

THE SENTENCING OF THE LUDDITES

1813

York Special Commission

Many 19th-century workers watched their jobs vanish as machines replaced them. One group of frustrated workers, known as the Luddites, banded together to destroy the machines they felt were the cause of their problems. The British government took harsh measures to stop the Luddites' attacks on factories. The following selection comes from an 1813 trial in which a group of Luddites were sentenced to death.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Issues

What crimes did the Luddites commit? Do you think their punishment was just?

John Swallow, John Batley, Joseph Fisher, John Lumb, Job Hey, John Hill, William Hartley, James Hey, Joseph Crowther, Nathan Hoyle, James Haigh, Jonathan Dean, John Ogden, Thomas Brook, John Walker, you, unhappy prisoners at the bar, stand convicted of various offences, for which your lives are justly forfeited to the injured laws of your Country. You have formed a part of that desperate association of men, who, for a great length of time, have disturbed the peace and tranquillity of the West Riding of this county. You have formed yourselves into bodies; you have proceeded to the most serious extremities against the property of many individuals. The cause of your so associating appears to have been a strange delusion, which you entertained, that the use of machinery in the woollen manufacture was a detriment to the hands that were employed in another way in it; a grosser delusion never could be entertained, proceeding probably from the misrepresentations of artful and designing men, who have turned it to the very worst purpose which riot and sedition could produce. You have proceeded to great extremities. The first object, perhaps, seems to have been that of your procuring arms, in order to carry on your nefarious designs. With that view, it seems that some of you went about inquiring for such arms at different houses, and getting them wherever you could find them.

But not stopping there, and not contenting yourselves with getting what arms you could lay your hands upon, you proceeded to plunder the habitations with a great degree of force, and took from them property of every description, which you could find in those houses. An offence of that nature is brought home, and sufficiently established against you the prisoners *John Swallow, John Batley, Joseph Fisher, John Lumb, Job Hey, John Hill, William Hartley, James Hey, Joseph Crowther, and Nathan Hoyle.*

You the prisoners, *Job Hey*, *John Hill*, and *William Hartley*, did upon the occasion, when you went to the house of your prosecutor, carrying away certainly nothing but arms, but you carried them away with great terror, and under circumstances which were sufficient unquestionably to make him deliver what he had. The other prisoners, whose names I have last recited, have been concerned in breaking a dwelling-house in the night time, some of them getting notes, money, and other things; and the last prisoners, *James Hey*, *Joseph Crowther*, and *Nathan Hoyle*, for robbing a person in his dwelling-house.

The evidence, that has been given against you all, was too clear to admit of any doubt; and you have all been convicted of these offences upon the most satisfactory evidence.

You, the other prisoners, *James Haigh*, *Jonathan Dean*, *John Ogden*, *Thomas Brook*, and *John Walker*, have been guilty of one of the greatest outrages that ever was committed in a civilized country. You had been long armed and organized, you had assembled upon this night, when the mill of Mr. Cartwright was attacked; you had assembled at the dead hour of night in great numbers; you had formed yourselves into companies under the command of different leaders; you were armed with different instruments of offence, with guns, with pistols, with axes, and with other weapons; you marched in military order and array to the mill, which was afterwards in part pulled down; you began there your attack with firearms, discharged into that mill, and kept up a most dreadful fire, and at the same time applied the instruments, which you had brought there, of a description calculated to do the worst of mischief, in beginning to demolish the mill, intending, as it is obvious, to do also mischief to and to demolish the machinery which that mill contained. The cries and exclamations that proceeded from this riotous tumultuous mob thus assembled, of which you formed a very powerful part, were such as were enough to alarm a man of less firmness than that man possessed, who was the owner of the mill so attacked. Your cry was, "Get in, get in, kill them all"; and there is but little doubt, it is to be feared, that if you had made good your entry into that mill, these threats would have been put into execution, and that the mischief done would hardly have been confined to the machinery which was there. The courage and resolution, however, which that individual displayed, had the effect of making you desist at that time from the attack. . . .

In the awful situation in which you, prisoners, stand, let me seriously exhort you to set about the great work of repentance, and to spend the very short time that you must be allowed to remain in this world, in endeavouring to make your peace with your God, and to reconcile him by deep repentance. A full confession of your crime is the only atonement you can make for that which you have committed. Give yourselves up to the pious admonitions of the reverend Clergyman, whose office it will be to prepare you for your awful change; and God grant, that, worthily lamenting your sins, and acknowledging your wretchedness, you may obtain of the God of all mercy perfect remission and forgiveness.

THE SENTENCING OF THE LUDDITES

Hear the sentence which the Laws of man pronounce upon your crimes. The sentence of the Law is, and this Court doth adjudge, That you, the several Prisoners at the bar, be taken from hence to the place from whence you came, and from thence to the place of execution, where you shall be severally hanged by the neck until you are dead. The Lord have mercy upon your souls.

Source: Excerpt from Proceedings at York Special Commission (January, 1813).

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

The Luddites were convicted of breaking into homes, stealing weapons and money, and attempting to destroy a mill. Answers will vary regarding whether the death penalty was a fair sentence. Some may feel that while the Luddites deserved to be punished, the death penalty may have been too harsh.