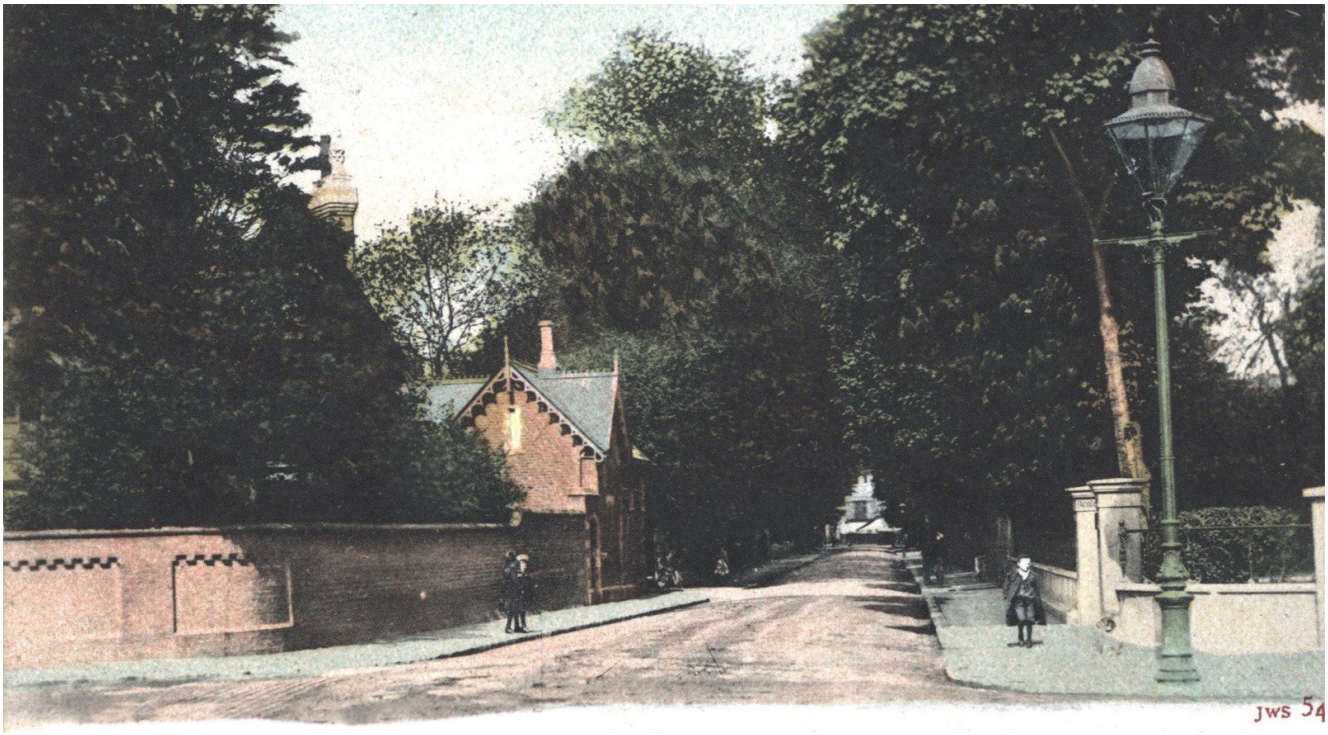
In the Interest of Neo-Luddism

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2023)



Elm Grove, Southsea, Previous to 1897

The word luddite has negative connotations. It is used to mean a person or a policy that refuses to take advantage of, or actively seeks to destroy, modern machinery, in order that everything may remain the same. The luddite is taken to be ridiculous at best, but mulish or outright dim at worst. He is a technological Canute, vainly bidding the tide to return.

But I am something of a luddite myself—in my heart, if not in my practice. Like most such luddites, I am a hypocrite: I want the benefits of modernity without its drawbacks. I want its conveniences without the ugliness than makes them possible. I want to have my cake and eat it, or as the French say, the butter and the money for the butter.

If I were a rich man—and with recent economic developments I feel further away from that happy state than ever—I should fund a prize for the best essay on the disastrous aesthetic effects on the world of the private motor car, permitting entrants to dilate also upon its deleterious spiritual effects.

The idea for this prize came to me some time ago when I read a book about Arthur Conan Doyle's early adult life in Southsea, the town adjacent to Portsmouth, on the south coast of England, where, newly qualified, he set up as a doctor. The book, by Geoffrey Stavert, is titled *A Study in Southsea: The Unrevealed Life of Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle*, and was published in 1987.

If I may be allowed a slight, non-luddite or even anti-luddite digression here, let me add that a quick search on the internet revealed that Stavert, whose full name was Geoffrey Scott Stavert, was captured near Tunis during the war (I am of the generation for whom *the war* can mean only the Second World War), and spent a little more than six months in a camp in Italy, from which he and all the other inmates fled once Italy had surrendered. His memoirs, unpublished, are to be found on the internet, and show that he was a man both of humour and character. What a marvelous (and terrible) instrument is the internet, then! It gives us access in a few seconds to information that would otherwise take us years to obtain, and it destroys out minds by insinuating that nothing other than itself is necessary for us to become well-informed. It gives and it takes away.

But to return to the motor car and its destructiveness. The picture that gave me the idea of my proposed prize was that of Elm Grove in Southsea in Conan Doyle's time. It is a pleasantly wooded street with no motor cars, exuding calm. A couple of children stand on the pavement looking toward the camera, one of them in a cape, but the photograph is too indistinct to make out their expression. Clearly there are

villas behind the trees, but only a gatehouse and the stuccoed pillars of gates are visible.

There is practically no residential street as pleasant left in the country today. Such streets are now lined by cars: moreover, they are, like Jacob's coat, of many colours. (At least when cars began their career towards ubiquity, they had the good taste, with few exceptions, all to be black. If only manufacturers had adhered to Henry Ford's great dictum, that you can have any colour you like, so long as it's black. Instead, they gave in to the increasing demand for self-expression via minor variations in the mass-produced objects that people owned. This is not to say that *nothing* is expressed by these means. I believe it is true that bright red cars are more often involved in serious accidents than, say, dark green ones: their owners are more inclined to aggression. And if I were dictator of the world, which fortunately both for myself and others I am not, I would prohibit *white* cars, which I particularly abominate as an indelible blot on any landscape.)

In Victorian suburban streets that were once civilised and comfortable, if not elegant, the front gardens that gave it charm have been replaced by places to park cars, tiny parking lots, asphalted over so that hardly a blade of grass remains to be seen. A Mercedes or a BMW automatically takes precedence over a delphinium or a honeysuckle, and this has a deleterious knock-on effect. The street having become ugly and given over to machines, pride in the appearance of the houses themselves declines, and neglect and decay set in. What is the point of upkeep in the midst of such ugliness?

As for new houses, they often appear to have been built for the comfort and convenience of cars, rather than of people. In many homes, the liquid crystal screen is what the icon was in the Russian peasant's izba; by the same token, the garage seems to be the focus of the whole house, not perhaps in size but in visual dominance and unavoidability. The message is,

car first, people afterwards.

I recognise, of course, that for many people, the car is a symbol of freedom: and also that I could hardly do without one myself. I use it not only by necessity, but sometimes for pleasure also—although less and less frequently. I sometimes visit places by car that would otherwise be all but inaccessible.

But there is a very stiff price to be paid for this liberty, if liberty it is. Occasionally, for example, I have to drive on the ring roads that are strung like a noose round Paris or London. Millions of people, whom I sincerely pity, have to do so daily, twice a day in fact. What kind of liberation is the car for them? Many of them have to spend an eighth, or even a sixth, of their waking lives (except for weekends and holidays) in slow-crawling traffic jams, chronically fuming at the consumption of their lives by this deeply unpleasurable activity, to which they must pay attention while being bored by it at the same time. And when there is a public holiday, and millions try to leave the city, things are even worse. The worst traffic jams are not for business but for pleasure, or rather, as the price that much be paid for pleasure.

Who can look at pictures of the freeways of Los Angeles without thinking, by no means in a flattering way 'What a piece of work is a man?' What collective madness is this, hundreds of millions or billions of hours of life expended merely going to a fro? If you add them all up, they probably amount to many times more hours of human life lost than were lost to the Covid pandemic, certainly in the prime of life.

There is not much to be said for the Cuban regime, but it kept cars out of Havana, except for a relatively few, and one realises there what a city can be, aesthetically, without cars: provided, of course, that it is built right, as Havana was. Unfortunately, the absence of cars there is accompanied by the absence also of public transport, but the two absences

do not have to go together.

Public transport can both speed up and slow down the pace of life. In the centre of a city like Paris, it speeds it up. When I am there, I could not do all that I do if I had to go everywhere by car, all the more so if everyone else had to do likewise. Public transport not only make for an efficient use of time but adds greatly to the quality of life. If it is subsidised, at least those who pay the subsidies reap some direct benefit from them and therefore do not begrudge paying them.

Alas, public transport so good and widespread that nobody needs a car is about as realistic as a society so perfect that nobody will have to be good. Nevertheless, it is not true that ease of access is an unmitigated good. In the first place, difficulty and enjoyment are not opposites. What is experienced without effort rarely stays long in the mind: rather, it renders a person blasé.

Ease of access to pleasures, moreover, leads to a kind of inflation, that of the necessity of ever greater sensation. The easier it is to go somewhere, the further you want to go; and everyone else is like you. As any observer of mass tourism will know, the pleasure of the most marvelous or delightful place can be vitiated almost in its entirety by crowds. There are exceptions, no doubt: Lourdes, for example, which I recently visited, would be completely uninteresting without the crowds, whose main object, however, is not tourism.

I sometimes receive, unsolicited, brochures offering me what they call ‘the holiday of a lifetime.’ This appears principally to consist of a short period of absurdly luxurious sloth (at equally absurd expense) in a sunny climate with waving palm trees in the background. I count myself as having had a fortunate life indeed that such offers hold no attraction for me. I am lucky to have had a life in which bathing in asses’ milk, or otherwise luxuriating, would not

count as a high point, let alone as *the* high point, of my life.

But let us briefly return once more to the joys of Southsea before the advent of the motor car. In the same book is a picture of the promenade as it was in Conan Doyle's day, the only vehicle in the road a tram. The promenade had elegance and grandeur without inhumanity of scale; it was civilised without egotistical claims on the part of those who built it to artistic originality or genius. There was not much to do there, I imagine, except promenade and socialise in a somewhat restrained way, with occasional visits to the music hall and trips to the pier. Sensation, if it was wanted, was provided by the yellow press and novels such as those written by Mrs Belloc Lowndes, the sister of the much more famous Hilaire; while pornography titillated by its clandestinity rather than bored by its omnipresence.

A horse-drawn tram at the King's Road Junction at Portsmouth,

1901

I remember (vaguely) the tail end of those days in the early 1950s. Our joys were small, but none the less real or satisfying for that. We children were expected to entertain ourselves for most of the time, without the aid of external stimulation, and did so without much difficulty.

Even if the Luftwaffe had not bombed Portsmouth and the adjacent Southsea, the modern architects would not have been able to resist ruining it. They have, after all, done incomparably more damage to the urban fabric of the country that the Luftwaffe managed: they would not dare to leave anywhere alone lest it stood as a reproach to their own baleful efforts. The motor car has added a great deal to the visual nightmare—a nightmare now so lasting and permanent that most of the time we do even recognise the nightmare for what it is. The omnipresence of a phenomenon does not foster that *sine qua non* of judgment, comparison.

I know, of course, that there is no going back and I wouldn't want to do so if it meant doing without many of the conveniences of daily life. I suffer from a condition of old age for which there was no treatment in the early years of my life, and which, in its absence, would by now have rendered me a near cripple and made my life a misery.

Moreover, I rather like modern Southsea. Enough of it remains for it to have retained some of its gentility, which lies cheek by jowl with a certain, almost bohemian loucheness. It has excellent Asian restaurants, and bric-a-brac shops with unexpected treasures. There are nightclubs with bouncers as big as the Ritz and pubs with sad local drunks. Alas, a second-hand bookshop run by an unworldly man who comes straight out of a novel by Mrs Belloc Lowndes, and who seemed not to have realised that prices have risen since he was a

lad, has closed down. Unlike the prices of his books, his rent had risen.

One must enjoy the present, but lamentation over the past is surely one of its pleasures.

Table of Contents

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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