

Anne Orde, ed. *Letters of John Buddle to Lord Londonderry: 1820-1843*. Rochester: Boydell and Brewer Press. xxv + 422 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85444-072-6.

Reviewed by Leslie Tomory (Research Affiliate, McGill University)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth

Managing a Durham County Colliery in the Nineteenth Century

This book gathers a large selection of the letters of John Buddle (1773-1843) to his employer Lord Londonderry over the years 1820-43. Buddle was a coal viewer (or mining engineer/manager) who first gained experience at his father's side when the elder Buddle worked as coal viewer at Wallsend. When his father died in 1806, he succeeded him in his post, and by 1815 had added many other mines to his list of employers in that capacity. In 1820, he acquired his most important position, that of coal viewer for Charles William Stewart, the Marquess of Londonderry. He held the post until his death in 1843. Stewart had come into the possession of the extensive colliery of Vane-Tempest through his marriage to Frances Anne Vane-Tempest, the heiress to the Durham colliery. During his employment with Londonderry, Buddle corresponded extensively with him, giving many details of the colliery and associated matters, such as the shipping of coal and Seaham Harbour, the coal trade to London, relations with workers and other colliers, and Londonderry's finances. The relationship between Londonderry and Buddle grew testy over time as Londonderry's financial situation deteriorated, causing him to make increasing demands on Buddle for income and sometimes accuse him of mismanaging the property (e.g., 1841, p. 361).

Anne Orde, a retired senior lecturer in history at the University of Durham, has edited many of Buddle's letters to Londonderry, kept in the Durham County record office, for this volume. The correspondence is extensive, and although 192 sometimes lengthy letters have been reprinted here, many more still remain. This book has been admirably prepared, with many footnotes that provide clarification about people, events, and places, as well as useful cross-references to matters that appear elsewhere in the volume.

The value of these letters lies in the picture they give of the coal industry in Durham in this period. Although Buddle is well known to historians of the British coal

industry in the nineteenth century, no dedicated study has yet been published.[1] Given the relative dearth of nineteenth-century printed materials in Britain on coal mining, relying on primary sources such as these is fundamental to gaining a better understanding of the industry. Besides the intrinsic interest stemming from Buddle's position in a large Durham coal mine, he is a particularly good choice for the publication of related archival material due to the innovative nature of his work over his life. Buddle, for example, developed and improved ventilation systems for mines which soon became deployed in the northeastern coal fields. He also came up with a system of mining by working pillars, which improved yields.

Historians interested in many details of the daily functioning of coal mines will not find much here. Rather, due to Londonderry's own interests, the subjects covered in these letters are broader. Particularly prominent is how the coal market functioned, especially on the River Wear in Durham County, but also in northeast England generally. One central concern was the "regulation" of coal trade. The collieries along the Wear and the Tyne regularly collude to control the price of coal through a system of production quotas (called "vends"). The arrangement, however, was under constant strain and sometimes broke down through cheating and negotiations. In 1822, for example, Buddle complained of the "absurd conduct of of the Coal-owners" who leased ships directly to take their coals to market in great quantities, rather than selling to ship owners, driving down prices (p. 42). Although Buddle was hopeful that colliery owners on the River Wear could maintain the prices, those located on the Tyne were creating fierce competition. Buddle later described how this "war of annihilation" was leading some to sell at a loss. By July, however, he judged that the "regulation is working well," and the prices on the Tyne had been raised to their former level (pp. 55-58).

This cycle of cheating, competition, negotiation, and the reimposition of the “regulation” repeated itself over the years, with Londonderry sometimes intervening directly (1829, p. 176). By the end of the period, the “immense number” of new collieries (1838, p. 327) was driving the quota constantly downward (1840, p. 354), leading finally to the breakdown of the regulation in 1843 (pp. 391, 398, 405).

Another important theme that emerges from these letters is the situation of workers. At times, the mine workers could make some gains due to competition among the mines for labor, such as when Buddle observed that a rival pit had made “almost a clean sweep of the best of Lambton’s families of pitmen” (1825, p. 119; 1837, p. 328). Overall, however, the picture Buddle’s letters give of the workers is not a happy one. Strikes were frequent. In a letter about a strike that ran for several months in 1831, Buddle described how the confrontation became more “warlike” and a “crisis,” necessitating the involvement of troops. His own home was attacked, and he feared that his life was in danger. This strike ended when Londonderry made some concessions, but the other colliery owners resented this (1831, pp. 220-233). Many other strikes were recorded, and not all ended in concessions from owners, such as in 1833 when they managed to hire many good men at reduced rates due to panic in the union (1833, p. 272). The issue of child and female labor in the mines also came up in 1842 when parliamentary investigations into mining drew attention to these practices. Buddle claimed that the mines in the district were not guilty of the worse offences. The practice of girls in the pits had ceased in the area fifty years previously. But Buddle was against “any obnoxious legislation” from “meddling morbid humanity mangers” to restrict boys from working in the dark for twelve hours a day (pp. 373-376). Finally, mine explosions also happened, such as in 1823 when fifty people were killed in “one of those catastrophes which but too frequently occur in Coal mining.” Buddle blamed the mismanagement of a Davy lamp, and observed that “the male population of many families” were “wholly swept away” (pp. 88-91).

A larger explosion in June 1835 also killed over one hundred (pp. 318-320).

Politics is present in the letters as well. Buddle made reference to local and parliamentary elections, as well as Londonderry’s efforts to influence the outcome (e.g., 1828, p. 169; 1830, p. 212; 1832, p. 261; 1837, p. 328). Of particular concern to all the collieries in the area was the duty on coal sent via coastal shipping to London. The colliery owners argued for lower duties in the domestic trade because they claimed that repealing the coal duty would benefit all classes, as opposed to lower windows duties which would only benefit the wealthy. Later, they lobbied for lower duties on coal exported to other European countries as they sought markets further afield (1827, p. 160; 1828, p. 168, 1829, p. 183; 1830, pp. 214, 218; 1835, p. 311).

Finally, scientific and technological change make occasional appearances in the letters. The growth of railways were commented on, sometime in regard to the threat they could pose to coastal shipping, and to Londonderry’s harbor in particular (1823 p. 84, 1832, p. 245; 1833, p. 286; 1839, p. 351). Buddle also sometimes wrote about the arrangement of pumps in mines, such as when he had a new engine installed which allowed the Adventure Pit to be reopened after flooding in 1817 (1822, p. 60). Formal scientific geology hardly merits a mention in the letters, except when Buddle abused William Smith, a foundational figure in stratigraphy. Smith had claimed that coal could be found under magnesian limestone, but Buddle’s response was somewhat sarcastic: “this is all mighty scientific, and tickles the Ears of those who know no better, and wish it to be so. In reply to all this theorizing I can only oppose a homely North Country Proverb viz. that ‘Steel is not to be found in a Steg’s year’” (1822, p. 67). Smith’s prediction was, however, proved correct.

Note

[1]. The most extensive work is Christine. E. Hiskey, “John Buddle (1773-1843): Agent and Entrepreneur in the North-East Coal Trade” (master’s thesis, University of Durham, 1978), <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/7452/>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Leslie Tomory. Review of Orde, Anne, ed., *Letters of John Buddle to Lord Londonderry: 1820-1843*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40522>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.