

THE PRO-MACHINE BIAS: THE FATE OF THE LUDDITES

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When either a casual reader or serious student comes upon an unfamiliar work and is prompted by curiosity or need to find out what it means, that is, to “look it up,” the common response is to turn to the library’s reference books for authoritative and objective definitions. After all, our dictionaries and encyclopedias are widely thought of as value-free sources of meaning, perhaps even the source of TRUTH! The child who argues, “It’s not a word; it’s not in the dictionary!” and the *Scrabble* player who calls in the *Webster* to challenge the validity of an opponent’s layout of letter tiles are both responding to the special place these mostly anonymous entries in their unabridged thickness and multi-columned erudition hold for us. These are the sources the non-professional researcher turns to, not the extended histories and nuanced discussions found in specialized works. For many, looking something up in a dictionary or encyclopedia is all the research they will ever do.

But how reliable are these sources; are they consistent; are they objective or are there editorial perspectives embedded in the entries? To answer these questions, I recently visited the library of a major research university to see what the reference books had to say about the word “Luddite.” I became interested in the use of this word a few years ago upon reading Ian Reinecke’s discussion, in *Electronic Illusions*, of how our culture enshrines technological developments while discrediting those who resist or question their implementation. As he points out, a Luddite is widely thought to be “a machine-breaker, one who stands in the way of progress, an ignoramus, an untutored primitive who resorts to instant violence” (25). [The author’s references are grouped alphabetically at the end of the article. The numbers in the text indicate which item is being referred to. When several editions have been studied, each is listed separately.] How, I wondered, did this meaning come about, and who were the people who first bore this name? Historians of early 19th century England report that the Luddites were an unorganized group of textile workers in a few shires in England who, between 1811 and 1816, took it upon themselves to attempt to destroy the machines that were costing them their jobs. Their efforts failed: some were exe-

cuted and others were deported; new framing machines were installed; jobs were lost (26, 27). And before long the term "Luddite," which had been used with a sense of mocking pride by the laborers to represent their defiance of authority, came to mean mindless machine breakers. Lost from the semantic environment, at least in colloquial usage, were the sentiments of the day captured in the folk ditty:

*Chant no more your old rhymes about bold Robin Hood,
His feats I but little admire.
I will sing the Achievements of General Ludd,
Now the Hero of Nottinghamshire.*

While some 19th century workers may have considered "General Ludd" a hero, such is not the case today. If a curious reader encountered "Luddite," a fairly widely used allusion, in a magazine and turned to the "standard" references for explanation, what would be found? Do the reference works support the devaluation of the term or do they set the record straight?

Having examined all of the available English language dictionaries and encyclopedias in the university library I visited, the following is a report of those findings.

The material included thirty different books: eleven works identified themselves as encyclopedias, most in multi-volume sets and a few in single volume, concise editions; different editions were examined to check for longitudinal change; six unabridged dictionaries were also examined.

Four of the works contained no entry on the Luddites or Luddism (4, 5, 18, 22). Two of these were single volume desk references for popular use. Omission of information about early 19th century English history is not surprising in the case of concise editions. However, its omission from the 1976 *Collier's* and the 1966 *Compton's* is noteworthy especially as the Compton Company identifies itself as a "Division of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc." which means it had easy access to the *Britannica's* detailed Luddite entry. The *Compton's* title page proclaims a lofty mission, "To Inspire Ambition, to Stimulate the Imagination, to Provide the Inquiring Mind with Accurate Information Told in an Interesting Style, and Thus Lead into Broader Fields of Knowledge—Such is the Purpose of This Work." One is left wondering what it is about the history and

purposes of the Luddites that disqualifies them from inclusion. Did the people at Compton's not wish to inspire the ambition to question technological change or to stimulate the imagination to ponder the consequences of the introduction of mechanical devices into the workplace?

Obviously, asking why something is left out is a speculative endeavor, so let us turn to the works that do include entries. The language in these is sometimes suffused with attitudes and judgements toward the subject. And since standard reference works commonly violate the norms of scholarship by not telling the reader where the information comes from, it's often impossible to check the primary sources to ascertain whether the judgements are those of the editors or their sources. Therefore, a few more details about the historical events themselves should help set the scene for an examination of the entries.

Historians of the period generally agree that the origins of the term Luddite and who Ludd was have not been conclusively established. Some say a young man, perhaps with a cognitive disability, named Ned Ludd once misunderstood an order and accidentally smashed his framing machine. Others contend it was done purposely in a fit of anger. Whatever the impetus, it seems that it became a joke line that whenever a machine got smashed, for any reason, one might say something like, "Ludd must have been here." From this construction it's a short step to ironically applying the name of Ludd to vandalism for political purposes. To further invest the idea with irony and humor, those engaged in the acts referred to their make-believe leader as King Ludd or General Ludd, thereby mocking the title of esteem by associating it with a story of one whose disability made him the target of ridicule.

Given how little has actually been discovered about the original Ludd, it is interesting to see how he is characterized in the reference books. The entries in these works contain descriptive language about Ludd himself as well as about the movement that came to bear his name fall roughly into three value categories: Those which present the Luddites, their actions and their plight in a somewhat sympathetic way; those which strive for neutrality; and those which are hostile toward them.

To begin with, there's some question as to whether the person in question was even named Ludd. Thomis suggests it was actually Ludlum, and that Ludd was just a convenient abbreviation (26). But, whether Ludlum or Ludd, consider how the person whose name came to be a short-hand reference for either a skeptical or reactionary (take your pick) response to new technologies is described. In three entries he is "an imbecile" (2, 23, 28), in one he's "an idiot" (20), in another he's "half-witted" (29), and in two he's "a person of weak intellect" (10, 21). On the other hand, some sources choose not to engage in such denigrating characterizations but rather strive for neutral phrases like "a person who broke stocking-frames in 1779" (30) and one "who had destroyed some stocking-frames thirty years before" (18). Close to these is the *Random House Dictionary* description which calls him the "worker who originated the idea [of machine breaking?]" (24), which attributes inventive qualities to the same person others call an imbecile.

Another set of Ned Ludd descriptions questions whether he even existed. One calls him "possibly imaginary" (17), another "probably mythical" (10), and two "mythical" (6, 9) with no qualifier. In one he is elevated to the status of a "legendary apprentice" (16).

Not only does Ned Ludd's intellect and very existence vary from source to source, but he undergoes transformations from one edition to another. In the 1890 and 1911 *Britannica* Ludd is "a person of weak intellect" (10), but by the 1929 edition he has become "probably mythical" (12), a characteristic he has maintained through the most recent edition. The four editions of the *Americana* also contain changes. The 1938 edition makes no mention of Ludd, but in 1984 he appears as the "mythical leader 'Ned Ludd' or 'King Ludd' of Sherwood Forest" (9).

There are other interesting ways that the Luddite entry varies from edition to edition of single titles. Consider what happens in the *Britannica* and the *Americana*, the two works which I examined that were available in several editions. The brief 1938 *Americana* entry consists of the following 61 words:

LUDDITES, in British history a name given to rioters in 1811-16, in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire, in England, who attributed the prevailing distress to the introduction of machinery in manufactures, and did a great deal

of damage in destroying it. For a time these counties were in a perpetual state of disturbance, but on the return of prosperity the riots ceased.

The vagueness of the entry borders on evasion. What was the "prevailing distress" and how much is "a great deal of damage"? The closing sentence loses sight of the Luddites and shifts to concern for the counties which are perpetually being disturbed. And the claim that prosperity brought an end to the "riots" overlooks the possibility that executing groups of Luddites and transporting others to the colonies may have also had a dampening effect. But no matter how soft the 1938 treatment was, it provided more information than the 1964 edition for in that year the Luddites disappeared completely. Future research might reveal if the political climate of the late 50's and early 60's accounts for this omission, but by 1984 the Luddites were rehabilitated by the *Americana* in a long entry by Harvey L. Friedman of the University of Massachusetts, as the end-of-entry identification describes its author.

This entry, which is repeated in the current (1989) edition, is among the most historical of all the entries that I read. By "historical" I mean not only that Friedman gives the usual dates and details, but that he is concerned with context and cause. He indicates that both changes in working conditions and lack of government action to help displaced workers contributed to the problems, and he avoids the easy label "riots," instead calling the events "direct industrial action," a term which invites more thought as to their etiology. This entry is unique in that it describes the events in such a way as to capture their organic nature, stating that "the movement succeeded partially and temporarily in intimidating employers and improving conditions." Most other entries imply that since this particular labor movement failed and faded from the political scene, at least in its *guise du jure*, it was, therefore, over and of no consequence. Such writing, it seems to me, is essentially ahistorical. I am curious to see if future *Americana* editions, edited by scholars schooled in the Reagan/Bush era's "end of history" view, return to the perspective of the 1938 or 1964 version.

Another valuable and unique quality of the Friedman entry is its addition of a two sentence reference to a similar response to industrialization that occurred in France where some workers threw their wooden shoes (*sabots*) into machines, thereby giving us the word

sabotage. This passing etymological fillip elegantly links the plight of the Luddites to that of workers throughout rapidly industrializing Europe.

The changes detected in the Luddite entry over five editions and eighty-four years of the *Britannica* are less dramatic than those in the *Americana* but interesting none the less.

Although historians such as Thomis and Thompson contend that there is little to support the belief that the angry workers were part of any kind of mass movement, the *Britannica* begins every one of its entries with the assertion that the Luddites were "organized bands" who "rioted." If "organized" means that the actions they performed required planning when to get together and where to go to bust-up some textile machinery, then I suppose the term fits. But I wonder if the word "organized" doesn't exaggerate both the extent of the activities and the magnitude of the threat posed. The continued use of the word "riot" or "rioters" in every opening sentence gives the Luddites an anarchistic cast which invites the reader to feel relief that they are no longer about; no one, after all, wants to live in a time and place in which rioters are constantly on the loose.

Over the years, the *Britannica* has changed its mind about why the Luddites were rioting in the first place. The 1890 edition contends that "riots arose out of the severe distress caused by commercial depression and the consequent want of employment. . . [and the] widespread prejudice that [machinery] directly operated in producing a scarcity of labour." But in 1911 we find that, "The riots arose out of the severe distress caused by the war with France." By 1929 (in Volume 14, *Libido* to *Mary Queen of Scots*), the war with France is no longer a cause, the focus is limited to mechanization, and "distress" returns: "Great distress had been caused by the dismissal of handicraftsmen in the areas in which such machinery was introduced." This sentence remains virtually unchanged forty years later in the 1969 edition, but there's a subtle shift in the description of local support for the Luddites. In 1929, "The rioters were supported by local public opinion," but by 1969 they were merely "sometimes supported," a clear erosion of their mandate. Finally, the 1974 *Micropaedia* edition tells the reader that Luddites were "noted for the destruction of the textile machinery that was displacing them," while the *Macropaedia* edition, strangely, has no entry at all for Luddites.

As one might expect, such shifts, contradictions and disagreements occur among the various sources as well as within the different editions of one source. Sometimes the editorial voice intrudes blatantly as the mostly anonymous writers state their own views of the wisdom and purpose of the Luddites' actions. One 1961 compiler patronizes the poor, benighted Luddites by telling his readers that they acted "from the mistaken notion that the introduction of machinery tended to lessen the demand for manual labor" (17). Similarly, in 1902 a writer states that they were "under the delusion that these [machines] diminished employment" (2). Most references are more subtle or seemingly neutral in their descriptions, stating that the Luddites "attributed" (6, 9, 18) their unemployment or other problems to the introduction of new machinery, thereby the editor avoids appearing to take a position on the effects of industrialization but leaves the impression that these "rioters" were misdirecting their energies.

Some entries go so far as to say that unemployment was actually "caused by the introduction of new machines" (17) or that machines were responsible for "underpricing the wages of the skilled workers" (3). Another in this category employs that peculiar oxymoron, "labor-saving" to describe the Luddites' intent "to prevent the introduction of labor-saving machinery by burning factories and destroying machines" (28).

While the entries described above share an implied pro-machine—which is to say "pro-capital"—perspective, the entry in the English translation of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, predictably, presents the Luddites in the context of class struggle: "... the first spontaneous workers' outbreaks. . . against the introduction of machines and capital exploitation in Great Britain. . . . It was a . . . mode of struggle of the still-forming industrial proletariat against intolerable labor conditions, wretched wages and unemployment. . ." (16).

Regardless of political perspective or date of publication, almost all of the entries are wrong, or at least sloppily inaccurate, on one important point. Consistently they state or imply that the Luddites were opposed to machinery. This simply is not so. In fact, many of the textile workers who engaged in the Luddite raids were themselves skilled machine operators. They earned their living by working the various stocking-framers and other devices used in the textile industry as it functioned in the homes and factories being built in

their communities. Neither the Soviet work which says the workers were opposed to "the introduction of machines" nor the many American and British volumes which declare they "set themselves to destroy manufacturing machinery" (21), "organized for the destruction of machinery" (20), "attempted to prevent the use of machinery (30), "attempted. . . to destroy textile machinery" (1), took "part in the machine-wrecking riots of 1811-16" (17) get the point right.

The Luddites had nothing against machines *per se*; they just didn't want to lose their jobs! However, given the distorted picture presented in this collection of reference books, it's understandable that the Luddites would get a reputation akin to primitive anarchists. This is eloquent testimony to the strength of the role of the machine in industrialized society (both East and West) and the lengths taken to dismiss those who have raised challenges to the preponderant authority (dare I say hegemony?) of the machine.

Finally, what do these entries say about what happens to those who do break the machines which threaten their livelihoods or disorder their communities? To put it mildly, they don't get off easy.

The *Britannica* in 1890 said that there was "severe repressive legislation" and "vigorous repressive measures," phrases that remain in use to the most recent editions. We are also told that there were mass trials "which resulted in many hangings and transportations" (10). Three other works include the fact that machine breaking was made a capital offence (9, 16, 17) and that hangings ensued. The *Chamber's Encyclopedia* is less precise but more colorful and judgemental: The Luddites "were savagely repressed. . . .The government used spies and even *agents provocateurs* against the movements, and special commissions. . . extracted savage sentences" (3). Moving in the direction of more vague and less severe terms, two references describe the hangings and transportations as "harsh repressive measures" (1) or the riots as "harshly suppressed" (6). The statement most supportive of the government's actions comes from the Century Co. whose editors report that the "conspiracy" and the resulting riots "required stern measures for their repression" (2). The damning word "conspiracy," the parental authority of "stern," and the objective inevitability of "required," combine effectively to condemn those uppity Luddites.

Given the special respect which "standard" reference works receive from many users, the findings which this article reports are practically troublesome. With other books teachers and professors encourage readers to view the contents as the product of one or a few authors' thought and subject to challenge, and even in those cases the persuasive power of the bound and printed page to convince the reader that the contents are true is hard to resist. But in the reference section we tend to let down our guard, to think that those heavy volumes, so much a part of the library itself that they may not be removed from the room they reside in, are as sacrosanct as the very institution in whose presence we are taught to lower our voices, to be respectful, to assume behaviors otherwise reserved for the presence of God or the dying.

Perhaps it's time we demystify the reference room. I don't know if the abuse the Luddites receive in the stacks is typical of what a thorough examination of reference entries on other words would reveal, but it seems to me to at least warrant some disclaimers prominently posted over the arches. What's the Latin for "Let the Reader Beware"?

Notes

1. *Barron's Student's Concise Encyclopedia*, New York: Barron's, 1988, p. 175.
2. *Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, New York: The Century Co., 1902, Vol. IV, p. 3536.
3. *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, revised ed., New York: Pergamon Press, 1950, 1967, Vol. III, p. 720.
4. *Collier's Encyclopedia*, New York: Macmillan Educational Corporation, 1975.
5. *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia and Fact-Index*, Chicago: F. E. Compton Co., 1966.
6. *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 495.
7. *The Encyclopedia Americana*, New York: Americana Corporation, 1938, p. Vol 17, p. 684.
8. *The Encyclopedia Americana*, New York: Americana Corporation, 1964.
9. *The Encyclopedia Americana*, Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Incorporated, 1984, 1989, Vol. 17, pp. 836-837.
10. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago: R. S. Peal & Co., 1890, Vol. XV, pp. 57-58.

11. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Cambridge, England: University Press, 1911, Vol, XVII, p. 111.
12. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1929, Vol 14, p.468-469.
13. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1969, Vol 14, p. 402.
14. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1974. Macropaedia edition, Vol 11.
15. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1974, Micropaedia edition, Vol, p. 375.
16. *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1977, vol XV, p. 164.
17. *Hutchinson's New 20th Century Encyclopedia*, London: Hutchinson, 1964, p. 682.
18. *The Lincoln Library of Essential Information*, Buffalo, NY: The Frontier Press Company.
19. *New Standard Dictionary of English Language*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1963, Vol XVII, pp. 438-439.
20. *New Standard Encyclopedia of Universal Knowledge*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1931, p. 1472.
21. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, Vol. 6, p. 489.
22. *The Peoples Almanac*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975.
23. Phyfe, William Henry P., *5000 Facts and Fancies*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901, p. 462-463.
24. *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1967 ed. New York: Random House, 1967, p. 852.
25. Reinecke, Ian, *Electronic Illusions*, New York: Penguin Books, 1984, p. 2.
26. Thomis, Malcolm, *The Luddites: Machine-Breaking in Regency England*, New York: Schocken Books, 1970.
27. Thompson, E.P., *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York: Vintage Books, 1966, p. 547.
28. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd. ed., New York: The Publishers Guild, Inc., 1961, p. 1073.
29. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Springfield, Mass: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1967, p. 1344.
30. *Webster's Universal Dictionary*, New York: Harver Educational Services, Inc., 1976, p. 838.