



*A review of*  
**The Legend of  
Spring-heeled Jack:  
Victorian Urban  
Folklore and Popular Cultures**

**Scott Wood**

**S**pring-heeled Jack has been bounding in and out of the folkloric imagination since his first sighting in 1838. Despite his early amorphous appearance as a ghost, bear or devil tasked by debauched aristocrats with driving a number of women insane, his image has been honed into that of a big-booted, black-clad, demonic figure. He crashes across the rooftops and along the alleyways of an equally mythical, soot-caked Victorian London before populating other cities and the countryside as a folk-devil.

Karl Bell's book arrives at a good time for Jack's cultural profile: a series of online radio plays, the 'Springheel Saga', is currently on its second season; an individual in London is attempting Spring-heeled Jack walks, following in the tradition of Ripper and ghost walks; and a recent issue of *Fortean Times* collected articles on Jacks both Ripping and Spring-heeled. Both are Victorian boogiemens who have lived far longer in the popular imagination than they ever did in real life, if either of them ever were living, breathing individuals. Bell's book chimes in with, as well as adding to, Mick Dash's research on Spring-heeled Jack, which posited that there was not one figure but a broader mass of opportunistic mythmakers, cloaked perverts and pages of newspaper copy contributing to the Spring-heeled Jack of myth.

This being before the time of dedicated paranormal publications or paranormal researchers conducting their own interviews, Jack's boot prints were exclusively followed via the news and letters pages of early newspapers. Just as letters and media organ-grinding fuelled the early days of the Whitechapel Murders, Spring-heeled Jack's debut was fed more by printers' ink than blood. The Society for Psychological Research (SPR) was 45 years away from Spring-heeled Jack's main appearances; the earliest incarnation of the Ghost Club was 25 years away. In the 1880s, when the SPR was founded and Spring-heeled Jack started to appear outside of London, Bell suggests there was no investigation into sightings because Spring-heeled Jack was 'migratory and too often associated with a human hoaxer' for the society to take an interest.

The method of understanding folklore as a historical study is applied very well to Jack's case. Reading the book I was surprised by a feeling of disappointment, not in the book itself – it's a careful

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and thoughtful look at a moral panic become myth that well deserved its 2013 Katherine Briggs award – but with Spring-heeled Jack himself. He did not spring from London's smoggy streets, but rather was a surprisingly rural entity in his early days. He began, famously, as a suburban ghost haunting the edges of London back when Peckham and Barnes had not been assimilated into greater London and were open, green areas far from the City. Bearbinder Lane, scene of the famous steel-clawed attack on Jane Alsop, is described as a 'very lonely spot between the villages of Bow and Old Ford'.

The book communicates Spring-heeled Jack's nebulous history well, making clear that the Jack we know now is far more a product of pulp fiction than folklore. Here is where our light-footed, black-clad hero formed, informed by some of the newspaper accounts. Here is where Spring-heeled Jack transitioned from a vile molester of women to a figure that was thought of almost fondly.

Bell draws an interesting line across Spring-heeled Jack's fictional life that has not been clear, to me at least, before. The Marquis of Waterford was one crazed aristocrat thought to be causing nocturnal havoc as the definitive Spring-heeled Jack. The cheap fictions built on this: who else could continue a life as an antiheroic vigilante with strange and expensive gadgets but a determined, affluent member of the higher levels of society? The iconic figure of Batman may have many pulp origins but some part of his make-up arrives, possibly via Zorro, from the penny-dreadful Spring-heeled Jack and his reckless adventures.

I have one thought that is tangential to this particular work. The world is still awaiting a popular book on the phenomena of Spring-heeled Jack, paranormal, folkloric and cultural. This book's insights are communicated clearly but one does wonder whether an interested non-academic reader would be put off by the framing of some of the insights and references, not to mention the academic pricing. This would be a pity, as this book has a lot to offer those interested in Spring-heeled Jack and Victorian culture. I am confident that the author of this book or another of the tight kernel of Spring-heeled Jack researchers could reiterate the research and insights in a way that would entertain and expand the understanding of readers interested in Fortean, folklore, penny-dreadfuls and Victoriana. However, all future writing will owe a debt to this book.

At the end of the book Bell suggests 'it would be arrogant to assume that this study has managed to capture Spring-heeled Jack' and quotes Jeffrey Cohen's idea that the monstrous can only be glimpsed and never fully regarded. In accepting Spring-heeled Jack's 'cultural hybridity' a sense of the entity is gained. Spring-heeled Jack's nature creates a fascinating index entry: listed beneath his name are 'as criminal', 'as demon', 'as extra-terrestrial', 'as ghost', 'as ghost-type', 'as hero', 'as highwayman', 'as human prankster', 'as inventor' and 'as rebel', among others. In bottling this whirlwind of differing sources of a protean devil, Karl Bell has succeeded, through the narrative, of apprehending the fractions of Spring-heeled Jack.

Author: Karl Bell.

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