

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

English Faculty Publications

English

Fall 2007

Steven E. Jones. *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism.*

James C. McKusick

University of Montana - Missoula, mckusickj@umkc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eng_pubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

McKusick, James C., "Steven E. Jones. *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism.*" (2007). *English Faculty Publications*. 13.

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eng_pubs/13

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Steven E. Jones. *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism.*

(Routledge, 2006) x + 277. \$100.00; \$27.95 ppr.

A Review by James C. McKusick
University of Montana

In *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism*, Steven E. Jones offers a cultural history of the Luddite movement and an account of how it was ultimately transformed into contemporary neo-Luddism. Rather than seeking to determine “what really happened” in the frame-breaking riots that occurred in 1811-16, *Against Technology* examines the “history of the *idea* of the Luddites, how Luddism has been mediated and translated by way of various representations — novels, poetry, films, images in popular culture, activist subcultures — between 1811 and the present” (4). In this way, *Against Technology* highlights essential differences between the historical Luddite movement and modern neo-Luddism while still elucidating important continuities in the beliefs and attitudes of those who have stubbornly resisted the encroachment of technology into everyday life.

In tracing the history of the original Luddites, *Against Technology* emphasizes that “the movement was deliberately made, constructed through an act of collective self-fashioning. As with later subcultures, it was the Luddites themselves who began the making of Luddism, starting with the invention of their eponymous, mythical leader” (51). General Ludd seemed to be everywhere and nowhere during the heyday of the movement, appearing as the signatory to letters and manifestos, the subject of songs and ballads, and the inspirational hero of working-class insurgents who sought to destroy the knitting and cropping machines that threatened their traditional livelihood. General Ludd was probably not a real person, though individual leaders of the Luddite movement may have used his identity as a *nom de guerre*. Rather, *Against Technology* argues, General Ludd was created as a mythic embodiment of emergent working-class consciousness, modeled after Robin Hood and endowed with a folkloric tale of origin. According to the popular narrative, a hardworking weaver named Ned Ludd became irritated with his employer and “took the desperate resolution of avenging himself, by breaking his *Stocking Frame*” (55, citing George Beaumont’s 1813 pamphlet “Reflections on Luddism”). This simple legend, recounted many times in the oral history of the movement, became a foundational myth, providing both rationale and archetype for future acts of resistance against the factory system of textile production in Nottingham, Yorkshire, and Manchester.

Several British Romantic writers responded eloquently to these history-making events. Byron’s maiden speech in Parliament (in February, 1812) defended the Nottingham Luddites, and he followed up in March, 1812, with a biting satire in the *Morning Post*, “Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill.” Percy Shelley attended closely to the events of the Luddite uprising and sympathized with the workers’ plight, al-

though he did not condone their violent tactics. His most famous political ballad, *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819), exhorted the working “men of England” to rise up in peaceful protest against tyranny. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) has often been regarded as “the first Luddite novel . . . a tale about the dangers of technology” (106), although Steven Jones argues that such an interpretation of *Frankenstein* fundamentally misreads her deep ambivalence toward scientific “progress.” Despite such authorial ambivalence, however, the story of Frankenstein’s monster has been eagerly appropriated by Hollywood, most notably in James Whale’s landmark *Frankenstein* film of 1931, as an enduring icon of technology run amok. In this way, “*Frankenstein* was boiled down in the crucible of culture in order to reduce it to the essential neo-Luddite myth” (122).

The single most celebrated Luddite action was a midnight attack on Rawfolds Mill in Yorkshire on April 11, 1812. Armed with hatchets, pikes, and guns, as well as a massive sledgehammer known as the Enoch Hammer, an intrepid band of workmen laid siege to the mill. But the owner, William Cartwright, fought back with the support of armed militiamen, killing two attackers, mortally wounding two others, and driving off the rest. The story of this doomed attack was told in contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, and ballads, and it was frequently recounted in poetry, novels, and local histories throughout the nineteenth century. The most familiar literary version of this story is Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), which offers a sympathetic account of the siege from the perspective of two middle-class women who observe it from a distance, barely able to discern what is going on in the midnight darkness. As Jones points out, “the women’s perspective mimics the reader’s own position in history as well: at history’s distance from events, peering backward into the darkness of the limited archival record” (144).

The historical legacy of the Luddite movement was refashioned over the course of the nineteenth century to enable Victorian society to grapple with a larger, more abstract question: what is the proper role of machinery in modern civilization? Are we masters or servants of the Machine? The “machine question” of Victorian times would eventually give rise to an even broader dilemma for twentieth-century culture: the question of what constitutes “appropriate technology” and the fear that humans will ultimately be replaced by robots (or cyborgs).

In a well-detailed survey of cultural history, *Against Technology* traces the rise of neo-Luddism in the twentieth century and examines how many of its leading exponents in Britain and America have sought to appropriate the mantle

of the Luddite movement for their own rhetorical purposes, generally without acknowledging the vast historical gulf that separates neo-Luddism from its origins in vernacular working-class radicalism. Self-declared "Luddites" of modern times include the hippies and street poets of the Haight-Ashbury district, Earth First activists and eco-terrorists, computer hackers and Burning Man Festival revelers, and most notorious of all, Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who advocated the total collapse of world civilization through random acts of terror.

Against Technology critically interrogates the supposed continuity between neo-Luddism and its alleged precursor, the original Luddite movement of 1811-16. Along the way, the book provides fascinating insights into the development of this unruly working-class movement and demonstrates its continuing relevance to twenty-first-century culture. *Against Technology* is a magisterial scholarly work of compelling interest to readers of British Romantic literature.

William Wordsworth, Landscape Architect

Ian H. Thompson

*School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape,
Newcastle University*

In a comment reported by Percival Graves, Wordsworth believed that besides poetry he had two callings: art critic and landscape gardener. Citing this comment, in *Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape* (1968), Russell Noyes concluded that "Wordsworth was a rounded and eminent practitioner of the art of landscape on its highest levels" (91). Curiously, although Noyes graduated in landscape architecture before turning to the study of literature, he does not refer to Wordsworth as a "landscape architect" anywhere in his book, although he agrees with the Rev. R.P. Graves that Wordsworth had established his credentials as a landscape gardener on the grounds of his home at Rydal Mount (135). I believe it is appropriate to think of Wordsworth as a landscape architect, or at least as one of the spiritual and intellectual precursors of the profession, a view supported by the range, scale and depth of his interests in landscape beyond the boundaries of a garden. Furthermore I want to propose that the values which Wordsworth revealed, not only in his poetry but also in his gardening and travel writing, would place him among those landscape architects who have incorporated ecological insights into their design philosophies, making him a figure of considerable contemporary relevance.

In the 20th century, Wordsworth was often depicted politically as a radical who became conservative and opposed all social change. However, in *Romantic Ecology* (1991) Jonathan Bate offered another way of reading Wordsworth, interpreting his politics, or the underlying attitudes that emerge in his poetry, as neither red nor blue (left nor right in present day British politics), but green, and the environmentalism of Wordsworth's later years was a continuation of the radicalism of his youth, not a reaction against it.

As I argued in *Ecology, Community and Delight* (1999), landscape architects draw their values from three main areas:

aesthetics, social responsibility and environmental awareness, all matters of deep concern to the poet. As Bate has observed, "Wordsworth was a vital influence upon the tradition of environmental consciousness" (9) and many of his attitudes are reflected in the discourses of contemporary landscape architects.

Wordsworth was a contemporary of the landscape gardener, Humphry Repton (1752-1818), who self-consciously assumed the mantle of Lancelot "Capability" Brown upon the latter's death in 1783. The first person to use the expression "landscape gardener" seems to have been the poet and gardener William Shenstone who created a much admired garden at the Leasowes in Warwickshire between 1743-1763 and whose *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening* was published after his death in 1764. Though "Capability" Brown preferred the terms "place-maker" or "improver," Repton, certainly considered himself a landscape gardener as it was understood in Wordsworth's time.

The term "landscape architect," on the other hand, was first used by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who designed Central Park in New York. It was not coined until 1858, eight years after Wordsworth's death, which may account for why Noyes avoided it and preferred calling him a "landscape gardener." When writers seek to express the continuity between landscape gardening and landscape architecture, they sometimes use the term "landscape architect" retrospectively, applying it to 18th century designers like William Kent, Lancelot Brown and Humphry Repton and even to the leading gardener of 17th century France, André Le Nôtre. Commentators who wish to indicate similarities in underlying values, working methods, scope of vision etcetera, between these historically important designers and later practitioners use the term landscape architecture. I submit that there are good reasons for applying it to Wordsworth.