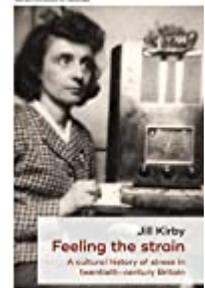


**Jill Kirby.** *Feeling the Strain: A Cultural History of Stress in Twentieth-Century Britain.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. x + 259 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5261-2329-9.



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## **Echoes of the Past: A Historical Lesson on the Stress for Our Current Times**

Occasionally one is presented with an opportunity to review a book that is not only a wonderful and interesting read, but also timely. Jill Kirby's *Feeling the Strain: A Cultural History of Stress in Twentieth-Century Britain* is not only a well-written, interesting, and scholarly interrogation of the evolution and experience of the construct of stress across the decades, but a transcendent work in its capacity to offer a valuable perspective on our contemporary global Covid-19 pandemic-altered lives. Kirby's account of stress, with its first-person perspectives offered through careful selection of source material and descriptions of its manifestation and effect across all social strata, particularly in the war years, echoes our globally shared experiences with the pandemic beautifully. Having not myself equated our experiences with those of people living through world wars, I was stunned by the parallels of conditions and contemporary responses to life under the stress of the current pandemic reflected in her narrative.

Although most contemporary citizens of complex, modern societies have some conceptualization of stress and can articulate the experience of it, few have given much thought to, or examined, the true nature of that construct as thoroughly as has Jill Kirby. Few, if any, have previously offered such a readable, informative, and comprehensive developmental story and analysis of "stress" as is offered in *Feeling the Strain*. While it is short in length, the book is long in interesting historical information and analysis.

Within the pages of this well-written book is a multilayered history of stress not only as a medical condition but as a shared, interpreted human experience across and within subgroups. In *Feeling the Strain*, the reader is engaged in the consideration of stress as a responsive human condition, as well as how that condition is defined, interpreted, and experienced in relation to the societal constructs and economic realities across and within the decades examined. Of particular note are the

astute interpretations and rationale provided throughout.

*Feeling the Strain* is fundamentally a chronological examination of stress within British society across the twentieth century. Through a thorough and excellently articulated study of materials including self-help books, oral histories, and a variety of archived reports from studies on stress, Kirby creates a multifaceted, engaging chronology of stress within the milieu of each individual decade. More specifically, she offers readers an opportunity to consider the guiding principles and mores of the contemporary society within each decade as reflected in the recognition and interpretation of stress. Kirby dissects responses and definitions within each decade further through consideration of occupation, gender, and class.

The book reveals that stress as a human condition lacks objective, historical definition. Moreover, the right to experience stress and interpretations of that experience are grounded in class, gender, and occupation. Kirby presents firsthand accounts to support interpretations of physical and emotional “nervousness” as conditions of those with power, education, and responsibilities of industry. Stress was, more so in the earlier decades of the century than later, viewed as a condition created from working or living conditions, and complaints of stress were viewed as reflecting weakness of character, thus creating potential for loss of employment and respect. Kirby’s consideration of, and approach to, physical manifestations of stress (e.g., headache, gastric distress, etc.) is very interesting. The patterns of justification and acceptance of physical ailment over complaints of mental ill health through the decades and across groups resound with great familiarity. This is but one example of many throughout where the reader will find commonality with the voiced experiences of those generations expressed within the text.

Personal and societal economics as they relate to the manifestation and interpretation of

stress emerge not only in a rich chronology, but as a complex portrayal of hegemony. Employers’ interpretation of worker stress (caused by working conditions and limited financial reward and manifesting in physical or psychological ailments) as irrational or unfounded and reason for dismissal, is shown to generate additional stress associated with concern over potential termination. Simultaneously, an employer or supervisor experiencing job-related stress is celebrated for their dedication and the brain-taxing work that has resulted in its manifestation. Throughout the book, Kirby revisits the themes of class and power as they relate to differential definitions and responses to stress, demonstrating repetition of thought despite significant changes to societal conditions across the decades and within societal subgroups.

The chapters that focus on the latter half of the century provided a mirror of my own experience and understanding of stress. The text rang true as I read accounts of stress in the workplace or home. Kirby captured the shifting responses and interpretations of anxiety, boredom, and angst that I witnessed in my parents as they negotiated the changing dynamics of the mid-twentieth century. I saw my own experiences, interpretations, and responses to stress reflected in the narratives and descriptions presented. The narrative style, application of first-person voice, and interpretation grounded in deep historical and sociological knowledge not only captures the reader’s interest, but generates contemplation and reflection, creating a meaningful connection to the ideas being presented.

Although I found the entire book to be interesting and engaging, several discussions stood out as exceptionally well presented. The initial discussion focuses on the role and growth of the self-help book as a means of defining and responding to one’s own stress. As the growth of psychology for the masses occurred, and as engaging a professional specifically for mental health and stress be-

came more acceptable, the cottage industries associated with providing that assistance emerged and flourished. While the expansion of those industries took a backseat during the war years, they emerged with gusto again in the later decades of the century. Not only does Kirby provide an interesting, comprehensive, balanced consideration of the emergence and evolution of psychological responses to stress, but she offers a much broader portrayal of the diversity of access, interpretation, and responses across different segments of the societal spectrum.

Before concluding, I would be remiss if I did not give attention to the skillful and effective application of thematic strands. One would expect any book focused on aspects of British society to reflect class differences, but Kirby effectively uses voices from the data sources to give authenticity to experiences across groups. Of particular note is the clarity with which she presents conditions in the lives of women that not only create stress, but that regulate options for its management. She makes clear that conditions that stimulated social change, such as World War II creating demand for women's factory labor, generated new opportunities for women, bringing interest and purpose beyond housework and child-rearing to their lives. However, such changes have sometimes been short-term, as when women lost their newfound jobs when the war ended and men returned home. Likewise, the exodus from cities to suburbia brought a loss of community, the nonstop workday, and boredom. While all aspects of this text are well written, supported, and interrogated, Kirby's consideration of stress on women across the decades offers an interesting and important presentation and analysis that is greatly needed in the literature.

*Feeling the Strain: A Cultural History of Stress in Twentieth-Century Britain* is not only a very nice piece of scholarship; it is a very readable and insightful consideration of the human response to the condition identified as "stress," as it tran-

scends decades. Through Kirby's skillfully applied lens, we see the ebb and flow of stress as it is manifested in work, home, and self, across and within social strata. We see how conditions beyond our control such as war, and by extension our contemporary global pandemic, contribute to wholesale depression and stress. As noted at the beginning of this review, I felt this text was timely and I continue to marvel at just how much of our shared, as well as my own, experience was echoed in the voices and situations revealed on so many pages. Beyond offering a wonderful and interesting history of stress, Kirby offers us something else; she offers evidence that despite the situations that cause great stress, humans are resilient and persevere. As the book was written before COVID-19 entered our vocabulary, let alone dominated and decimated lives, creating immense stress across the globe, Kirby could not have intended this book to offer readers a reminder that generations before ours have also felt strain resulting in mental anguish and stress. After reading the book, I felt that Kirby had confirmed that, like those prior generations, we too will respond to our contemporary shared strain, and that humanity will continue, perhaps better for the experience.

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