



In the wake of  
dark patchworks,  
networked clumsiness  
and technological  
dulling, an opening  
appears between the  
cracks of lost fiction  
and the merging of  
two narratives.

Two centuries ago, at the turn of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution had grown strong in England. In a period that brought with it great technological advance and the idea of moral and economic progress, the drive to ‘become modern’ had put the livelihoods of many at risk.

New machinery was being introduced into textile and woollen mills across the Midlands, Yorkshire and north-west England. Highly-skilled workers had used artisan manufacturing techniques up until this point, but due to the development of technology, new stocking frames could produce cloth quicker and more cheaply than the trained workers could have themselves. Factory owners were now able to employ non-skilled, low-wage labourers to operate these new machines.

In the decades previous, the government had passed the Protection of Stocking Frames Act after a handful of irregular protests. Now, several groups of textile and woollen-mill workers had begun to more formally organise themselves, and an influx of riots began in 1811 onward. These workers soon became known as the Luddites.

The Luddites would write to factory owners and members of Parliament, calling for them to remove the new labour-saving machines in a bid to protect their working rights. When those addressed did not comply, the Luddites would attack the mills nocturnally and smash the machines in dispute. The revolts culminated in the introduction of the Frame Breaking Act, making their well historicised intervention with technology a capital offence.

The leader of the Luddites, Ned Ludd, may or may not have been real. Some have authored that a Ned Ludlam was an apprentice frame knitter who destroyed two machines in 1779, though this story remains apocryphal. The mythology of Ned Ludd, General Ludd, King Ludd, and the Machine Breaker in his many guises, created a fiction that could be actioned and assumed en masse. His name was authored across ballads, declarations, manifestos, and ubiquitous threatening letters.

Theorist Marco Deseriis defines Ned Ludd as an ‘improper name’, or “the adoption of the same pseudonym by organized collectives, affinity groups, and individual authors”.<sup>1</sup> Nuance appears where the name Ned Ludd detached itself from its originating context. He writes:

“The name Ned Ludd designates two asymmetrical forms of struggle. On one hand, Ludd expresses the resistance of the last guild masters and apprentices against industrial capitalism. On the other hand, as it enters the Northwest, it comes to designate the emergence—albeit still in embryonic form—of a modern form of class struggle all internal to the capitalist mode of production.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether real or unreal, Ned Ludd’s collective identity became actionable in the political circumstance its users found themselves in. Ned Ludd was malleable, performative and constructed when and where was necessary: a fiction as literary weapon.

## Along came Eliza

Many of the Luddite’s letters are stored at the UK’s National Archives. One of these is of particular interest to our story today. Marked ‘A’ and dated April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1812, its words were authored by an ‘Eliza Ludd’: the only non-male pseudonym deployed by a Luddite within a letter. Eliza’s words offered unique awareness and a literacy of politics that its counterparts did not share in, the vast majority of Luddite letters were violent threats. However, in the absence of knowing Eliza Ludd and anything beyond the words written inside ‘A’, their fiction remains in the shadow of another.

Today, machine breaking and technophobia have reduced the Luddite narrative to a colloquial stigma, though it is no longer machines that need breaking but the metaphors that obfuscate our literacies of them. What might a reclaimed and re-narrated Luddism—fit for the 21st century User—look like?

“Let me persuade  
you to quit your  
present post, lay by  
your sword, and  
become a friend to  
the oppressed, for  
cursed is the man  
that even lifts a straw  
against the sacred  
cause of Liberty.”

Eliza Ludd  
April 30th, 1812

1. Marco Deseriis, *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 3  
2. *Ibid.*, p. 32



