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Book review: before the Luddites: custom, community and machinery in the English woollen industry, 1776-1809

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Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776-1809

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Abstract: Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776-1809 by Adrian Randall is reviewed.

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Full Text: Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776-1809. By Adrian Randall * New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. xvii + 318 pp. Maps, charts, illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.50. ISBN 0-521-39042-7. Reviewed by Craig Calhoun Vague images of the British industrial revolution inform a great deal of contemporary discussion of technological and economic change. This is seldom more true than when opponents of this or that apparent progress are labeled "Luddites." Few doubt that the label carries stigma; at best the early nineteenth century machine-breakers are assumed to be pathetic and ignorant; at worst, malicious. These were the views of contemporary elites, of course, and they have been challenged by a great many historians during the last thirty years. By far the most important of the challengers was E. P. Thompson, whose work is the inspiration and, in a sense, the starting point for Adrian Randall's useful book. Randall, like Thompson, argues that the machine-breakers acted in more or less deliberate ways out of a fairly clear and accurate awareness of what machines were doing to their crafts. Like Thompson, Randall also seeks to rescue those whose ways of life were destroyed by industrialization and whose resistance to the incursions of capitalist industry failed from "the enormous condescension of posterity." He shows the nature of the work and the importance of the community and family relations that they sought to protect. He adds to the picture that Thompson painted of the fear of the factory as well as of unemployment that the artisans and outworkers shared. He shows that resistance was often tied to an alternative political economy that had substantial ideas about the nature of property and legitimate reasons for innovation. Randall also reinforces Thompson's argument that we cannot grasp the nature of industrial change by reducing it to economic indexes and by ignoring what it meant to the people who experienced it. Randall offers a very good challenge to the idea that violence--machine-breaking in particular--was an indication of organizational weakness. Many studies of Luddism (notably those by Duncan Bythell and Malcolm Thomis) have treated it not only as backward-looking, but also as a desperate measure undertaken only because workers lacked other resources, real craft strength, hopes for the future, and some sense of how the economy worked. In contrast, Randall claims that "violence was the pre-emptive, calculated choice of a powerful labour elite, not the desperate last gasp of a demoralised trade" (p. 183). Randall shows that a history of struggles over machinery predated the specific Luddite events on which most historians concentrate. Like Bythell and Thomis, most writers have adopted a teleological view that attempts to distinguish machine-breaking from proper trade unionism. Randall shows this to be false and at odds with the deep interdependence of both forms of action, whose roots lay in strong communities rather than in economic conceptions of workers' interests. For the most part, Randall's work adds nuance and support to a picture that Thompson (and others) have already painted. In one way, however, it is more original. This is Randall's comparison of the West Country woollen workers to those of the West Riding of Yorkshire. A great deal of writing on craft resistance to industrialization has suggested that the issues were essentially similar throughout Britain. Randall shows, however, that even within the woollen trades the domestic system of the West Riding made for a significantly different pattern of action. In particular, Yorkshire woollen workers approximated an artisan production model more closely than other groups

of woolen workers, with smaller workshops, easier progression from journeyman to master, and families more often the unit of production. Painite radicalism struck a strong chord in the 1790s in Yorkshire and led to a tradition of radical reaction not only against machinery but against industrial capitalism and political repression as well. In Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, by contrast, large-scale capitalist employers were more common-- principally clothiers who handled contracting for all or most aspects of production. It was less common for craftsmen to move into the ranks of masters, and employers were less well integrated into local craft communities. Though workers in the West Country also mobilized against machinery, they were less radical and their efforts were less concerted and less successful. West Country workers also sustained for a longer time a faith in the prospect that they might obtain legal enforcement of old laws regulating machinery. Randall's account implicitly suggests that the areas where industrial relations most readily fit a class model are not the areas where radical mobilization fared best. Explicitly and soundly, he points to the importance of community foundations for labor radicalism. Woolen workers in the West of England had a much stronger "labour consciousness" than did those of the West Riding, with a strong sense of traditional customs and prerogatives, but they did not have the communal foundations for collective action that aided their Yorkshire counterparts. Contrary to the idea that clear divisions between owners and workers are the key to struggle, the strongest collective action came where workers and small employers worked alongside each other and were knit together into craft communities. Randall's book is solidly researched with a good deal of detail on the characteristics of woolen work in both West Riding and the West Country. Its comparisons of community characteristics are, by contrast, much more vague. One could wish for both a more robust conception of community and a more focused, detailed comparison. It is as though Randall began with an orientation toward the centrality of work that he only incompletely modified. "Where the structure of work was the same in both the West Riding and the West of England, as was the case with cloth finishing, the response was the same, as the Wiltshire Outrages and Yorkshire Luddism showed," he writes (p. 70). Yet his more crucial argument is that "the impact of the machine upon work was a critical factor but as important was the way in which the community responded and this was as much dictated by the character of that community and its previous history of industrial relations as by the technology itself" (p. 100). Randall keeps his argument quite specifically to the English woolen industry and to the period of his evidence. Nonetheless, he does offer an important lesson for business and labor history in general. This is his demonstration that we need to see economic struggles as involving workers' lives generally and not just their economic interests or working conditions and workplace structures. Though not startling news after three decades of "new social history," this is still a salutary reminder for all those who participate in contemporary debates on the implications of changing technology and industrial organization. Craig Calhoun is professor of sociology and history and director of the Office of International Programs at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the author of several books and articles, including *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution* (1982).

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