



A review of
**The Mystery of
Spring-Heeled Jack:
From Victorian
Legend to
Steampunk Hero**

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Spring-Heeled Jack was a figure that terrorised the streets of South London during the early parts of the 19th century. His appearance was eventually coalesced by the various newspapers of the time into a tall slender figure, garbed from within in white and without in black, with a tendency to breath fire and whose eyes were described as wheels of fire. Those who encountered him often reported that he had an uncanny ability to leap high into the air, usually as a means of escape. Many speculated that his leaping ability was due to a kind of mechanical contraption attached to his shoes. Spring-Heeled Jack's *modus operandi* was to attack unsuspecting members of the public (mainly women but sometimes men), tear at their clothes with bladed hands and then abscond from the scene by bounding off into the dark of the night. John Matthews' book, *The Mystery of Spring-Heeled Jack*, seeks to explore the origins of this figure, through scrupulous reproduction of primary sources (in the form of newspaper clippings during this period), to trace the folkloric inspiration behind the figure and into 20th- and 21st-century manifestations of the character's archetype.

The book runs into a few fundamental problems almost straight away and the first of these are his choice of formatting during his first three chapters. These are inundated with newspaper clippings from the period, and although it is no doubt good scholarly practice to provide evidence to properly support your narrative, Matthews' text is overburdened by examples of newspaper clippings that do not positively add to the argument. A more readable approach would have been to provide select clippings that support the quintessential examples of the consolidation of the Spring-Heeled myth. Other clippings should have been included as selected quotations embedded in the body of the text, or paraphrased with endnotes. Instead

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the reader is constantly forced to change reading styles, which is tiresome.

Thankfully, things improve somewhat in chapters 5 and 6 ('Roots in Myth and Folklore' and 'Who was Jack?' respectively) where Matthews suggests that the origins of Spring-Heeled Jack can be traced back to such figures as Robin Hood and Jack the Giant Killer as well as the children's toy 'the jack-in-the-box' and to the devil figure in Punch and Judy shows. Matthews is in far stronger territory here and his writing benefits greatly from the lack of constant interruption of newspaper excerpts. And in contrast to the last third of the book, his argument is supported by ample evidence and indeed his propositions appear to hold up to closer scrutiny. Similarly, chapter 6 provides an interesting theory as to the real-life inspiration behind Spring-Heeled Jack. The parts regarding Henry de La Poer, the 3rd Marquess of Waterford are entertaining and provide some much-needed substantiality toward unveiling the truth behind the 'mystery' of Spring-Heeled Jack.

Unfortunately, this redemption does not last long and Matthews runs into perhaps one of the biggest problems of the text regarding Spring-Heeled Jack as an antihero and subsequent symbol of working-class rebellion. Before stating on page 160 that 'like Robin Hood, Jack is a hero of the common people', there is no narrative lead-up to this proposition. Indeed, there is a noticeable deficit of working-class voices in the book; in fact the presence of 'the common people' are usually in the form of wrongly accused men in the docks. It is hard to consider Spring-Heeled Jack as a hero of the common people from what Matthews presents to his readership. Even when Matthews introduces the counternarrative of Spring-Heeled Jack as an antihero, he then goes on to make extremely broad claims about the figure in this regard without any kind of evidence to support this claim. This is even more alarming considering the scholarly posture Matthews adopts at the start of the book.

Finally, as the text comes to the end we are confronted by perhaps the weakest aspect of *The Mystery of Spring-Heeled Jack*: the final chapter. Matthews' tracing of the myth of Spring-Heeled Jack into the 20th and 21st centuries falls between being broadly speculative and factually dubious. Indeed, many of the comparisons of the supposedly 20th- and 21st-century incarnations of Spring-Heeled Jack often come with the caveat that there is little to no actual evidence that figures such as Mothman and Slender Man have anything to do with the myth of Spring-Heeled Jack. Whilst speculations and suggestions that there are tangential links with folklore and the western conception of the bogey man are valid, there seems to be a glaring comparison with Batman that Matthews dismisses out of hand. In regard to comparison with the Slender Man – the internet myth which has spawned several real-life crimes by children wishing to be taken to his house – Matthews makes reference to the crime committed by two 12-year-old girls which is largely covered

by HBO's documentary 'Beware the Slender-Man'. I mention the documentary briefly as there is a brief section in the documentary addressing the folkloric roots of the figure in the Pied Piper which seems to be a far more apt comparison. Again, if Matthews provided some kind of evidential link between the 19th- and 21st-century figures, it would make more logical sense that he eschews one folkloric inspiration for another, yet again, he fails to do so.

Another glaring omission in the text is the almost complete lack of any exploration of Spring-Heeled Jack as a Steampunk hero, barring a brief mention on pages 231-2 and a picture on plate 1. As Matthews deems to include the steampunk hero element in his title *The Mystery of Spring-Heeled Jack: From Victorian Legend to Steampunk Hero* this seems especially detrimental to the viability of his overall argument.

By the closing chapter of the book Matthews abandons any pretence toward exploring or further investigation into Spring-Heeled Jack, and instead provides a lengthy synopsis of all three seasons of an audio-drama featuring Jack which he feels is a good example of blending the facts and fiction into a compelling narrative. This lengthy exposition does little to add to his ongoing investigation of Jack's incarnations in the 21st century.

There is little here to recommend the book, save for a competent (if overly burdened and repetitive) first three chapters, a far better middle where folkloric inspiration proves more enjoyable reading and an incredibly disappointing end. Matthews pads out his ending with 'Spring Heeled Jack—The Terror of London', one of the first canonical texts to feature the eponymous figure, which Matthews praises as 'competent' – high praise indeed. Ultimately Matthews' text suffers from an identity crisis: it does not know whether it is a history or academic investigation or something far more informal. For those interested in the myth of Spring-Heeled Jack this book provides a serviceable job of tracing the media-created entity, but it critically fails on several other levels.

Author: John Matthews.
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