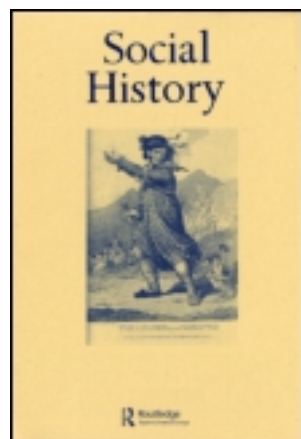


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Social History

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rshi20>

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Available online: 05 Aug 2006

To cite this article: Katrina Navickas (2005): The search for 'General Ludd': the mythology of Luddism, *Social History*, 30:3, 281-295

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071020500185406>

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Katrina Navickas

The search for 'General Ludd': the mythology of Luddism¹

In attempting to make sense of the working-class disturbances of the period 1811–13, both contemporaries and historians have searched for 'General Ludd' and his followers. The magistrates who sent out their spies to uncover the underground organization of the movement, the witnesses and prosecutors at the Assize trials giving their versions of events, the parliamentary Secret Committee set up to investigate the disturbances, and the historians who rely on evidence surviving from these sources have all attempted to understand Luddism's scope and revolutionary potential. Yet Luddism can be analysed and understood in a different light. This article discusses aspects of its mythology and shared identity: that is, how Luddism was seen and transmitted in a more abstract form than physical organization. In assessing what it meant for its participants and opponents rather than what it actually achieved in practice, some suppositions can be suggested as to why Luddism developed in the way it did and managed to sustain itself for a relatively long period of time.

I

Strictly defined, Luddism refers to working-class attacks on labour-saving machinery. Its participants were often workers who felt that innovating manufacturers were threatening their livelihoods by introducing into their factories cropping or shearing frames or powerlooms during the period of economic distress of 1811–13. On the other hand, it has been recognized that the situation encompassed a much wider scope of action and participation. Methods of protest included food riots and threatening letters to magistrates and manufacturers. Most distinctively, the nature of the disturbances was more complex in Lancashire and Yorkshire than in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. In these northern regions, Luddism encompassed meetings composed of early trade unions and of radicals.² Both these strands within the working classes had links to, but were not directly involved in, the attacks on machinery. It could also include the silent but inactive acquiescence of the affected towns, where populations had their own separate grievances against local authorities or government. Pennine Luddism in this respect was a wider phenomenon. It was an expression of discontent from the

¹I have been able to undertake this research thanks to funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Board.

²J. R. Dinwiddy, 'Luddism and politics in the northern counties', *Social History*, IV (1979), 33–63.

geographical and social communities known as the 'neighbourhood': the industrial colonies and handloom weaving villages nestling on the moors, which played a significant role in fomenting and sustaining the disturbances.

Many of the historiographical disagreements over the nature and purposes of Luddism have resulted from historians evaluating the extent of its organization and its links with republican radicalism. Thompson and Thomis represent the two extremes of interpretation. The former posited the movement as revolutionary and expansive; the latter believed it was apolitical, limited and reactionary. Dinwiddy held the moderate position, arguing that Luddism was a combination of different strands of working-class activism, including both revolutionary and non-radical trade-union elements.³ Problems of the reliability of evidence from magistrates' spies and the secretive nature of the movement have ensured that the question of motivation remains contentious.⁴ The respective roles of the early trade unions and the wider working-class communities in sustaining Luddism are also at issue. The trade unions were still fragmented into occupationally segregated combinations in this period. Calhoun has argued that once popular protest movements attempted to stretch their organization beyond their community base, they foundered for want of support and shared identity.⁵ According to his formulation, therefore, Luddism did not achieve its aims because activists were unable to bridge the forty-mile gap between the northernmost outbreaks in Staffordshire and the southernmost disturbances in Cheshire.⁶ Nor were they able to have significant revolutionary or reforming potential because they were unable to co-ordinate their activities with Sir Francis Burdett and the London radicals, regardless of whether or not this was their intention.

These historiographical preoccupations often neglect the fact that the movement was able to sustain itself for a relatively long period of time in the face of vigorous surveillance and arrests by magistrates and their spies. In Nottinghamshire, attacks on machinery began in March 1811 and continued in sporadic bursts until the Spring Assizes of March 1812. The troubles in Yorkshire emerged from about February 1812. The first disturbances in Lancashire were also recorded in that month, when a mill was set on fire on Oxford Road, Manchester, and the bulk of the outbreaks occurred in the region in April and May.⁷ Food rioting did not subside until the Assize trials in late August, and the military were still required to patrol the streets in Bolton and Stockport to prevent more trouble. Huddersfield magistrate Joseph Radcliffe was continuing to receive Luddite death-threats in 1813.⁸ At this point in the war, when grain prices were high, wages were decreasing and a general war-weariness was rising, the financial and organizational strength and levels of commitment of any popular movement would have been tested. Yet Luddism was seen as a real threat to the general public order by the magistrates. As their desperate letters to the Home Office illustrate, written in the early hours

³E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968); M. Thomis, *The Luddites, Machine-Breaking in Regency England* (Newton Abbott, 1970); Dinwiddy, *op. cit.*

⁴See B. Bailey, *The Luddite Rebellion* (Stroud, 1998); R. Reid, *Land of Lost Content: The Luddite Rebellion, 1812* (London, 1986).

⁵See M. Chase, *Early Trade Unionism: Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (Aldershot, 2000); C.

J. Calhoun, 'Community, Class and Collective Action: Popular Protest in Industrializing England and the Theory of Working Class Radicalism' (D.Phil., Oxford, 1979).

⁶Bailey, *op. cit.*, 35.

⁷Reid, *op. cit.*

⁸West Yorkshire Archives, Leeds (subsequently WYAL), WYL 280, Radcliffe Mss.

of the morning, many anxiously felt that they did not have the military manpower to prevent an uprising, however removed from reality that possibility was.

Luddism was not a movement with clear aims and organization, in contrast to the concurrent middle class-led campaigns against the Orders in Council or for peace. It was not structured as successfully or widely as the emerging parliamentary reform movement would become after the war. By its very nature, it had to be secretive and rely on other means of communication and identity to propagate itself. Most of the evidence for the motivation and organization of Luddism has accrued from historians piecing together events from the sparse and biased details provided in magistrates' letters to the Home Office and witness statements at the Assize trials. These obviously have to be seen through the filters of their authors' bias and have not satisfactorily explained why Luddism sustained itself for as long as it did.

Binfield's recent anthology of Luddite texts has gone some way to correcting this imbalance.⁹ Together with an interpretative preface by Randall, he uses post-modern methodology to interpret the myriad ballads, threatening letters and internal communications of the disturbed regions in 1811–13. Previously, the so-called 'linguistic turn' has analysed post-war radicalism and the growth of class consciousness in Britain in the nineteenth century. It was argued that tropes and symbols were transmitted in protest to create a shared identity, which in turn promoted action.¹⁰ Unlike radicalism, Luddism was more a movement of pro-action rather than re-reaction. Images, symbols, place and, as Binfield argues, 'discourse' were essential to this action. Tropes common to all participants and their supporters created the pan-regional identity of Luddism. They therefore provide a means of viewing the movement with a different historiographical focus. Binfield's approach not only highlights a shared language among Luddites but also successfully demonstrates the regional variations in this language and the political opinions therein expressed. Hence Lancashire Luddism was unique for its wider awareness of national and international economic conditions and trade networks, which Binfield attributes to the more virulent Jacobin tradition within the region. The main purpose of the anthology is to highlight the significance of the shared trope of 'General Ludd', which was infused into the organization and identity of Luddites in all disturbed regions. He discusses the imaginary figure's role as an 'eponym' in some areas, while in other districts it became a 'metonym', embodying a whole range of intangible concepts or opinions under one tangible imagined leader.¹¹ Luddism was nevertheless a potent and forceful movement across regions because it was generated 'not by conspiracy or the sudden emergence of class consciousness' but rather by 'the creation and appropriation of the eponym Ned Ludd'.¹²

Luddism found its strength and ability to cross the boundaries of 'community' and region not in its physical organization or network but rather in irrational forces shared by its members in discourse. *Writings of the Luddites* raises new questions as well as answering many others. Why were the inhabitants of industrializing areas using an imaginary figure at this point in the war? Why did magistrates, spies and even the Home Office appear to have subscribed to the concept of 'General Ludd' as well as the protestors themselves? Binfield's argument can be

⁹K. Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites* (Baltimore, 2004).

¹⁰See, for example, M. Steinberg, *Fighting Words, Working-Class Formation, Collective Action*

and *Discourse in Early Nineteenth Century England* (Ithaca, 1999).

¹¹Binfield, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹²*ibid.*, 18.

augmented by an understanding of the psychology of protestors and their opponents and the effect of two decades of war on this psychology. 'General Ludd' was perhaps only the most visible manifestation of what was in fact a mythology of Luddism, a whole mindframe of opposition which was framed by both participants in, and suppressors of, the disturbances.

II

The character of 'General Ludd' or 'Ned Ludd' was taken from the Leicestershire idiom for a machine-breaker, allegedly after an individual named Ned Ludd had destroyed stocking frames in Leicester in 1779.¹³ Working-class memory, dialect or narrative must have kept the character alive in its native region until it found a potent use during the frame-breaking of 1811–12. The adoption of the Leicestershire character in the other regions was most probably achieved through a combination of oral transmission into Nottinghamshire and through the influence of newspaper reports over longer distances. There may have been some level of tangible contact and identity between Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire activists, which also diffused awareness of the character. For example, a letter of 1 May 1812 seized by one of Joseph Radcliffe's spies involved the correspondence of 'Peter Plush, secretary to General Ludd senior at Nottingham to General Ludd junior, Market, Huddersfield'.¹⁴

Previous wartime disturbances of working-class action against manufacturers or magistrates, such as the food riots of 1795 and 1799–1801 or the handloom weavers' strikes of 1808, had not featured such a semi-mythical figure. Only loyalist demonstrations, often encouraged or organized by local authorities, fictionalized real characters such as Guy Fawkes or Thomas Paine in effigy to be burnt or 'hung'. These were objects of attack rather than positive leaders of action. Future popular outbursts, however, utilized the latter psychological method, especially 'Captain Swing' in the agricultural riots in the southern counties of the 1830s and 'Rebecca' during the tollgate riots in Wales in 1839–44.¹⁵ Furthermore, the pan-regional nature of the character of 'General Ludd' sheds new light on the current historiographical emphasis on the effect of the French wars on British national identity.¹⁶ It suggests that the impact of the wars on the general population was not altogether positive or enabling of loyal and patriotic nation-building, but rather one where psychological links and shared identities among regions were made under circumstances of war-weariness and opposition to government or forces of order.

Most magistrates and their spies shared and contributed to the delusion of the existence of General Ludd. Captain Frederick Raynes, stationed in Tameside, argued: 'There is no reason to believe there was any one leader, for in each disaffected district, the most daring and aspiring assumed the title of General Ludd.'¹⁷ At the trial of men charged with administering an illegal

¹³G. Pellew, *Life and Correspondence... of Lord Sidmouth*, vol. III (1847), 80.

¹⁴WYAL, Radcliffe Mss, WYL 280/383, letter of 1 May 1812.

¹⁵E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); P. Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca: An Account of the Welsh Toll-Gate Riots, 1839–1844* (Llandysul, 1983); G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France*

and England, 1730–1848 (rev. edn, London, 1981), 247.

¹⁶There are over fifty articles and monographs listed under the subject of 'British nationalism and patriotism, 1688–1900' in the Royal Historical Society's bibliography for 2002 alone: www.rhs.ac.uk/bibl/

¹⁷F. Raynes, *An Appeal to the Public* (1817), 10.

oath to the soldier-spy Holland Bowden on the road to Bolton, most of the prosecution witnesses were members of the Bolton local militia and/or employed as spies for magistrate Colonel Fletcher. One said he 'heard that he knew where these men met, as it was generally talked of in the croft, amongst the workmen. They said a man they called General Ludd was reviewing about 300 men, two or three times a week.'¹⁸ Many spies were deliberately searching for Ludd rather than for other participants. Abraham Kaye, a private in the Bolton militia, reported that he saw 'one called General Ludd, who had a pike in his hand, like a serjeant's halbert; I could not distinguish his face, which was very white, but not the natural colour'. Other spies claimed they recognized John Hurst as General Ludd. The hysteria of magistrates in facing a crisis of public order engendered these delusions, both among their spies desperate for information and among the victims of the brutal interrogatory tactics of magistrates such as J. S. Lloyd of Stockport.¹⁹

Applying developments in sociology and historical geography to Luddism adds a different dimension to Binfield's emphasis on the eponym of General Ludd. The role of a mythical character in the disturbances of 1811–12 has some parallel in sociological theories of collective action. The work of Smelser has been discredited by other sociologists, particularly his focus on 'irrational' forces and shared myths in promoting movements. They stress, rather, the importance of conscious mobilization, organization and resources, and thus explicitly disavow psychological and socio-psychological factors such as grievances and discontent.²⁰ Smelser's periods of strain and crisis are replaced in Tilly's analysis by an almost constant state of 'contention' in quotidian life, which has a broader influence in evolving what he terms as 'repertoires' of action than the 'moments of madness' which bring them to the surface.²¹ Food riots in this period were indeed only a manifestation of the greater economic strains the war was placing on local markets, as 'badgers' – the itinerant dealers and middle-men – were forced to travel further in search of produce, in turn stretching local supplies.

More recent voices in sociology have moved away from the depiction of collective action as calculated in structure and solely political in aim. They have suggested that identity and culture are as important as organizations and structural change to social movements, and they illustrated how social movements have drawn on religious and other beliefs to mobilize their supporters and construct collective identities.²² Polletta, for example, has argued that narratives are a significant factor in social movements. By explaining past events and formulating possibilities for the future, shared narratives were a key method of defining collective identity. They encouraged the spread of protest among disparate groups, particularly in the initial stages.²³ Epstein and Connerton have highlighted the importance of ritual, ceremony and

¹⁸*The Trials of all the Prisoners...Convicted at Lancaster Assizes...August 1812*, 50.

¹⁹Reid, *op. cit.*; B. Turner, 'A loyal Englishman? John Lloyd and aspects of oath taking in 1812' in M. T. Davis (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain* (Hampshire, 2000).

²⁰S. Barkan and L. Snowden, *Collective Violence* (Boston, 2000); S. Tarrow, 'Cycles of collective action' in M. Traugott (ed.), *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (London, 1995); C. Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain*, 1758–1834

(Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

²¹Tilly, *op. cit.*; Tarrow, *op. cit.*, 104.

²²Barkan and Snowden, *op. cit.*, 24–5; F. Polletta, 'Contending stories: narrative in social movements', *Qualitative Sociology*, XXI, 4 (1998), 419–46; B. Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford, 1997).

²³F. Polletta, '“It was like a fever.” Narrative and identity in social protest', *Social Problems*, XLV (1998), 143.

gesture in transmitting shared memories, transmitting radical ideas, sustaining protest networks and structuring social action.²⁴ The 'generalized beliefs' Smelser posited as necessary for action can thereby be re-evaluated. They were not strictly or mindlessly irrational but, rather, based on a shared culture and references which influenced people to act as much as did tangible leadership and organization. Psychology and some 'irrational' forces in this qualified sense thus have their place in collective action, together with the more traditional emphasis on structural causes.

Elements of Smelser's theory can be revised in analysis of the disturbances of 1811–12. 'Generalized beliefs' were a shared discourse or mythology necessary to bind participants in protest together. He identified five types of generalized belief: hysteria, 'wish-fulfilment', hostility, and 'norm-oriented' and 'value-oriented' beliefs:

Hysterical beliefs lead to panic; wish-fulfilment beliefs to the 'craze'; hostile beliefs to scapegoating and in extreme cases mob violence; norm-oriented beliefs to reform movements and counter-movements; and value-oriented beliefs to political and religious revolution, nationalist movements, secessions and cults.²⁵

These myriad categories can be simplified into two motivations: negative and positive. Both could arguably be seen in the terse situation built up in rapidly urbanizing areas of Britain during the Napoleonic wars. The negative motivation of hysteria and hostility were observable among food rioters, who imagined or exaggerated the rumours of forestalling and engrossing by grain dealers and shopkeepers. Hence the main focus of the riots was selling the grain at a 'fair price'. 'Badgers' were targeted en route to the market, and the servants of gentlemen offering to buy up the stocks at a higher price were also vilified.²⁶ For example, the Oldham diarist William Rowbottom described the workings of the moral economy in late October 1799, when a 'large mob of people from Saddleworth and the Neighbourhood of Oldham' first descended into Oldham to the marketplace, giving the dealers three days' notice to lower prices. They assembled again 'according to their promise', not in the town centre but on the New Road leading to Ripponden. They then took possession of the meal before it got to Oldham market, selling it at what they regarded as a fair price.²⁷ The rioters were therefore well aware of the routes of supply and the market networks. The enemy was generalized or made generic in popular imagination to include prejudices against Jews and Quakers, the latter being quite prominent in the grain trade in this period and thus obvious targets.²⁸ Positive beliefs of restoring the 'norm', 'values' or 'wish-fulfilment' could be also seen in food riots and wage negotiations, which were attempted by the Manchester executive committee of weavers

²⁴J. Epstein, 'Radical dining, toasting and symbolic expression in early nineteenth century Lancashire: rituals of solidarity', *Albion*, XX (1988), 271–91; J. Epstein, *In Practice, Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, 2003); P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989).

²⁵N. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (London, 1998), 83–4.

²⁶A. Booth, 'Food riots in the north west of England, 1790–1801', *Past and Present*, LXXVII (1977), 84–107.

²⁷Oldham Local Studies, typescript, diaries of William Rowbottom.

²⁸See K. Navickas, 'The Cragg family memorandum book: society, politics and religion in north Lancashire during the 1790s', *Northern History*, XLII (March 2005), 151–62.

who were the remnants of the previous decade's strike organization. These formed part of the 'moral economy', which envisaged what Smelser called the 'reconstruction of a threatened normative structure', that is, the pre-war prices, wage levels and presumed notions of social stability.²⁹ They were part of the campaign for peace and parliamentary reform which had shown resurgence from 1808 and was attracting an increasing number of both working classes and middle classes to its principles and organization. It encompassed positive demands for an end to the distress by a restoration of an imagined English 'constitution' through the removal of parliamentary corruption and a widening of the electoral franchise.

Polletta's focus on the use of narrative in the forming and consolidating of social movements points to the significance of Luddite ballads. Popular ballads have been somewhat ignored by social historians, primarily because of the difficulty of extracting 'pure' songs composed orally by the working classes from the generic and commercial broadside ballads, which were often adapted dramatically by paid hacks. Yet other historians have recognized that music was a crucial part of both quotidian life and working-class 'extraordinary events'.³⁰ Ballads thereby infused the character into popular narrative and memory. The Manchester magistrate Reverend William Robert Hay noted one in his scrapbook which had the refrain: 'Enter, No general but Ludd means the poor any good.'³¹ Binfield's anthology includes ballads from Nottingham and Derbyshire with the titles, 'General Ludd's Triumph', 'Well Done Ned Ludd' and 'Hunting a Loaf'.³² The apparent paucity of surviving printed Luddite ballads does not mean that they were unpopular, but rather that they were transmitted orally. For instance, a letter exists in papers of the Huddersfield magistrate Joseph Radcliffe, purportedly from 'John and Maria Middleton at Haughton' in Staffordshire to their son James in Nottingham. It reported their elation at a Luddite 'victory' he had related to them: 'We have enjoyed ourselves over a pot or two of beer and heard [sic] Mr Luds song.'³³ The different sorts of ballads were used for different purposes to the same end. Oral ballads may have been used to drill up support before attacks on machinery or provision warehouses, such as 'The Cropper's Song', reputedly sung by Huddersfield croppers in February 1812 before the destruction of William Cartwright's shearing frames. Surviving written and later printed ballads, such as were composed after the events, infused them into popular memory, including 'T' Three Cropper Lads o' Honley', about the murder of William Horsfall in Honley, West Riding, in March 1812.³⁴

General Ludd was not the only fictional character in popular imagination. Historians have emphasized the popularity of the character of John Bull in this period, as a positive focus of national identity. He was portrayed by pamphleteers and caricaturists as independent in mind and occasionally in political thought, but nevertheless patriotic and a staunch opponent to threats to British liberty.³⁵ Furthermore, from the Napoleonic wars, the character appears to

²⁹These ideas were explored by E. P. Thompson in *Customs in Common* (London, 1991).

³⁰M. Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working Class Literature* (London, 1974); H. Barker and D. Vincent, *Language, Print and Electoral Politics, 1790-1832, Newcastle-under-Lyme Broadside* (Woodbridge, 2001).

³¹Chetham's Library, Manchester, Hay Mss.,

Mun. A. 3. 7, scrapbook 7, 299.

³²Binfield, *op. cit.*

³³WYAL, Radcliffe Mss., WYL 280/369, letter of 19 April 1812.

³⁴Binfield, *op. cit.*, 201-3.

³⁵M. Taylor, 'John Bull and the iconography of public opinion in England, c.1712-1929', *Past and Present*, CXXXIV (1992), 93-128.

have been regionalized in popular ballads and dialect literature, as 'Jone O'Grinfilt' in the Lancashire series of broadsides and 'Bob Cranky' in Newcastle, although this has not been discussed in the historiography of Britishness.³⁶ It indicates how a shared sense of Britishness needed to be filtered through regional identities to be disseminated and accepted nationally. General Ludd can be regarded as a subversion of the character of John Bull. The psychological impact of over two decades of war had certainly left its mark. This was the first period of war in which the general population participated in great numbers: voluntarily in the volunteers and via subscriptions for national or voluntary defence; mandatory in the militia. The fear of being called up to serve in the militia was general and affected all classes; the militia ballot was held periodically in every parish and hiring a substitute to serve was increasingly expensive. Historians have recognized the great extent to which this participation affected people psychologically. Colley and others have suggested that the experience was on the whole positive, infusing a patriotic sense of shared British identity against the French.³⁷ The other, more negative, side was also significant, however, and came to the surface during the Luddite disturbances. The volunteer corps, in particular, did not assert an unquestioning patriotism, but rather the defence of highly local power structures and identity against military centralization and compulsion.³⁸ While John Bull was a positive figure, General Ludd formed an expression of the negative side of defensive patriotism. In forming a positive leader of trade defence for his supporters, like the volunteers, he embodied a provincial alternative to the generalized images of military bravery and patriotism propagated by the government.

Unlike the defensive patriotism of the invasion scares or the hopeful euphoria during the final victories of 1814–15, the period 1811–12 displayed a peak in war-weariness for the general British population. Some people in industrializing areas under economic and psychological strain therefore found catharsis in the military drilling and oath-taking which comprised elements of Luddism. General Ludd and his regiments were not merely tropes but opposition expressed in action – opposition which directly mirrored and in some senses subverted their previous experiences of the volunteers and the ballot. Another contributing factor to the military ethos of Luddism was that, in 1807, Castlereagh had disbanded the volunteer regiments and transferred them to more centralized units of local militia.³⁹ The Luddite regiments were thus not only a means of training for attacks on machinery but also a reaction to the element of compulsion and government dominance perceived to have been introduced into what had been a voluntary means of demonstrating patriotism and local identity.

North-west Luddism also reflected, and possibly was based upon, the cellular organization of oaths of the United Englishmen of 1798–1802 or unionized weaving and spinning

³⁶Manchester Central Library, BRf. 824.04.BA1, Ballad collection, vol. 4, 155, 'Loyal Jone' (printed by J. Haddock, Warrington); R. Elbourne, *Music and Tradition in Early Industrial Lancashire, 1780–1840* (Woodbridge, 1980), 79; R. Colls, *The Collier's Rant: Song and Culture in the Industrial Village* (London, 1977). My thesis includes a chapter on the subject of 'Lancashire Britishness' in broadside ballads: 'Redefining Loyalism, Radicalism and National Identity:

Lancashire under the Threat of Napoleon, 1798–1812' (D.Phil., Oxford, forthcoming, 2005).

³⁷L. Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992).

³⁸J. E. Cookson, 'The English volunteer movement of the French wars, 1793–1815: some concepts', *Historical Journal*, XXXII (1989), 867–91.

³⁹M. Smith, 'Loyalty and Opposition in the Napoleonic Wars: The Impact of the Local Militia, 1807–15' (D.Phil., Oxford, 1984).

committees who had gone on strike in 1799, 1808 and 1810. They may not necessarily have taken part in any of these previous forms of organization, but they all shared knowledge of them. Drilling Luddites were in the minority, but this does not mean that the general population was not affected by the atmosphere of militarism. Rather, they chose to take out their anger in 'natural justice'⁴⁰ by attacking the houses of manufacturers and magistrates as well as participating in food riots. Indeed, food rioting was much more prominent as a means of protest among the Lancashire and Cheshire populace than in Yorkshire or Nottinghamshire in 1811–12. The Luddite set-battles against powerloom factories in Middleton, Westhoughton and Stockport were rather isolated incidents, provoked by magistrate spies or used as a last resort in imitation of the frame-breaking in the other counties.⁴¹ It also led to a shared silence about the machine-breaking, either through acquiescence or fear. This was not a class identity but a shared identity of the 'neighbourhood', community or wider region. It proved decisive in prolonging Luddism, helping the evasion of arrests. Many activists appear to have travelled from other towns to take part in agitation, as was the case with Oldham and Saddleworth colliers and weavers involved in the assault on Daniel and Emmanuel Burton's factory and house at Middleton, Lancashire.⁴²

General Maitland was ordered up from the south by the Home Office to quell the disturbances in Lancashire and Yorkshire. On 9 May 1812, he wrote a report about the situation he had found when he arrived in Lancashire. It perhaps best summarizes the conclusions the historian must take:

That it exists I have no doubt, but I do not believe either to the extent or combination credited by many. ... The Magistrates and Persons who have been writing to Government, seem to me, to stop generally exactly where they ought to begin, and where they try anything of the kind, their zeal leads them to think they have done a most meritorious Act.⁴³

He concluded that Luddism was a serious problem, but that the magistrates and manufacturers were exaggerating the nature of an oath-taking conspiracy. His military efforts deliberately but respectfully attempted to counteract the bias of the magistrates, and they succeeded in calming the situation, although he also had recourse to using spies. His report judged: 'There must be, and very naturally, great variety of opinions on the subject of what is the real bottom of all this scene, possibly the wisest mode of answering it is that all the apparent causes contribute in some degree to the present state of the country.'⁴⁴ In short, Luddism was the result of various pressures engendered or brought to the surface by the wars. It was an outburst emanating from over a decade of mistrust between manufacturers and employees of many trades, which had previously been seen in the conflicts over the Masters and Servants Acts, Combination Acts and later turnouts over wage reductions. It also involved the general population whose anger had become exacerbated by their direct or indirect experience of the

⁴⁰Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, *op. cit.*

⁴¹Bailey, *op. cit.*, 147.

⁴²Oldham Local Studies, Diaries of William Rowbottom, typescript.

⁴³National Archives: Public Record Office (subsequently PRO), HO 40/1/1/64–5, part 2, 9 May 1812.

⁴⁴*ibid.*

prejudices of the manufacturers, their decisions over settlement and their openly hostile attitude to demands for peace and parliamentary reform. The mythology of Luddism was a means of coping with disappointment and frustration. It is significant that, in their attempts to counteract working-class organization, local magistrates also subscribed to this mythology, raising the possibility that loyalists as well as radicals were searching for a leader in this period.

Luddism formed an apolitical strand of popular politics which was radical not necessarily in ideology, but in its defiant opposition to the forces of order and consequently of loyalism. It therefore sought to subvert the authority of these forces using the same methods of control. The magistrate was a common enemy of all Luddites, following two decades of loyalist reaction against radicals and working-class combinations in the industrializing districts. This hatred crossed regions; it was no longer a case of personal animosity and specific retribution, but one of collective opposition. Binfield has pointed to the conscious use of legalistic language in Luddite texts in imitation and subversion of the discourse of the forces of order. Hence the 'Soliciter [sic] to General Ludd' sent a 'summons' to Huddersfield magistrate Joseph Radcliffe, 'filed against you in Ludd Court at Nottingham'. The threat required him to desist acting as a magistrate or else 'General Ludd and his well organized army' would levy the summons against his person and property 'with all Destruction possible'.⁴⁵ During the attack on Goodair's mill in Edgeley, Stockport, on 14 March 1812, the crowd was led by two men dressed as women, referred to among the crowd as 'General Ludd's wives'.⁴⁶ This was part of a symbolic defence mechanism against the magistrates. It was a disguise of identity and furthermore was a deliberate subversion of authority and norms.

Furthermore, this subversion was not confined to rhetoric or symbol but practised with an acute awareness of the use of geography against the magistrates. Colonel Fletcher of Bolton reported meetings of Luddites held in the fields within direct sight of his house, in preparation, he believed, for attacking his house and that of the manufacturer Thomas Ainsworth. He alleged that, before the attack on Burton's mill at Westhoughton, the perpetrators mustered in a field and then 'repaired to Dean Moor two miles distant where the General caused them to pan in review'.⁴⁷ The Pennine villages and towns provided a psychological environment for protestors and strikers as well as a physical one of control and secrecy. Furthermore, they often took place in areas of ambiguous jurisdiction. The moors overlooking the river Tame and Ashton-under-Lyne in Lancashire were one place where participants were in view of the magistrates but could escape into the neighbouring counties of Cheshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. The Revd Henry Broughton wrote anxiously to Lord Sidmouth: 'During divine service some hundreds assembled on a hill near Ashton-under-Lyne, hoisted a flag, went through the manoeuvres of a regiment and before any military could arrive, dispersed.'⁴⁸ Some had the temerity to organize in broad daylight but, crucially, when the local elite were in church. The Revd William Hay reported that a 'very riotous mob assembled from various parts of the country at Ashton-under-Lyne' on 20 April 1812. They broke into provision warehouses and shops 'throughout the town' and then 'proceeded into Cheshire, thro'

⁴⁵Binfield, *op. cit.*, 212; WYAL, Radcliffe Mss, WYL 280/364, letter to J. Radcliffe, 20 March 1812.

⁴⁶R. Glen, *Urban Workers in the Early Industrial Revolution* (London, 1984).

⁴⁷PRO, HO 40/1/1/87-94, Fletcher to Beckett, 22 April 1812.

⁴⁸Reid, *op. cit.*, 175-6; PRO, HO 40/1/1, Broughton to Sidmouth, 17 June 1812.

Dukinfield, where I am informed they continued the same sort of outrage'.⁴⁹ Another report by G. Hadfield of Stockport stated that the Ashton rioters also invaded Mottram and that 'having traversed the county in every direction unopposed by Civil or Military authority' engaged in 'breaking such part of the Machinery in different Factories as is most obnoxious to them'.⁵⁰ Assembling on the moors before descending into a town had been a common tactic for both striking workers and food rioters in the Pennine regions throughout the war. The 'text' of the landscape was thereby transmitted through these previous protests to be used to some effect by the Pennine Luddites.⁵¹

III

Luddite identity had multiple levels, to be used in different situations as circumstances arose. General Ludd was pan-regional, but action and physical connections were based on the local 'neighbourhood'. Furthermore, the movement was also infused with an acute awareness of national and international events. Binfield has identified the language of Luddism in the north-west, in particular, as expressing a wider knowledge of economics than the other regions. A letter of 26 April 1812, for example, was sent to the Fire Office Agents in Wigan, in which the writer recognized not only a larger financial system connecting the powerloom owners with their insurers but also the position of fulfilling a reciprocated potential in destroying by fire the steam looms.⁵² These sorts of connections that Luddites made contradict generic impressions about the reactionary or ill-educated nature of Luddism. It was not a blind reaction against economic change but a desperate adjunct of the well-informed and increasingly progressive early trade unionism.⁵³ Furthermore, although seemingly a phenomenon of the industrial North, Luddism was not divorced or isolated from wider events; indeed, many of the working classes at this point were deeply interested in gaining news of the war. Every class or trade was affected by the war, with most having kin in the army or militia, or suffering financially. At the Lancaster Assizes, William Kay, a weaver from the radical village of Chowbent, commented: 'I had heard that some news had come from Spain, about Badajos and went to see if it was true, knowing that he [John Charlson] read the papers.' William Speakman, a weaver, received his information from a more direct source:

My wife and Christopher Medcalf were talking about the expedition to Holland. ... [She] has a brother who [is in the army]. They talked about the expedition to Holland and how the Dutch behaved to prisoners.⁵⁴

⁴⁹PRO, HO 42/122/22, Hay to Beckett, 21 April 1812.

⁵⁰PRO, HO 42/122/546, Hadfield to Beckett, 24 April 1812.

⁵¹This method of protest has only been discussed with reference to post-war radical demonstrations: see J. Vernon, *Politics and the People, a Study in English Political Culture, 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 208–13. The sociology of

landscape as 'text' is discussed by D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (eds), *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge, 1988). For more on the use of moorland in strikes and protests during the 1800s, see my thesis: Navickas, 'Redefining Loyalism...', *op. cit.*

⁵²Binfield, *op. cit.*, 174.

⁵³See Chase, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴*The Trials of all the Prisoners*, 11, 22.

Information was thus transmitted orally as well as in newspapers; people were aware of who received the latter and relied on them for news. The assassination of Spencer Perceval was quickly disseminated in this way throughout the north and, to the magistrates' horror, welcomed by the general populace. Colonel Fletcher of Bolton wrote:

The death of Mr Perceval has filled all good Loyalists with grief – and what is to be particularly lamented is that the *Mob* should have expressed *Joy* on such a melancholy occasion. It would appear as of John Bulls character had experienced a [change] and that he is become [a symbol] for Treason, stratagems and spoils.⁵⁵

This appears to have been a common attitude in all the Luddite counties. Thomas Parker, a captain in the Norfolk militia, called up to suppress the disturbances, wrote to his father from Congleton:

What a dreadful thing the Murder of Mr Perceval. The Assassin has taken his trial and found Guilty and was to be executed this day. There were I am sorry to say great rejoicings on this melancholy event both in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire, the Bells were set ringing in several Towns in both Counties.⁵⁶

The vicar of St Mark's, Liverpool, the church on the street where Bellingham lived, preached a sermon on the 'melancholy event'. In response, he received a letter signed by 'Jenkins, Lt de Luddites', which ridiculed his sermon and added, 'had it been in any other place than the church, my pistol would have silenced the blasphemy'. It went on to speak of the 'brave and patriotic Bellingham' and threatened death to the 'depraved George the Prince'.⁵⁷ Threats like these were isolated and not indicative of any serious revolutionary danger, but they show how information and a shared discourse or mythology of action could be spread among disturbed regions.

A key theme repeated in testimonies, reports and other contemporary records of Luddism was a perception on the part of those confessing to be Luddites and the magistrates' spies that they were part of a much wider pan-regional network. Their language and beliefs in this respect were very similar to the evidence given by the United movement and the striking weavers and spinners of the previous decade. For example, the information given by Thomas Whittaker, a silk weaver from Stockport, in 1812, was typical of Luddite rhetoric and vision, but was also reminiscent of United and unionized claims:

Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire were in a very forward state and it was doubted if they would wait for the other counties that it was calculated that Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Westmorland and Cumberland would have 500,000 men capable of bearing arms that one third of them were in good discipline.⁵⁸

⁵⁵PRO, HO 40/1/115, Fletcher to Beckett, 15 May 1812.

⁵⁶Lancashire County Record Office, Preston, Parker Mss., DDB acc 6685, box 27, T. Parker to

T. Parker Snr, 18 May 1812.

⁵⁷Reid, *op. cit.*, 159; PRO, HO 42/123, Blacow to McMahon, 27 May 1812.

⁵⁸PRO, HO 42/121/433-4, 4 July 1812.

Reid believes that Whittaker's statement displayed 'not the ranting of a rabid revolutionary but the apologia of a naïve idealist'.⁵⁹ The Luddites based their organization and networks on experience of unionized action, but they had wider horizons. Whittaker claimed that he initially thought the meetings he attended were merely combinations to advance wages, but he became disillusioned with their increasingly violent plans. He attended a meeting of delegates in a Manchester pub, where 'never was more surprised in my life when I heard the Manchester delegate lay down the plans and communications with other towns, first acting [as] if all Persons there were friends'.⁶⁰ Whittaker may have been a spy, which further illustrates the extent of the common delusion between activists and the forces of order. The significance of the delegates' plans was their vision. It was not just Whittaker who was naïve: so were the Manchester committee members who seemed to him and the magistrates as so organized and revolutionary.

Pan-regional networks may not have worked in practice, but perceptions of them were crucial. Thomas Miller of Stockport was present at the meeting and reported: 'all was going on far beyond expectation that the Country Districts were pushing it from one to another as fast as possible that 900 had taken the Oath in Manchester'.⁶¹ Mythology was reliant upon superlatives: that thousands were taking the oath. It was essential that the oath network was perceived to be crossing geographical and trade boundaries. Thomas Whittaker's statement again expressed this belief:

James Buckley, Manchester, has administered the oath to several thousands I believe, I have heard him say seven hundred in one day, he has the tailors under his discretion. . . . Mr Hyde [of] Edgley Stockport has taken the Oath and also every male spinner in his factory. Sampson Robinson Stockport is doing the same amongst the Hatters.⁶²

Some pan-trade co-operation was envisaged, although it became strained when the spinners and tailors apparently refused to give any more subscriptions to the Manchester executive committee.⁶³

Again, the contributions of the spies inadvertently added to this mythology and filtered into Luddite imagination. Colonel Fletcher's spy 'B' claimed that Napoleon was ready to supply men and arms and that 10,000 men and 30,000 men were standing by in Ireland to bolster the coming revolution.⁶⁴ Before the attack on Westhoughton mill, the spy John Stones apparently persuaded some local workers in an alleged secret committee that radical leaders in London were only waiting for the northerners to rise. Colonel Fletcher then reported that the attack had been postponed because preparations for a simultaneous rising in the capital were not complete.⁶⁵ This was a total fantasy and another significant element of the mythology of Luddism. Concurrently, the popularity and scope of peace and reform petitions to the Commons, and addresses to Colonel Wardle and Sir Francis Burdett congratulating them for exposing the Duke of York corruption scandal of 1809, were increasing. The influence of

⁵⁹Reid, *op. cit.*, 168.

⁶⁰PRO, HO 42/121/433-4, statement of Thomas Whittaker, 4 July 1812.

⁶¹PRO, HO 42/121/433, 4 July 1812.

⁶²*ibid.*

⁶³Dinwiddy, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴PRO, HO 40/1/1/4, Fletcher to Beckett, 11 April 1812; Reid, *op. cit.*, 124.

⁶⁵Bailey, *op. cit.*, 67.

these popular campaigns infused Luddite mythology. They therefore shared a perception of the extent of connections and delusions reliant upon London. A prisoner of the Stockport magistrate J. S. Lloyd spoke of Burdett as destined to become the first president of the Commonwealth when George III and the Prince Regent had been despatched.⁶⁶ Henry Brougham was also crucial in fostering ideas of wider connections. He acted as a defence lawyer for the 'Thirty Eight', arrested in Manchester in May 1812 during a meeting to discuss reform, and he also defended the Luddites against over-zealous magistrates and their spy system in the Commons debate on the Secret Committee Report into the disturbances.⁶⁷ Knowledge of these links with London personalities was evolved by extremists and other activists into plans for a rising being reliant upon Burdett and the other London reformers. On 29 April 1812 a gaoler at Lancaster Castle found a letter in the pocket of a Bolton cloth worker, written by James Burdett on 16 April, which mentioned his brother Francis and linked him with the cause of the Bolton committee.⁶⁸ The fact that those Luddites who were not directly involved in moderate reform meetings took up the idea of support from London again demonstrates the intricate web of connections and ideas circulating within Luddism. The support of Ireland and France was still a hope, but the Luddites evinced their recognition of the growing importance of the role of parliament and London radical leaders in furthering their demands. This may indeed have been a consequence of the increasing size and effectiveness of the petitioning movements for peace and reform which would form the basis of organization for popular radicalism after the war.

There was much more to the character of General Ludd than a simple product of popular imagination in a period of war-weariness. General Ludd was imagined because the increasingly radical-leaning general population was searching for a leader. In 1812 they could not find one locally or were unable to raise one themselves because of magistrate repression. Most of the Jacobin radicals of the 1790s had long gone. Furthermore, according to Eckersley, Major Cartwright and his metropolitan supporters distanced themselves from the working classes during the 1800s in an attempt to create an elite radical political party in parliament. Cartwright only reached the north on a popular reform campaign once dissension within his chosen party made this goal unachievable and after Luddism had begun to subside.⁶⁹ The only genuine 'gentleman leader' of the 1800s in Lancashire was Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Hanson of Strangeways Hall, Salford. He supported the campaign for peace, was almost elected for Preston in 1807, and became a popular hero after his imprisonment for speaking at a mass meeting calling for the minimum wage held at St George's Fields in Manchester in May 1808. He was, however, isolated among the loyalist elites and reticent radical friends in Manchester and died in 1811, after again representing the weavers at a parliamentary Select Committee to examine their distress.⁷⁰ The 'Friends of Peace' in Liverpool also had the potential to become new radical leaders, but they were suspicious both of working-class action and Burdettite radicalism and remained aloof.⁷¹ On the national scale, there had been popular 'hero-worship'

⁶⁶Reid, *op. cit.*, 176.

⁶⁷*Liverpool Mercury*, 22 May 1812.

⁶⁸Reid, *op. cit.*, 146.

⁶⁹R. Eckersley, 'Of radical design: John Cartwright and the redesign of the reform campaign, c.1800–1811', *History*, LXXXIX (2004), 560–80.

⁷⁰E. Little, 'Joseph Hanson, weavers' friend', *Manchester Region History Review*, V (1991), 22–30.

⁷¹J. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace. Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793–1815* (Cambridge, 1982).

of national military leaders, particularly Admiral Nelson,⁷² but Trafalgar was becoming a distant memory as Lord Wellington still faced setbacks on the Iberian peninsula and war with America was exacerbating the economic distress. By 1812, the rhetoric of reform petitions was taken directly from the resolutions of the metropolitan radicals, and Burdett was called upon to present the Manchester petition of June 1812. Yet local radicals adapted the reform resolutions to the more democratic tendencies of northern temperament. Furthermore, Burdett's circle lacked the intimacy of being local or instantly accessible.⁷³ Luddites therefore created a fictitious or mythic figure to guide them, anonymous yet visible, in order to combat the authority of the magistrates with an imaginary figure made corporeal in the nightly drilling on the moors or as the author of threatening letters.

'Irrational' beliefs in a shared discourse and knowledge of geography thus played a major part in popular agitation in 1811–13. General Ludd was more than an epithet. The exaggerated delusions of the extent of the movement meant more than they achieved in practice. There was a fine line between reality and truth: hence the difficulties both contemporaries and historians have had understanding what actually occurred. Yet many participants, as well as magistrates, could not decipher it either. The mythology was so potent that it persisted in popular memory and in counter-reaction against loyalists long after the Luddites had been transported or executed. It thereby contributed to the reactions against repression of the post-war mass platform and popular radicalism exemplified at Peterloo. The mythology of Luddism further sheds new light on the current historiographical emphasis on the effect of the French wars on British national identity. It suggests that the impact of the wars on the general population was not altogether positive or enabling of loyal and patriotic nation-building, but rather one where psychological links and shared identities among regions were made under circumstances of war-weariness and opposition to government or local magistrates.

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⁷²G. Jordan and N. Rogers, 'Admirals as heroes: patriotism and liberty in Hanoverian England', *Journal of British Studies*, xxviii (1989), 201–24.

⁷³Manchester Archives, BR f.942.7389 Sc13, Scrapbook, 15; Dinwiddy, *op. cit.*, 62.