 1889. The following year, he fell between railroad cars in Spring Gulch, Montana; his left leg was amputated between the knee and hip, the right between ankle and knee. Bedridden, Kingsley read Karl Marx and then left his family behind for the West Coast, likely on artificial limbs. Kingsley’s injury was hardly unique, but the presence of disabled workers challenged
the then-commonplace view that manliness was manifested through political and economic independence.

Malhotra and Isitt draw on the work of John Williams-Searle, who described how a brakeman with a broken neck made a living as a sideshow performer and how the residents of an Illinois home for disabled railroaders were exhibited for fundraising as in a county fair, so onlookers could be assured of their social status vis-à-vis the otherness of those with disabilities.[3] Thus, Malhotra and Isitt theorize that the disabled Kingsley was moved to reject this entire framework in rejecting capitalism. However, as mentioned, Kingsley, as orator and writer, never explicitly addressed his disability. As, drawing on the work of Erin O’Connor, Malhotra and Isitt recognize, the ableist assumptions of the era still meant that amputation connoted feminization or mental impairment; phantom pain could seem like hysteria. (We might add that prosthetics, as subverting physical hierarchies, could be seen as deceptive and threatening. Artificial legs became hidden weapons in stories like Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four* [1890].[4])

Kingsley would have encountered difficulty in suing his employer and, given the limited opportunities for litigation and employment, had financial difficulties for the rest of his life. Still, after he divorced his wife and moved to San Francisco, Kingsley quickly became a leader in the California Socialist Labor Party. He consistently argued against reformist ideas of a mixed economy and for political power to transform society completely into socialism. Thus, he was against trade unions. Malhotra and Isitt suggest that “perhaps Kingsley’s radical conception of class was at least partly influenced by the fact that the barriers raised by his physical disability prevented Kingsley from doing wage labour” and embracing any socialism that privileged wage laborers (p. 70). Thus, Kingsley remained an impossibilist, rejecting “possible” reforms of capitalism as insufficient.

Party infighting, and perhaps his own abrasiveness, meant that Kingsley left the party and eventually the United States for Canada in 1902. In British Columbia, Kingsley moved socialism to the left and away from gradualism and issues like women’s suffrage. On the latter, the authors conclude, “There is too little evidence to link his insensitivity on gender politics to his alleged cruelty or vindictiveness in his failed marriage,” which included abandonment of his children (p. 99). Kingsley never seems to have had other romantic relationships; the Socialist Party became his family—at least temporarily.

In 1903, he became editor of the *Western Clarion*, the Socialist Party of Canada organ, where he wrote sentences like, “The principles of unionism and socialism are opposite therefore antagonistic” (p. 101). Everything for Kingsley depended on the ballot box and seizing political power. To fund his efforts, Kingsley turned to entrepreneurship, which also perhaps let him “retain a sense of masculinity and accomplishment in an ableist world” (p. 120). He only referred to disability in the *Western Clarion* once and without autobiographical reference, arguing that yet another form of gradualism—pensions for disabled soldiers—simply let an oppressive system stay in place.

The Socialist Party of Canada was a fractious family, in part because of Kingsley’s doctrinaire stances, but his influence only ended when Kingsley argued that Germany must be defeated in World War I. He remained active and impossibilist, writing *The Genesis and Evolutionary of Slavery* in 1916, in which he argued that, where workers could vote, “they have the legal right to conquer the state for their own purposes”; they had only their docility to defeat (p. 176). He critiqued capitalism in an article that again never became autobiographical, but which Malhotra and Isitt suggest “cannot be
read in isolation from his own experience of disablement” as it was about the worker deaths resulting from railroad accidents (p. 178). The problem was not capitalism run amuck that had to be softened; it was ordinary capitalism, oppressive by its very nature.

Kingsley, who had taken part in the free speech fights in San Francisco in the mid-1890s, also found himself in conflict with the Canadian state over censorship of the press and what were seen as incendiary or seditious speeches. Here, the authors note, “Again Kingsley’s impairments in no way smothered the flames arising from the controversy,” as he was seen as a threat (p. 201). Some Canadian officials considered deporting Kingsley.

Kingsley was not deported and worked for a new party, the Federated Labor Party, from 1918 onward, if ill-fittingly. His opposition to capitalism as *ipso facto* slavery meant he insightfully saw past mechanization and automation as technological solutions to economic injustice. He grasped that the formation of One Big Union and a general strike would also require political action to avoid state persecution. He opposed Bolshevik tactics as unnecessary in North America, where workers could vote to take control. The Federated Labor Party never achieved political success, however. It appears as though Kingsley retired after 1926 and died alone in 1929. There does not appear to have been a public funeral.

The lasting importance of Kingsley, the authors write, is his strenuous and prolific participation in the fostering of a now-forgotten socialist subculture, with holidays, symbols, myths, cartoons, songs, and other forms of popular education. After all, Kingsley ended *The Genesis and Evolutionary of Slavery* by quoting a comrade, “What grander, loftier motive could stir the heart; inspire the brain; nerve the arm; or touch as with a live coal from liberty’s altar the lips, than to do all and dare all in this glorious struggle.” The prophetic struggle for human freedom was only delayed (and delayed) because “the workers are slow to think, and even slower to act in defence of their interests as a class.”[5]

And Kingsley did this with disability. A colleague in the Socialist Party of Canada, John Sidaway, said, “few who saw him carefully thread his way, with the aid of a cane and a pair of artificial limbs, through Vancouver traffic, realized the extent of his physical disabilities” (p. 228). Malhotra and Isitt suggest that disability exists in Kingsley’s biography like a “hazy mist” with a barely visible pervasiveness (p. 230). To be sure, Kingsley retained privilege—he was white; he did not have mental illnesses or intellectual disabilities—and perhaps even resembled President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as his audiences remained “unaware of his impairments” (p. 235). Nevertheless, his disability, if unacknowledged, was always there.

So, Malhotra and Isitt are to be commended for a book that, besides providing extraordinarily useful information on subjects ranging from the ubiquity of railway accidents in the late nineteenth century to the influence of eugenics on Canadian immigration policies at the same time, recognizes that Kingsley, even though he never spoke or wrote of his disability, likely constantly had to make decisions, whether about the class struggle or where to live, that reflected its existence in an ableist world. This is material for a new *The Gleaming Archway* in which a revised Tacey does not have to throw a massive inkstand to seemingly compensate for his disability. There might even be a different ending. The book helpfully provides a timeline and a useful list of Kingsley’s public speeches and lectures.
Notes


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.