

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This extract is from a magazine from 1856 called *The Medical Times and Gazette*. The writer aims to raise awareness of the pollution of the city and its lack of green spaces, and ways to reduce its negative effects.

from London Air and London Streets

Man may be regarded as living at the bottom of an immense ocean of air, which, like the ocean of water, has its tides and currents, and is liable to vary in its properties through its power of dissolving or of being intermixed with substances with which it comes in contact, and the purity of which is restored partly by the influence of vegetation, and partly by its
5 ceaseless circulation, whereby all foreign substances suspended in it are diluted and decomposed in the course of the incessant* chemical and electric changes which take place in it. Of the various sources of impurity, the presence of man and animals may be considered as the most important, and it is that to which nature seems to have provided an antidote in the powers of the vegetable world. Plants, under light and sunshine, renovate the
10 air with fresh streams of oxygen, and deprive it of the rank vapours with which animal bodies have contaminated it.

Two circumstances there must be, then, in all town air, which render it comparatively impure: the abundant presence of animals, and the absence of vegetation. Heaven forbid that grass should grow in our streets! If there were anything like a wise foresight or economy displayed
15 in the laying out of streets, we should have large spaces reserved for shrubs and gardens, in order to promote freer circulation and greater purity of air, as well as for the comfort of the eye. Yet the tendencies of the changes which are taking place are quite in the opposite direction. The New Road, that extends from Kensington Gardens into the heart of the City, might have been a magnificent boulevard, with gardens, or at least a row of trees on each
20 side. But the gardens which once existed in front of the houses are rapidly being built over, and broad, healthy avenue converted into a close and narrow street. The same kind of deterioration is taking place in all the suburban thoroughfares. May we add, that even Hyde Park is being changed for the worse? Broad gravel paths, or rather roads fenced in with rails, are being multiplied over it in every direction; huge strips of the "living turf" are being
25 removed, and the staid and formal aspect of a "trim garden" is being substituted for that natural wildness which was once the happy characteristic of this most important breathing space. We confess that we begrudge the loss of one particle of green vegetation, with its air-purifying powers, and still more the loss of that freedom of space and untutored beauty so refreshing to the brick-and-mortar-sated* spirit. What if the people do trample on the turf, and
30 wear it away? Let them enjoy this cheap luxury for their toil-worn feet. A broad gravel walk has no such charm in it.

It is not to be denied, however, that our houses must be packed closely, and that our green spaces must be few and far between; and we may then ask, whether nothing can be done to lessen the impurity and unpleasantness of London air? This question we think can easily be
35 answered.

If the atmosphere has the property of being mixed with emanations* from the substances over which it passes, it is not difficult to conceive what must be the effect of its traversing London streets in the summer time, covered as they are with a thick coating of animal matter, which is profusely watered, and exposed to the rays of the sun.

- 40 We ourselves never fail to remark, when returning in the summer-time from a country excursion, what a saddening, sickening, peculiarly depressing influence, both on mind and body, is produced by the emanations from the first great thoroughfare we enter. Nor, indeed, can it well be otherwise. Tons of water are daily thrown upon which they are thrown is covered with animal *debris*. Hence the air is loaded with fetid* moisture, and every street in
- 45 London is a marsh on a small scale.

Glossary

- * incessant – constant, never-ending
- * sated – full of/supplied with more than is desired or can be managed
- * emanations – something given off from a source, in this case likely a smell
- * fetid – smelling extremely unpleasant

This extract is from “London Air and London Streets” from the *Medical Times and Gazette*, Vol. 12 (April 5th, 1856), by unknown author, and the full text can be found online at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044103088019?urlappend=%3Bseq=426>.

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