

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from a book called *Diseases of Modern Life*, published in 1872, which aimed to explain all of the health problems which came about with technological advances and changes within society. This section, from chapter 5 'Disease from Combination of Physical with Mental Strain', is about travelling by train.

The introduction of the railway system tended greatly to facilitate the desire for possession of town and country house, and in this day we have, in all our large cities and towns, men who are leaving their chambers, their offices, their consulting-rooms every evening in great haste, that they may arrive at the train or other conveyance that will take them a journey of some
5 miles to their homes. Again every morning the same men, usually in very great haste, leave their homes to return to business. If this double process of travel could be performed daily with deliberation, and without exposure to physical or mental shock, it would be free of danger, and perhaps, on the whole, conducive* to health. For the man who can partly retire, and can pursue business as he lists, it is, I believe, conducive to health; but to the struggling
10 man who is in the meshes of an active life, few processes are more destructive. The elements of danger are many. There is the annoyance which springs from danger of absence from business; there is the haste to return from home to business; there is the temptation to remain occupied to the last possible moment, and to risk an exceeding hurry in order to join the family circle at the appointed hour; there is the tendency to become irregular
15 in the method of meals, to take a hasty breakfast, to work during the day on imperfect snatches of food, and late in the evening, when the stomach, like the rest of the body, is wearied, to compensate for previous deficiencies by eating an excessive meal. Lastly, there is the evil that some work, which might easily have been done during the hours sacrificed to travelling, is brought home to be completed at night, when the tired body should be seeking
20 its natural repose.

I take care to specify these processes, because my experience tells me I can hardly overrate the objections that may be urged against them. They create a feverish inaptitude* for real work; a wearied inaptitude for real play. They make life a constant labour, and they add to the necessities of labour a persistent unnecessary exertion. The result is a premature
25 decline of life, preceded by a series of diseased phenomena, which often, in what should be the hey-day of physical enjoyment, render existence a positive burden.

[...]

The effects of travelling, I mean the motion implied by a double daily journey and by the circumstances connected with it, add in a little time, intrinsically, to the evils which have been portrayed. The haste made to catch the train: the confusion, noise, and bustle of the railway
30 station; the shriek of the engine; the start from and stoppage at various stations; the perpetual vibration communicated through the carriage to the body; the closeness of the carriage or the draught through it; the desire in the carriage to fill the time by reading, controversy, joking or games of chance; – these influences all contribute most materially to

35 injure the life of the man who subjects himself to them, be he ever so strong, careful, and collected.

Many persons who have suffered from persistent railway travelling, have told me of one particular subjective symptom which deserves attention. They feel on seating themselves in the carriage a peculiar nervous restlessness and even faintness, which passes away so soon as the carriage is in motion, but which returns with so much increased intensity as the
40 train stops, that actual giddiness or half unconsciousness, with desire to bend forward and find something for support, supervenes. This particular sign I note as of singular* import. It tells of threatened organic change in the nervous matter; it is a forecast of paralytic seizure, and should never be allowed to pass without the correction of it which can only come from complete withdrawal from the cause; that is to say, from the motion and excitement of the
45 railway life.

Glossary

- * conducive – making the outcome of a situation likely or possible
- * inaptitude – lack of suitability or skill
- * singular – exceptionally good or remarkable

This extract is from Benjamin Ward Richardson's *Diseases of Modern Life* (1872) and the full text can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/fatigue01drumgoog/page/n12>

This resource is brought to you by the Diseases of Modern Life project at the University of Oxford, which is supported by the [European Research Council](#) under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 340121.