

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: Amelia Bonea, Melissa Dickson, Sally Shuttleworth, and Jennifer Wallis. *Anxious Times: Medicine and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780822945512

It's easy to see our fears of the internet, social media, and smartphones as something entirely new. After all, the issues presented by generations raised in front of screens, and the isolation, polarization, etc. that may come with it, can only be a product of the current moment. However, our fears and anxieties are not unique to the digital age. *Anxious Times: Medicine & Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* shows that our resistance to modernity—our fear of change and the anxieties that come with it—is “part of a longer historical trajectory” (Bonea, et al, 2019, p. 23). Co-authors, Amelia Bonea, Melissa Dickson, Sally Shuttleworth, and Jennifer Wallis, hope the reader will put aside the “sense of the uniqueness and unprecedented nature of the current moment” (Bonea, et al, 2019, p. 219). Their lesson: we've been here before.

Still, the book (Figure 1) tries to shy away from overt comparisons. Instead, the authors of *Anxious Times* make it clear in the introduction that drawing parallels between the then and the now “is not to reduce one to the other or to

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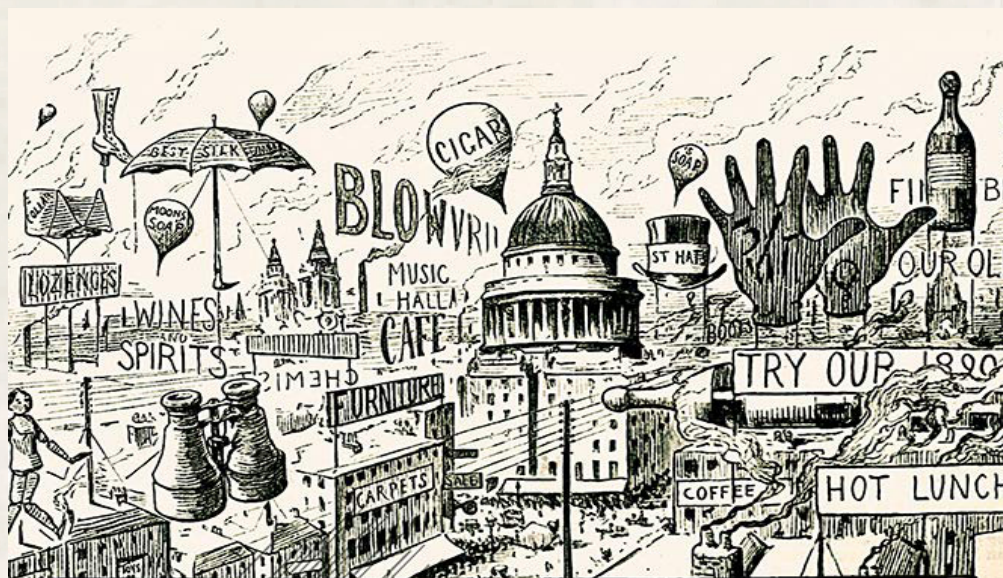
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ignore the details of historical specificity” (Bonea, et al, 2019, p. 23). History may repeat itself, but looking too closely for similarities risks viewing history through our modern cultural lens. They are firm that their interest lies first and foremost in nineteenth-century Britain and, outside the introduction and conclusion, this is primarily where they focus. Comparisons to present-day anxiety are left to the reader, and there are many comparisons to be made.



Anxious **TIMES**

*Medicine & Modernity in
Nineteenth-Century Britain*

Amelia Bonea, Melissa Dickson,
Sally Shuttleworth, & Jennifer Wallis

Figure 1. The book "Anxious Times
Medicine and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain"



The book is divided into six chapters, covering a range of topics that, at first, seem disconnected. Chapter 1 covers issues of occupational health in nineteenth-century workplaces as well as anxiety about the industrialization of the workplace. Chapter 2 looks at the role of the telegraph and telephone in nineteenth-century medical practice, and how these advances have improved the medical field as well as the social obstacles facing their implementation. From there, chapter 3 covers the topic of medical climatology, the emergence of European coastal spas, and the impacts of tourism on climate and health. Chapter 4 focuses on the private drinking habits of nineteenth-century women and the larger implications of alcoholism on health and social status. Chapter 5 looks at the growing pressure on students in the educational system and chapter 6 examines anxiety about the effects of modernity on the nerves.

Despite the variety of topics, as each chapter remains consistent with the larger theme of medicine and modernity, the book never feels disjointed. But, as other reviewers have mentioned, individual chapters can easily find their way into required reading lists on every issue, from gender studies to labor movements, to early communication studies, to environmental movements, to courses on the history of alcohol.

Those looking for a general history of public anxiety and modernity won't find much here. Although *Anxious Times* touches on this theme in the introduction and conclusion, the chapters in between focus more on the responses to anxiety than the actual anxieties themselves. It's a small distinction, but one the authors might have better distinguished early on. Chapter 1 covers the anxieties around rising health concerns in the changing workplace; however, it mostly focuses on Bernardino Ramazzini's *De morbis artificum diatriba* (English translation: *Disease of Workers*) and its numerous editions, reprints, and translations. Similarly, Chapter 2 focuses more on how new communication technologies have been adopted by the medical community than public apprehension to the changing medical landscape. Again, a small distinction, but one worth noting.

However, this is less critical than a warning to those expecting a broader history of societal anxiety and modernity. For most readers, there will be few collections more satisfactory. The exhaustive research and the authors' unique backgrounds assure that even those familiar with the areas of study included will find something new there. I foresee many readers returning to *Anxious Times* again and again as a point of reference.

The conclusion begins with a quote from Sir Arthur Helps' *Social Pressure* in which a fictional group of friends laments about the decreased value of direct communication and the need to over-publicize (Bonea, et al, 2019, p. 217). Here, Bonea, Dickson, Shuttleworth, and Wallis do not shy away from obvious parallels like Twitter and Facebook. They conclude that "it is helpful to look back to the debates of the past, to understand how our nineteenth-century predecessors responded to a revolution" similar to the current information age (Bonea, et al, 2019, p. 218). In the end, Bonea, Dickson, Shuttleworth, and Wallis acknowledge the need for both historical specificity and comparison. In particular, as we live through our own era of modernity, books like *Anxious Times* might inform how we confront the many changes brought on by the digital age.

Conflict of Interest

None.



References

Bonea, A., Dickson, M., Shuttleworth, S., Wallis, J., 2019. *Anxious Times: Medicine and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Sci & Culture in the Nineteenth Century)*. Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press.

