Land of Lost Content: The Luddite Revolt, 1812, *by Robert Reid.** (Heinemann, London, 1986) pp. xiv + 334, $65, ISBN 434 62900 6.

There is a mystical moment in the evolution of our vocabulary when a word imperceptibly changes in its meaning from being purely descriptive, to being value laden. 'Luddite' is one such word. Today the word Luddite means different things to different people and Philip Adams has much to answer for, because he uses 'Luddite' constantly in his columns to berate anybody opposed to change, particularly technological change. Some people use 'Luddite' to brand anybody who pursues a simple life rather than a complex one. And so it goes: but the word seems to have gathered derogatory overtones.

Here now is a book which should clarify the term if anything can. Robert Reid's volume *Land of Lost Content;* the title is taken from a poem by A.E. Houseman. It is the story of the Luddites, workers in the textile industry of Yorkshire who, from the middle of the eighteenth century witnessed the invention of machinery which they could see instantly, would make them redundant. Possessing only low esteem on the social ladder, forbidden to emigrate, captured in the turmoil of international events which were contracting the markets for their products, and denied hope by the government of the day, they released their fear, frustration and anger in violence. They were organised into groups, being 'twisted-in' to the secret society by swearing on oath and kissing the Bible when the penalty for administering that oath was capital punishment, and the penalty for taking it was transportation. So, many Australians must be descended from Luddites.

They roamed the hills and valleys in the dead of night, faces blackened, always wearing a hat, and vented their rage on the machines that were replacing them in savage raids on the factories. To the anguish of mill owners, retribution was a long time coming as an incompetent and insensitive government refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation in the north country, which this author claims to be the most disruptive force since the Civil War.

Eventually the die was cast when, in 1812, Luddites attacked people as well as machinery. The law enforcers took some time to find a crack in the fraternity but, once it came, the result was an awful and awesome spectacle of trials, dubious legal practices and convictions which led to hangings in public: the bodies of many of the dead Luddite leaders being dissected and anatomised to prevent community uprisings.

The Yorkshire valleys have still not recovered from that anguish of 175 years ago and the fear of the death penalty which pervaded that generation means that very few first hand accounts remain. Reid in this new book tells the Luddite story clearly and poignantly and in the process also tells the story of early eighteenth century England, surely one of the most fascinating periods of history. This book reveals how the events of that age came to pierce the tranquility of the Yorkshire valleys. The Duke of Wellington fighting Napoleon, the American War of Independence, the passing of a comet in the

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heavens, the assassination of a British Prime Minister, duels on Wimbledon Common, the Prince of Wales out hurdling; and the appearance of the more romantic figures like Daniel Defoe, Lord Byron, and the skulking figure of Patrick Bronte and his famous daughter, Charlotte Bronte, who would take the Luddite story as the key episode in the novel *Shirley*.

The author has produced for us a nice blend of description and analysis. We see the poverty of the workers and the beginning of the class structure. As Reid puts it 'once the community had been such that the worker and the master were linked by common purpose often under a common roof. The new technology was removing the shared aim and its benefits . . . now two communities were evolving: manufacturer and worker. Aligned with the manufacturer was an establishment which subscribed to church and king; bound to the worker were the poor and the failing small master. The divide in the house was deep. For the first time in their history the valleys were stratified by class barriers; from here on these were to be permanent structures in the community.'

We see in this book the motivations of the actors laid bare: industrialists following Adam Smith's dictates on the profit motive; magistrates seeking noble titles; police with paid spies; military officers seeking promotion; judges following a strategy of conviction to set examples, but not so numerous as to incite rebellion; an unholy rift between establishment religion and the new reformist religions battling for treasures on earth and in heaven; and a Home Secretary, like all politicians, wanting an easy life only too ready to believe that the Luddites had as their aim the overthrow of the whole of society and therefore the Establishment of the day.

But the most fascinating contribution of this book is the view of science which it presents. Faithful listeners to **Science Bookshop,** have you ever heard a statement as succinct as this? "The Industrial Revolution was not a chance event. By the end of the seventeenth century technology had given birth to its single greatest creation: modern science itself. Science — the ability to measure, to predict — had been the consequence of the invention of simple but accurate instruments; the ruler, dividers, compasses, the vernier scale, the telescope, the microscope, the clock. And science was to enter into an incestuous relationship with technology."

The author himself hovers throughout the book between historian and scientist. The Yorkshire valleys are his social laboratory and the Luddites are the ultimate case study. For him there is clear cause and effect. In the guise of the General sent to quell the uprisings he speculates that the unrest is caused partly by external factors but mainly the harsh working environment and the appalling living conditions of so many of the poor. He hypothesises that the real reason for the failure of the Luddite revolt was that it had no real leaders and was built on nothing but hope. There is, he asserts, an Iron Law of Technology, that technology is irreversible. "Invention, once made, is as permanent a part of civilisation as the DNA of a gene of a human embryo which becomes a permanent part of the individual." The tragedy of the Luddites is that they thought government action could reverse this law. It cannot, and Reid laments that this lesson learnt so harshly by the Luddites seems to have been lost on succeeding generations, if science is a predictor. He might well have mentioned picket lines at Rupert Murdock's Wapping plant in London being charged at by mounted police, as empirical proof of his theory.

Social scientists always feel themselves under severe scrutiny from natural scientists as to the objectivity and thoroughness of their methods. So it is natural to pounce on the smallest element of bias in an account such as this. Reid makes no secret of his disdain for the idleness of the upper class, the apathy of the Establishment and the incompetence of George III. His account seems fair by the evidence to hand though his basic conclusion will no doubt be debated forever: that the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution were different from those of any other historical period in the world because they found a new rational scientific base and occurred so quickly causing such social instability.

Read this book and you will be moved. You have to put up with his occasional carping criticism of other historians and authors. But Reid is a local who breathes the sentiments of his own north country into the narrative, and lapses into some beautiful language and imagery such as his belief that the north ran on the hot air of the south, magistrates he describes as overweening, the twitches of the workers, and the tombstone of one of the main clerics still stands, he says, 'in pleasing simplicity, identical to its neighbours, on parade with egalitarian soldiers of the Lord.'

But most of all he clarifies for us the meaning of the word Luddism. It is the purest of the English working class ideologies: Luddism is a 'human behavioural response to fear.'

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