



Smashing Time

Lord Byron and the Luddites

By Richard Byrne (Originally published in *Smashpipe*.)

That George Gordon, Lord Byron cuts a dashing and fascinating figure to this day is a testimony to the sheer force of his personality. As a lover, adventurer, poet and literary controversialist (and the author of some of the greatest letters in the English language), Byron has aged better than any of his Romantic contemporaries. And the Byronic hero – melancholic, haunted, and scribbling it all down on a ship or Alpine peak – survived well into the Edwardian era as a go-to mode for young gallants.

Yet one key element in the Byron myth is often overlooked: his penchant for radical and revolutionary politics. Byron's liberal politics were an anomaly for an English aristocrat. His pen and purse were called upon by radical publishers and Greek revolutionaries alike. His death in the swamps of the Greek coastal town of Missolonghi in 1824 came as he desperately tried to hold together a fractious army rebelling against Ottoman rule and quarrelling amongst themselves.

Among the most surprising elements of the Byron story, however, is the pivotal role he played in the public response to Luddism – a violent and secretive wave of labor agitation that roiled British politics violently from 1811-1813. At a moment when Britain was fighting wars against

the United States and Napoleon, the homegrown tumult of Luddism posed such a threat that the government sent more troops to the Midlands of England than it did to America or Spain just to quell the domestic disorder.

Byron's encounter with Luddism was one of the two key formative events in his rise to fame. Before Byron became *Byron*, he was a slightly chubby and unexpectedly sentimental young man with a taste for Alexander Pope and the passion for male classmates that seems to be part of the drinking water in all-male English public schools. Gloomy and excitable by turns, Byron matriculated at Cambridge University, where he was the sort of student who bathed in the fountain at Trinity College, and kept a tame bear in his chambers because the university had banned dogs.

Byron's chief notoriety in his early years was the heady bit of vitriol he launched at the literary scene of his day. *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* was an 1809 satire that pilloried a wide range of writers, including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The book elicited intense comment within those circles (especially since it came from the pen of a young noble), and also provoked at least one demand for satisfaction from the Irish poet Thomas Moore. Fortunately, for literature's sake, cooler heads prevailed and the two men became close friends. Byron's letters to Moore are among the treasures of correspondence in the English language.

After graduating from Cambridge in 1808, Byron eschewed the customary Grand Tour of continental Europe for a more picaresque excursion to Greece, Turkey and Albania. He swam the Hellespont (as Leander did to meet with Hero) and met the legendary Albanian brigand turned Ottoman governor Ali Pasha. The journey was one of Byron's first strokes of genius, because it became the primary fodder for *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* – an exotic philosophical travelogue in verse that launched him into literary stardom.

Fame didn't beckon immediately, however. Byron came home from that journey in 1811 encumbered by massive debts. Within a month of his return, his mother and two close friends died, sending him into a depression. Over the next few months, Byron flitted back and forth between London and Nottingham. His time in the capital was spent cadging funds to forestall his creditors and staking his claim to a place in Regency high society. Nottingham – and Newstead Abbey, the dilapidated family pile that Byron inherited from a series of dissolute and rapacious ancestors – was, for the moment, his home.

Newstead was a priory before it was converted to a mansion in Henry VIII's war against Church hierarchy. Byron tried mightily to live up to his ancestors' continuing assault on its virtuous foundations, boozing it up in the hallways and having his way with a few of his household staff.

Byron's last real affair there during the Christmas holidays of 1811, with a Welsh woman named Susan Vaughn. When he left for London again in January, she wrote him long, lively and mopey letters while also dallying with other members of the staff. Byron found out, and was plunged

into a fit of morose self-pity that seems shocking mere weeks before his transformation into a national celebrity.

“I do not blame her,” he wrote to a friend after sending Vaughn packing in January 1812, “but my own vanity in fancying that such a thing as I am could ever be beloved.”

Byron’s time at Newstead Abbey wasn’t all *billets-doux* and betrayals, however. An uprising of immense consequence – Luddism – was happening literally tight outside his door as he gallivanted. At that time, Newstead Abbey was located right on the edge of Sherwood Forest – yes, *that* Sherwood Forest, or Robin Hood fame – which was cited in a number of the Luddites’ threatening letters and proclamations as their home base.

“I leave town tomorrow...for Notts where the weavers are in arms & breaking of frames,” Byron wrote to his friend John Cam Hobhouse on December 19, 1811. It’s the first mention in his letters of a topic that would engross him for the next few months,

Luddism primarily sprang out of the fierce economic privation that afflicted the textile trade in the time of the Napoleonic Wars. The exact (and multiple) causes of the downturn in fortunes remain a topic of lively scholarly debate, but its pinch on the poor and middle class was sharp. Nottingham suffered recurring bread riots and other economic strife in the years leading up to Luddism.

For a movement of such lasting note and impact, Luddism held (and still holds) considerable mystery that has confounded historians to this day. Its code of silence among those who participated was ruthlessly enforced. None of its participants ever wrote memoirs. Luddite leaders whom authorities could identify and execute took the secrets of the movement to their graves.

What the stocking framework knitters of Nottingham – and later the croppers of Yorkshire – hope to achieve by smashing machines is impossible to exactly discern. It was certainly more complex than the reduction handed down to us as a simple war between labor and new technology. Indeed, workers had smashed machines for centuries. What was new and radical about Luddism was the targeted ruthlessness and utter impunity with which these raids by followers of the apocryphal “General Ned Ludd” were undertaken.

The nightly visits by the Luddites to destroy stocking frames in Nottingham in 1811 and 1812 were neither indiscriminate nor senseless. The Luddites often entered buildings and smashed the stocking frames of owners who flouted their demands, while sparing those of owners who had complied with them. The raids were often preceded by warnings, such as one in November 1811 from “Ned Ludd” that warned one owner to acquiesce to Luddite demands or “my Company will visit yr machines.”

There were dozens of such raids in Nottingham between in less than a year, a wave of destruction that sent local authorities into a frenzy of panic and recrimination. One of the Nottingham officials in charge of the response, Town Clerk George Coldham, wrote very plainly in December 1811 about what he saw as a threat to the entire structure of governance and order in the Luddites' nightly depredations:

If the People are once taught that they can accomplish the objects of their wishes by a system of Terror I feel assured that they will proceed further than breaking Frames and it is Difficult to say who may be the next Objects of their Vengeance.

Byron first took his seat in the House of Lords in 1809, but had not yet made his maiden speech. A draconian bill introduced in Parliament in early 1812 to make the destruction of stocking frames a capital offense offered a way to make a distinctive first mark in British politics. It is indicative of the human feeling and psychological insight woven into his letters and his greatest poem, *Don Juan*, that Byron took the side of the Luddites – or, at least, saw their violence as an all-too-predictable outcome of the poverty that gripped his region.

His already-liberal political inclinations already had led him to take up with the Whig faction led by Henry Vassall-Fox, Lord (and later Baron) Holland. In consultation with Holland, Byron worked through what he might say on the Frame-Breaking Act in his maiden speech. His exchanges with Holland are revealing, not only in his largely correct analysis of the complex situation, but also his sense of his own standing. Returning a letter from Coldham about the situation to Holland, Byron wrote on February 25, 1812:

Surely, my Lord, however we may rejoice in any improvement in the arts which may be beneficial to mankind; we must not allow mankind to be sacrificed to improvements in Mechanism. The maintenance & well doing of the industrious poor is an object of greater consequence to the community than the enrichment of a few monopolists by any improvement in the implements of trade, which deprives the workman of his bread, & renders the labourer “unworthy of his hire.” – My own motive for opposing the bill is founded on its palpable injustice, & its certain inefficacy. – I have seen the state of these miserable men, and it is a disgrace to a civilized country. – Their excesses may be condemned, but cannot be subject of wonder. – The effect of the present bill would be to drive them into actual rebellion...

Byron added in a postscript: “I am a little apprehensive that your Lordship will think me too lenient towards these men, & half a framebreaker myself.”

Holland encouraged him, however, and Byron made one of the most famous maiden speeches in history on February 27, 1812. He did not dispense with the arguments he made to Holland, but his speech was a much starker and more vitriolic salvo on the hideous nature of legislation that put property above people:

How will you carry this bill into effect? Can you commit a whole county to their own prisons? Will you erect a gibbet in every field, and hang up men like scarecrows? Or will you proceed (as you must to bring this measure into effect) by decimation; place the country under martial law; depopulate and lay waste all around you; and restore Sherwood Forest as an acceptable gift to the crown in its former condition of a royal chase, and an asylum for outlaws? Are these the remedies for a starving and desperate populace? Will the famished wretch who has braved your bayonets be appalled by your gibbets?

The speech was a sensation, but the bill passed with overwhelming support and was made law. Byron, however, was quite pleased with the attention, writing to his friend Francis Hodgson a few days after the speech:

I spoke very violent sentences with a sort of modest impudence, abused every thing & every body, and put the Lord Chancellor very much out of humour, and if I may believe what I hear, have not lost any character by the experiment. – As to my delivery, loud & fluent enough, perhaps a little theatrical. – I could not recognize myself or anyone else in the Newspapers.

Byron didn't stop there, either. He also placed an anonymous poem (An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill) in the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper on March 2, boiling down his speech to rhymed couplets:

*Men are more easily made than machinery--
Stockings fetch better prices than lives--
Gibbets on Sherwood will heighten the scenery,
Showing how Commerce, how Liberty thrives!*

Though anonymous, it would have been impossible to miss the similarities between Byron's speech and the poem. It seems almost a preview of coming attractions. And the attraction was coming out that very week, as he noted in the letter to Hodgson quoted above, telling him that "my poem comes out Saturday."

John Murray published the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* on March 7, 1812. It immediately sold out its first printing of 500 copies. One of Byron's most famous lines (not taken directly from any of his writings, but rather quoted by his would-be dueling opponent turned friend Thomas Moore in his *Memoranda*), was that "I awoke one morning, and found myself famous." Yet Byron had been grasping for fame and notoriety since before taking his trip to Greece, Albania and Turkey. Between his speech and poems on the Luddites and his new poem, he'd finally snatched it in less than two weeks.

Fame didn't agree with Byron. Or, rather, he took a few years and left behind immense personal wreckage before growing more comfortably into it. A string of public outrages (including a number of scandalous affairs), increasing debts, and a disastrous marriage to a prim and cold

woman named Annabella Milbanke. He treated her with extraordinary cruelty, and the rumors that sprung up in the wake of their breakup and divorce – including incest – drove Byron out of favor and into exile.

The Luddites too won their fame – and their continuing, if much misunderstood, place in contemporary language. But Luddism achieved few if any of its goals. Like any secretive and conspiratorial movement, its rapid growth overtook its effectiveness – especially with thousands of troops patrolling the countryside. In Nottingham and in Yorkshire, the Luddites moved on from more targeted attacks to larger, military-style assaults. This played right into the hands of the authorities, who were much better prepared to fight open pitched battles than guerilla warfare.

The wave of Luddite attacks receded, then sprang up again briefly before finally being put down in 1816 and 1817. The silence of Luddism's creators allowed journalists and historians to write a victor's history, oversimplify its aims, and malign its adherents. Even the careful work of scholars such as E.P. Thompson, Malcolm Thomis, and Kevin Binfield has not fully restored the picture of what was a pivotal movement in labor history.

Byron did briefly revisit the Luddites in 1816 in a letter from Italy to Moore. By then he'd cast off from England in disgrace with his new mistress (Claire Clairmont, sister of Mary Shelley), leaving behind a child (Ada Lovelace, who later became the first female computer programmer), a shattered marriage, and a damaged reputation not restored fully until the late 1960s – when Westminster Abbey finally allowed him a stone in Poet's Corner.

It's clear that some news of the Luddites' second wave of attacks and arrests reached Byron, and touched perhaps his twin affections for sentiment and scandals in a more pleasurable and uncomplicated moment of his initial rise. In a long, jovial letter to Moore, he dashed off a quick "song" for the Luddites that has survived to this day:

*As the Liberty lads o'er the sea
Bought their freedom, and cheaply, with blood,
So we, boys, we
Will die fighting, or live free,
And down with all kings but King Ludd!*

*When the web that we weave is complete,
And the shuttle exchanged for the sword,
We will fling the winding sheet
O'er the despot at our feet,
And dye it deep in the gore he has pour'd.*

*Though black as his heart its hue,
Since his veins are corrupted to mud,
Yet this is the dew
Which the tree shall renew
Of Liberty, planted by Ludd!*