

[By Gordon B. Carson]

INTELLECTUAL LUDDITES

A Paper for Kit-Kat Club, Columbus, Ohio

November 17, 1964

A few years ago I became concerned over the shallow thinking which was betrayed by the cacophony of voices raised in protest over the trends in Western civilization and the system of higher education which made that civilization possible.

These voices, largely centered in the areas of self-styled pure culture, would have the nation destroy its present system of higher education and return either to the Oxford or Cambridge University system of centuries ago, or to a facsimile of the system found in certain European countries.

The strident cries which were attacking any and every form of higher education which had an end objective were, for the most part, eloquent in the use of words, beautiful from the standpoint of forensic qualities, but, as it appeared to me, totally lacking in objectivity and adequate scholarly research to back up the conclusions being drawn. In other words it was mere dissonance in academic garb.

It appeared that the culturalists would solve all of the problems of Western civilization by eliminating all colleges of agriculture, business, engineering, science, and any other applied field, and return to the pure unsullied pursuit of liberal arts. All of those for whom liberal arts offered no challenge or stimulus were apparently to be relegated to the "masses", although it was not clear how this important large group was to be sold on such an inferior position in the proposed scheme of things..

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In England, with its educational systems originally geared to colonialism, some of the more serious thinkers began to delve into this problem with real earnestness in the late 1950's. Two men, whose work I shall draw upon heavily in this presentation, are Sir Charles Percy Snow, famed British writer and scientist, and Sir Eric Ashby, President and Vice Chancellor, The Queen's University of Belfast. Both of these men saw the fallacy in the drive to exclude all, save liberal arts (narrowly defined), from higher education, and both of them supported their points of view with ample evidence.

Sir Charles Percy Snow, in the Rede Lecture at Cambridge University in 1959, pointed out the similarity between today's intellectuals and the followers of Ned Lud.

Ned Lud lived about 1779. He was a half-witted laborer who broke up stocking frames in an attempt to keep them from being used. Later, a group of English workmen (1811-16) attempted to prevent the use of all labor saving machinery by breaking it, burning factories, and committing violence in an attempt to return to a past and outmoded economy.

And today's intellectual Luddites would destroy every facet of higher education which does not fall under the classifications in which they themselves visualize personal ascendancy. Their attempts are to force a return to an outmoded era, rather than to think positively about needed improvements in a rapidly moving world.

Let's look critically at the heritage of some of the Luddites in an effort to see what motivates them.

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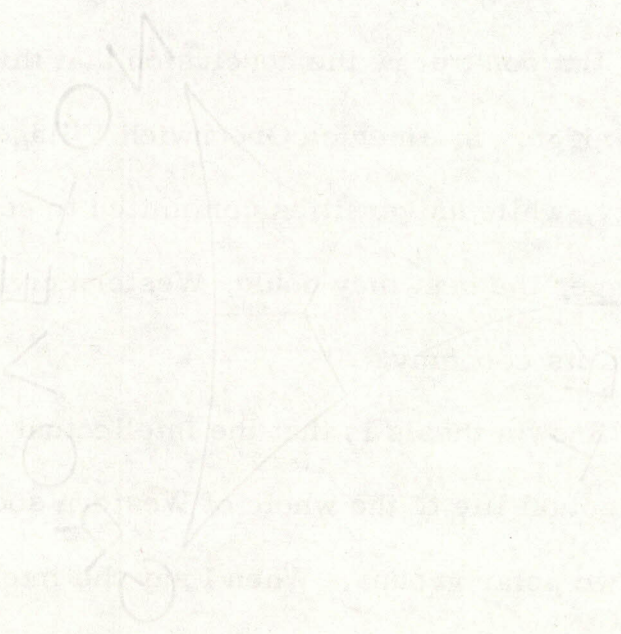
Mr. Snow pointed up the fact that culture is not the possession of any one group of people. He was in an excellent position to evaluate the ownership of culture, since he was educated as a scientist, but professionally was a writer. His vantage point was Cambridge University, and he had a ringside seat during a period of great discovery in the physical sciences. Snow's observations are not shallow: they encompass 30 years of his life. Fortunately he worked with his scientific friends, and at night and when at leisure, he hobnobbed with his literary colleagues.

Unmistakably, he was moving between two groups, as he said, "comparable in intelligence, identical in race, not grossly different in social origin, earning about the same incomes, who had almost ceased to communicate at all, who in intellectual, moral and psychological climate had so little in common that instead of going from Burlington House or South Kensington to Chelsea, one might have crossed an ocean".

But don't draw the conclusion that this problem is peculiar to Cambridge. In America, Greenwich Village dissented from virtually all reality, while universities committed to science, like MIT, drove ahead to shape, the best they could, Western civilization's defenses and indeed its economy.

Snow's thesis is that the intellectual life, and, as he puts it, "the intellectual life of the whole of Western society, is increasingly being split into two polar groups. When I say the intellectual life, I mean to include also a large part of our practical life, because I should be the last person to suggest the two can at the deepest level be distinguished".

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All of this boils down to two groups, one in which the scientists drive forward, the other in which the literary intellectuals operate, and in which they refer to themselves as "intellectuals" as if there were no others.

Snow's keen perception saw this development, reported its growth, and observed the hostility which sometimes manifested itself as the two groups grew apart.

Non-scientists regarded scientists as brash and boastful, and the scientists regarded the literary intellectuals as totally lacking in foresight, unconcerned with their brother men, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential moment.

It appears as a paradox, that the literary intellectual, the self-styled humanist, is often the person who would set himself and his carbon copies on an academic pedestal, deny such a position to all who do not conform to his image, and relegate all such unfortunates to a junior position in academic, or without qualification, all society.

Scientists, who fall beyond the limits of respectability of the literary intellectuals are anxious to move ahead with projects which help man rise from his present state. As Snow phrases it, "If the scientists have the future in their bones, there the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist".

Traditional culture also demands that all non-literary types become devotees of their favorites. This is just a thinly veiled bit of superb salesmanship. Make what you do and know more important to more

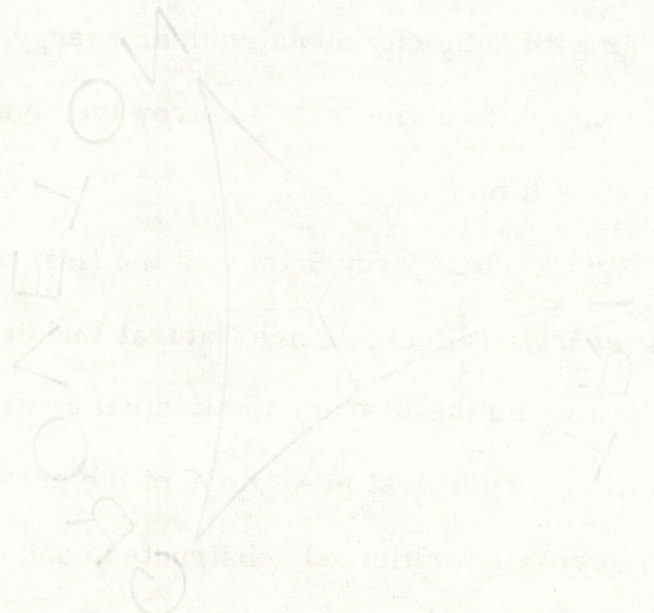


people, and you enhance your own worth, both socially and economically. Successful authors do not exist without a host of book purchasers. Therefore, there are easy value judgments to be made on other people. If they haven't acquired an interesting conversational knowledge of what the traditional culturalist considers important, they are obviously of lower caste, to be deplored, ridiculed, and to say the least, ignored.

It never occurs to the literary intellectual that his own habits and devotions might stand re-examination. Try asking him to describe the second Law of Thermodynamics, and you'll probably get an imperious withdrawn look of astonishment which says, "we in culture have no truck with such specialized nonsense". But at the slightest provocation he will abhor all of the things which make his own life pleasant and satisfying, even those things that permit him to live unfettered in a world to which he contributes little and from which he takes much. And he has the temerity to speak with authority about nuclear energy, while he refuses to understand it well enough to define it. "Destroy the bombs", he shouts. Ned Lud would be proud of him.

Sir Charles Percy Snow was the first to observe, in his Rede Lecture, that literary intellectuals are Natural Luddites. Nowhere in Western civilization did the literary intellectual contribute one bit to the industrial revolution. This first great hope of the common man for a decent life was universally criticized, obstructed, and deplored in every seat of higher education in the world as it then existed.

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Snow quotes Corrie, the old Master of Jesus as saying about trains running into Cambridge on Sunday, "It is equally displeasing to God and to myself".

The thinking in the industrial revolution was done by clever craftsmen, intuitive innovators, plus, of course, a few cranks.

Sir Eric Ashby¹ observes that "British universities played no part whatever". (In the industrial revolution.) "They had allowed the revolution to pass over their heads, and still a century later, they were providing no lead in scientific thought. They reflected yesterday: they did not illuminate tomorrow." True Luddites in every literal sense, they were.

I am amused by the thought that in the liberal arts are the great and true opportunities for true liberal thinking. Oxford would not admit the advocates of science and technology to the University! Such natural science as was taught, Ashby observes, "was Aristotelian, dogmatic and desiccated. Thus in the eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, half of the true University's function was in a state of complete atrophy at Oxford. In Cambridge, the barriers to the introduction of science were less formidable, but it could not be said, that it had taken root there even as late as the middle of the nineteenth century. And these are the universities, today's advocates of "a return to true culture" would have us follow. Ironically, however, Cambridge's judges, colonial tycoons,

¹ "Technology and The Academics", Macmillan, 1959

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and bishops who graduated in classics were more familiar with mass, velocity, and inertia, than most of today's American classicists are.

America, where rapid expansion aided the industrial revolution, produced its usual quota of sinister, greedy, and evil politicians. But it also produced some unusually perceptive ones.

American politics created the Morrill Act first (Justin Smith Morrill 1810-98, U. S. representative, Vt. 1855-67) introduced in 1857, finally passed in 1862. It provided for the granting of lands for the establishment of educational institutions, and all Land Grant Colleges stemmed from this humble beginning. Who opposed this new venture in higher education? No need to guess. It was the literary intellectuals, and their opposition was clever, enduring, and continuous. They attempted no physical burnings, but the strident cry "cow college" was heard and is still heard around the world. Phi Beta Kappa (1776) (William and Mary) made certain that engineering students could not qualify for membership. They cannot, under today's rules. This was part of the intellectual Luddite philosophy of destroying all forms of education, other than those which fitted the classical pattern of antiquity, and especially agreed with the background and interest of the literary intellectual.

This Ludditism continues today. At the inauguration ceremony for the new president of Defiance College, recently, the principal speaker spoke of "those big Godless state universities", which though not heard much now in areas of true enlightenment, was once part of the Luddite cry.



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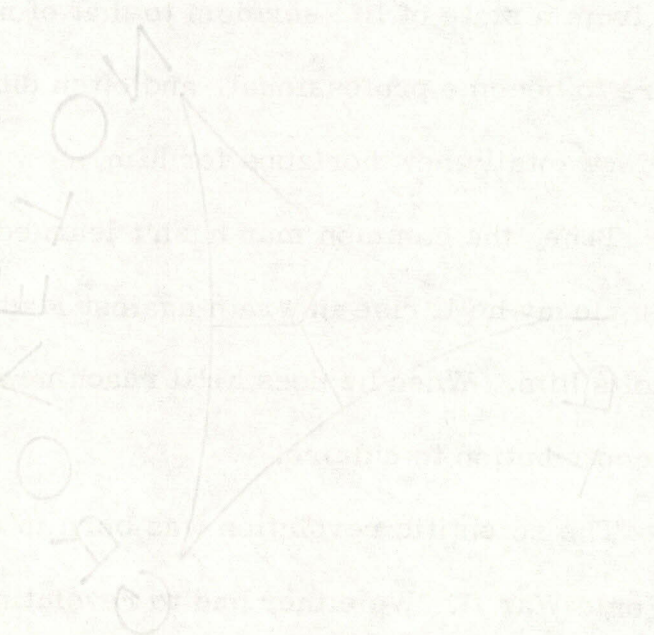
Apparently the coming of a system of higher education attuned to the needs of our people was, like the Sunday train to Cambridge, "equally displeasing to God and the literary intellectual".

The great hope for the common man was not to be denied. And our agricultural and engineering education saw the plight of man and did something about it. Where he was hungry, it produced food, where he was shunned by the literary intellectuals because he spoke the language poorly, it created a new society for him. Where he was laughed at by the imperious self-styled culturalists, it gave him dignity in accomplishment. When the "cow college" derision was hurled at him, he merely felt a greater oneness with his fellow workers, and turned the other cheek.

The intellectual Luddites are still at it. Now they oppose the scientific revolution! As the industrial revolution brought the common man from a state of life serfdom to that of a free craftsman who could aspire to become professional, and often did, the scientific revolution provides totally new horizons for him.

True, the common man hasn't learned how to use his leisure time, but someday he'll rise in wrath against Madison Avenue, which now exploits him. When he does he'll reach new heights of accomplishment and contribution to culture.

The scientific revolution was born in America out of the exigencies of World War II. We either had to revolutionize our weapons, or lose our freedoms. We chose revolution, and it was centered on MIT and a host of other scientific and engineering areas of competence. Quantitative

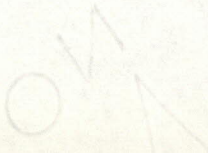
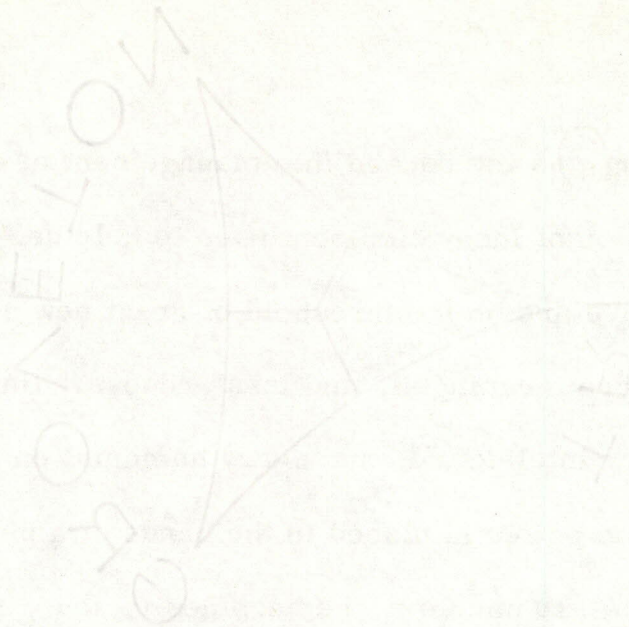


thinking was introduced into management as never before, and the explosion of innovation continues to help us.

We are on the threshold of great new achievements to make man's life more meaningful, and less arduous. But we need help from every literary intellectual, and every humanist on the face of the earth. Anytime power is placed in the hands of a person who is intellectually too small to handle it, he becomes vicious, mean, vindictive, and tyrannical. We are reaping the terrible result of the placing of such a mundane thing as a high powered car in the hands of a teen-ager, who becomes surly and inconsiderate on the highway, and alas, kills someone in addition to himself.

Whose responsibility is it to keep humans from being animals with power? It is the literary intellectual...the humanist who must involve himself in the process. . . to the point of total commitment, instead of being merely a critic of the passing scene. The literary intellectual's willingness to be a reviewer and critic, only, cannot be permitted to continue. It was Shelley (Percy Bysshe 1792-1822) who in 1821 observed that, "Reviewers, with some rare exceptions, are a most stupid and malignant race. As a bankrupt thief turns thief-taker in despair, so an unsuccessful author turns critic."

All humanists will have to become involved, they must contribute their knowledge and skill to the task of using our new found powers for the good of man. They must abandon Thoreauism, and face manfully



the tasks which are theirs and ours. If they do not, the fires of the Luddites will grow unmanageable and the conflagration which follows will burn both the buildings and the arsonist.

Ned Lud is long dead. Let us bury him.