

“The Achievements of ‘General Ludd’: A Brief History of the Luddites”

Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Ecologist*, v. 29, n. 5, Aug/Sep99

Q: What is a Luddite?

A: Someone who is overly scared of technology. As it is used today, the term has little to do with its original meaning, which had to do with the fear of losing one's livelihood to a machine and not being able to support one's family and way of life.

In one sense it could be said that Luddism began on the night of 4th November 1811, in the little village of Bulwell, some four miles north of Nottingham, when a small band of men gathered in the darkness, counted off in military style, hoisted their hammers and axes and pistols, and marched to the home of a ‘master weaver’ named Hollingsworth. They posted a guard, suddenly forced their way inside through shutters and doors, and proceeded to destroy a half-dozen weaving machines of a kind they found threatening to their trade. They scattered into the night, later reassembled at a designated spot, and at the sound of a pistol disbanded into the night, heading for home.

That, at any rate, was the first attack on textile machines by men who called themselves followers of General Ludd, who would convulse the countryside of the English Midlands for the next 14 months -and would go down in history, and into the English language, as the first opponents of the Industrial Revolution and the quintessential naysayers to odious and intrusive technology.

But, in another sense, one can certainly trace Luddism back even further: to the Enclosure Movement from 1770 on, which took some 12 million acres of shared common lands into private hands; to the perfection of the steam engine in the 1780s and its gradual adoption by textile manufacturers; to the terrible privations brought on by the seemingly endless Napoleonic wars, when what little food there was to be had was often too expensive to buy; and to the increasing concentration of economic power fostering the increasing growth of factories (perhaps a thousand in the years before 1811) and new kinds of machine that threw many kinds of labourer out of work. In short, to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, and all that it meant for the transformation of British economy and society.

Here's one way of understanding what was at stake:

A description of Lancashire, around 1780: "Their dwellings and small gardens clean and neat -all the family well clad the men with each a watch in his pocket, and the women dressed to their own fancy - the church crowded to excess every Sunday -every house well furnished with a clock in elegant mahogany or fancy case -handsome tea services in Staffordshire ware... The workshop of the weaver was a rural cottage, from which when he was tired of sedentary labour he could sally forth into his little garden, and with the spade or the hoe tend its culinary productions. The cotton wool which was to form his weft was picked clean by the fingers of his younger children and was carded and spun by the older girls assisted by his wife, and the yarn was woven by himself assisted by his sons."¹

A description of Lancashire, around 1814: "There are hundreds of factories in Manchester which are five or six stories high. At the side of each factory there is a great chimney which belches forth black smoke and indicates the presence of the powerful steam engines. The smoke from the chimneys forms a great cloud which can be seen for miles around the town. The houses have become black on account of the smoke. The river upon which Manchester stands is so tainted with colouring matter that the water resembles the contents of a dye vat... To save wages, mule

jennies have actually been built so that no less than 600 spindles can be operated by one adult and two children... In the large spinning mills machines of different kinds stand in rows like regiments in an army." 2

Great forces were at work creating this transformation: powerful manufacturing and financial interests; aristocratic landowners and speculators; government stalwarts both political and bureaucratic; it is hardly any wonder that the men who were whirled and whipped around at the bottom of this maelstrom chose to resist. Resisting a maelstrom, especially one that represents the future, may be futile. But resist it they did.

Nottingham and its surrounding towns were the first to feel the Luddite fury. In addition to the high prices and depressed wages common throughout the industrial counties just then, Nottingham weavers - mostly of stockings and mittens, called stockingers - faced competition from a new wide-frame machine that produced shoddy cloth but could turn out six times as much work as a normal machine ...

Almost nightly for three months, the Luddite armies would train and march and smash and disappear into the night. At least 1,100 knitting machines were broken in that time, despite the presence of an increased constabulary and the dispatch of soldiers to keep order. The local magistrates reported:

"Houses are broken into by armed men, many stocking-frames are destroyed, the lives of opposers are threatened, arms are seized, stacks are fired, and private property destroyed. There is an outrageous spirit of tumult and riot."3

...

The government quickly gave its answer, leaving no doubt that it was siding with the manufacturing sector: it sent out more and more troops - 3,000 to 4,000 in all by February - and it passed a law making the destruction of a machine an offence to be paid for by hanging. ... [Parliament] was overwhelmingly in favour of making a statement, a hallmark of industrialism, that machines are more important than men.

The government followed this with the prosecution at the March Assizes of ten men arrested for Luddism, seven of whom were convicted and sent to Australia - transportation being the stiffest possible sentence because the offences were committed before the death penalty act ...

It was a message that apparently had an effect in Nottinghamshire, for only 30 machines were smashed in February and 12 in March, and then nothing at all until a minor skirmish in the winter in which some 20 were broken. But Luddism did not die there, not at all: its sparks were swept to Lancashire and Yorkshire, and there started conflagrations even bigger and more destructive.

The acute distress of the textile workers there provided adequate tinder: "1812 opens with a gloom altogether so frigid and cheerless," said the Manchester Gazette. "that hope itself is almost lost and frozen in the prospect," and across the Pennines a sympathetic manufacturer reported that he "never knew the poor in such a distressed situation as they are at present," with widespread starvation, wages down by half and more, thousands with no work at all and "the remainder have one-third or one-fourth part work." Factories had marched into this area with (literally) a vengeance from the late 18th century on, several hundred in Yorkshire, even more around Manchester (30 alone in the little town of Stockport), and everywhere the new machinery was making human work redundant or replacing men's labour with women and children at a pittance of the pay.

Some idea of the Luddite approach is given by a letter delivered to a Mr Smith of Huddersfield on 9th March 1812, signed by "the General of the Army of Redressers, Ned Ludd, Clerk":

"Sir: Information has just been given in that you are a holder of those detestable Shearing Frames [wool-finishing machines that could do the work of four or five men], and I was desired by my Men to write to you and give you fair warning to pull them down... You will take Notice that if they are not taken down by the end of next week, I will detach one of my Lieutenants with at least 300 Men to destroy them."

But the issue goes beyond that:

"We will never lay down our Arms... [until] the House of Commons passes an Act to put down all Machinery hurtful to Commonality, and repeal that to hang Frame Breakers. But We. We petition no more {}, that won't do fighting must."

"All Machinery hurtful to Commonality:" Luddism in a nutshell. It wasn't machinery in general that the Luddites opposed, (many of them worked with fairly sophisticated weaving looms), but rather machinery that was hurtful to the common. They rose up with such ferocity not against all technology, as they are sometimes accused of, but against technologies that they saw would crush their livelihoods, overturn the traditional modes of work and employment, and erase the customary bonds of household, community and marketplace that had endured for centuries ...

They rose up with such ferocity not against all technology, as they are sometimes accused of, but against technologies that they saw would crush their livelihoods, overturn the traditional modes of work and employment, and erase the customary bonds of household, community and marketplace that had endured for centuries.

Northern Luddism exploded first in Yorkshire in 1812, with a factory burned in January, three workshops attacked and their machines broken in February, a dozen more workshops and two factories attacked in March with hammers, torches, pistols and muskets. Lancashire followed with a factory attack and the burning of a warehouse in February, another factory attack in March, and then in April no fewer than ten factories were set on, their machinery smashed, and two of them were burned to the ground, the most violent actions in the Luddites' whole campaign. In that same month, Yorkshire Luddism reached its height with six workshops attacked and two factories raided, including one mill at Rawfolds ...

But all this came at a fearful price. In the attack on the Rawfolds mill at least four Luddites were shot and killed (two of them buried in the graveyard of the church of the Reverend Luddite plotters, as seen by an 1816 engraving.

The government had reacted just as it had in Nottingham, sending in regiment after regiment of soldiers, many of whom were allowed to be put into service as guards in and around the factories and more of whom would be summoned when any disturbance broke out; by the end of April, a huge force of some 10,000 men had been dispatched to the Northern counties and unleashed without restriction to bully, bribe, subvert, terrify and, if necessary, fire upon the citizenry.

It was, in fact, the greatest invasion of its own territory the government of Britain had even prosecuted. By 1st May, there were no fewer than 14,400 soldiers in the Luddite region (an area of about 2,100 square miles), including cavalry and artillery, riding and marching around the countryside, giving the entire place, as the Leeds Intelligencer reported, "a most warlike appearance." In addition, there was a "voluntary militia" of citizens trained with annual encampments and intermittent drillings, numbering perhaps 20,000, and a system of local magistrates for every sizeable town and city, each with a small staff of constables and spies.

It was in the face of this armed force, and continuing refusal by the government to lend any helping hand despite the continuing misery and unemployment, that the Luddites ratcheted up the level of violence once more. In April,

one manufacturer in Nottingham was shot at and wounded, another manufacturer in Huddersfield was shot at and escaped, and a third in Yorkshire was shot and killed. Raids at night were no longer on factories or owners' houses, but on any establishment that might contain guns and bullets and valuables; a government agent in Stockport reported that "bodies of 100 and upwards of the Luddites have entered houses night after night and made seizures of arms." Churches were plundered for lead, and pumps and waterspouts and anything that could be melted down were stolen, all to be converted into bullets. Rebellion, indeed revolution, seemed to be in the air: a West Riding officer wrote of "open rebellion against the government", another warned that the nation was on "a direct Road to an open Insurrection," and a Lancashire general thought the Luddites were now aiming at "nothing more or less than the subversion of the government of the Country and the destruction of all Property."

But it proved to be less than that; in fact more like the dying twitch of a movement that had made its statement of desperation and misery for six months and found that it fell entirely on deaf ears, with no response from the powers of the land except force and repression. At the Lancashire Assizes in May, 10 Luddites were hanged, 38 transported and 18 imprisoned; in June, 38 men were arrested in Lancashire, in October and November 20 more in Yorkshire. A factory was torched in Lancaster in September, but for the most part the storm had passed; the heart seemed to have gone out of the cause. And for the first time, perhaps in reaction to the extremity of assassination, the Luddite ranks cracked and a cropper in Huddersfield informed on the murderers, who were arrested and brought to trial. At the December Assizes, 14 men were hanged, and 6 transported, and with their deaths, Luddism came to an end - as a movement, though not as an idea.

A brief summary of Luddism's diverse effects suggests why it struck such a historic chord, and why that chord resonated through the social edifice of Britain, then and afterward, as few others before or since.

First, the costs: the Luddites destroyed something over £100,000 worth of property in just 14 months, and manufacturers had other losses in expenditures for defending mills and in factories idled; the government spent at least £500,000 in salaries alone for its military force, to say nothing of food, lodging, and equipment and an untold amount for prosecutions at the assizes. All in all, losses of around £1.5 million can be laid directly to Luddite activity.

Second, there were a few scattered practical results: wages in a few places were raised, some machinery was discarded by manufacturers, several factories moved out of the Midlands, and a national organisation for poor relief was established. In many places, new machinery was not introduced for fear of a Luddite reaction.

Third, the failure of direct and violent action channelled workers' grievances into conventional reformist actions, leading to a revival of pressure for trade unions and workplace improvement on the one hand, and for parliamentary reform on the other. In effect, this meant the end of radicalism in Britain for all practical purposes, at least for the 19th century.

Fourth, the open alliance of government and industry laid bare the true nature of the state and its willingness to use any force at hand in service to industrialism - a lesson not always heeded, but there for all to see. Manufacturers learned that there would be nothing to check their powers except the market, and ancient bonds between the worker and master, fellow members of one community though of different rank, were now seen as irrelevant and unimportant.

Finally - and this is the real reason the Luddites have become as indelibly a part of the language as that other English group, the Puritans - Luddism brought the whole issue of machinery, and the succeeding technologies of the Industrial Revolution, out into the public arena and placed it on the agenda of industrial society for every age thereafter. "The machinery question", as it was called in 19th-century Britain, might be answered in several ways -

and the favoured way of the industrialists was that all machines were legitimate and the economic and social consequences, however horrible, irrelevant - but at least it could no longer be ignored and would continue to haunt the industrial process wherever it went in the world and down to the present day.

Ultimately, it must be said, Luddism lost, and all that it opposed, and apprehended, came to pass. The dawn of modernism was not held back, the future was not brought short, and the Industrial Revolution was able to proceed on its catastrophic trajectory of destruction and immiseration, across Europe and around the world.

And yet, industrialism has had only 200 years of triumph. The Luddite tradition, of custom and community, of family and friendship, of good goods and fair prices, and of the natural rejection of "machinery hurtful to commonality," goes back far longer than that.