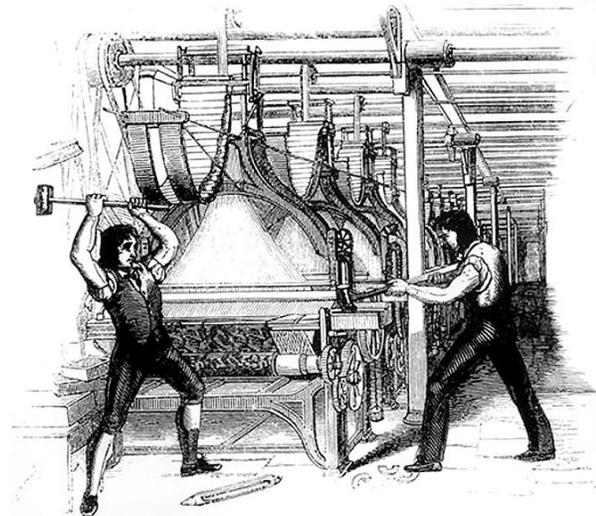


6.14 General Ludd's Triumph

Source: Thompson, E. 1963. *The making of the English working class*. NY: Vintage (534, 547)

Instructions: This song was sung by British weavers called “Luddites” as they destroyed new textile machinery at the beginning of the 19th century. Historians believe there actually was no person named General Ludd but that the name “General Ludd” came to symbolize discontent with industrial change. The Luddites rose in scattered rebellion against industrial progress that had undermined their skills and standard of living leaving them and their family’s unemployed and impoverished. The first threatening letters from “General Ned Ludd and the Army of Redressers” was sent to Nottingham mill owners in 1811. Nottingham workers were upset by wage reductions and the use of unskilled workers who had not first served as apprentices. They broke into factories at night and destroyed the new machines. In a three-week period over two hundred weaving frames were destroyed. Within a few months Luddite attacks on textile mills spread to other factory towns. The government responded by sending 12,000 troops into the region to suppress the rebellion. A £50 (\$100) reward was offered to anyone "giving information on any person or persons wickedly breaking the frames” and Parliament passed a law that people convicted of machine-breaking could to be sentenced to death. Read the song and answer questions 1-4.



An engraving showing machine-breakers.

The guilty may fear but no vengeance he aims
At the honest man's life or Estate,
His wrath is entirely confined to wide frames
And to those that old prices abate.
These Engines of mischief were sentenced to die
By unanimous vote of the Trade
And Ludd who can all opposition defy
Was the Grand Executioner made.

Then the Trade when this arduous contest is o'er
Shall raise in full splendor its head,
And colting [lowering wages] and cutting and squaring no more
Shall deprive honest workmen of bread.
Chants 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.

Questions

1. Why are British weavers complaining about industrial change?
2. How did the British government respond to machine-breakers?
3. According to this song, who are the guilty and who are the honest men?
4. In your opinion, why did displaced weavers invent General Ludd?