

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from *American Nervousness*, written by a doctor, George Beard, and published in 1881. By nervousness, Beard means something closer to what we would call anxiety or stress. In this extract, he looks at different causes of nervousness.

Causes of American Nervousness

Clocks and Watches. – Necessity of Punctuality.

The perfection of clocks and the invention of watches have something to do with modern nervousness, since they compel us to be on time, and excite the habit of looking to see the exact moment, so as not to be late for trains or appointments. Before the general use of these instruments of precision in time, there was a wider margin for all appointments; a longer period was required and prepared for, especially in travelling – coaches of the olden period were not expected to start like steamers or trains, on the instant – men judged of the time by probabilities, by looking at the sun, and needed not, as a rule, to be nervous about the loss of a moment, and had incomparably fewer experiences wherein a delay of a few moments might destroy the hopes of a lifetime. A nervous man cannot take out his watch and look at it when the time for an appointment or train is near, without affecting his pulse, and the effect on that pulse, if we could but measure and weigh it, would be found to be correlate to a loss to the nervous system. Punctuality is a great thief of nervous force than is procrastination of time. We are under constant strain, mostly unconscious, oftentimes in sleeping as well as in waking hours, to get somewhere or do something at some definite moment. [...] There are those who prefer, or fancy they prefer, the sensations of movement and activity to the sensations of repose; but from the standpoint only of economy of nerve-force all of our civilization is a mistake; every mile of advance into the domain of ideas, brings a conflict that knows no rest, and all conquests are to be paid for, before delivery often, in blood and nerve and life. We cannot have civilization and have anything else, the price at which nature disposes of this luxury being all the rest of her domain.

The Telegraph.

The telegraph is a cause of nervousness the potency* of which is little understood. Before the days of Morse and his rivals, merchants were far less worried than now, and less business was transacted in a given time; prices fluctuated far less rapidly, and the fluctuations which now are transmitted instantaneously over the world were only known then by the low communication of sailing vessels or steamships; hence we might wait for weeks or months for a cargo of tea from China, trusting for profit to prices that should follow their arrival; whereas, now, prices at each port are known at once all over the globe. [...] Within but thirty years the telegraphs of the world have grown to half a million miles of line, and over a million miles of wire – or more than forty time the circuit of the globe. In the United States there were, in 1880, 170, 103 miles of line, and in that year 33,155,991 messages sent over them.

Effect of Noise on the Nerves.

[...] The noises that nature is constantly producing – the moans and roar of the wind, the rustling and trembling of the leaves and swaying of the branches, the roar of the sea and of

40 waterfalls, the singing of birds, and even the cries of some wild animals – are mostly
rhythmical to a greater or less degree, and always varying if not intermittent; [...] they are
rarely distressing, often pleasing, sometimes delightful and inspiring. Even the loudest
sounds in nature, the roll of thunder, the howling of storms, and the roar of a cataract like
Niagara – save in the exceptional cases of idiosyncrasy – are the occasions not of pain but
of pleasure, and to observe them at their best men will compass the globe.

45 Many of the appliances and accompaniments of civilization, on the other hand, are the
causes of noises that are unrhythmical, unmelodious and therefore annoying, if not
injurious*; manufactures, locomotion, travel, housekeeping even, are noise-producing
factors, and when all these elements are centred, as in great cities, they maintain
through all the waking and some of the sleeping hours, an unintermittent vibration in the air
that is more or less disagreeable to all.

Glossary

* potency – the power of something to influence or make an impression

* injurious – causing or likely to cause damage or harm

This extract is from George Miller Beard's *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences* (1881), and the full text can be found online at https://archive.org/details/american_nervousness_00_bear_uoft/page/n7.

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