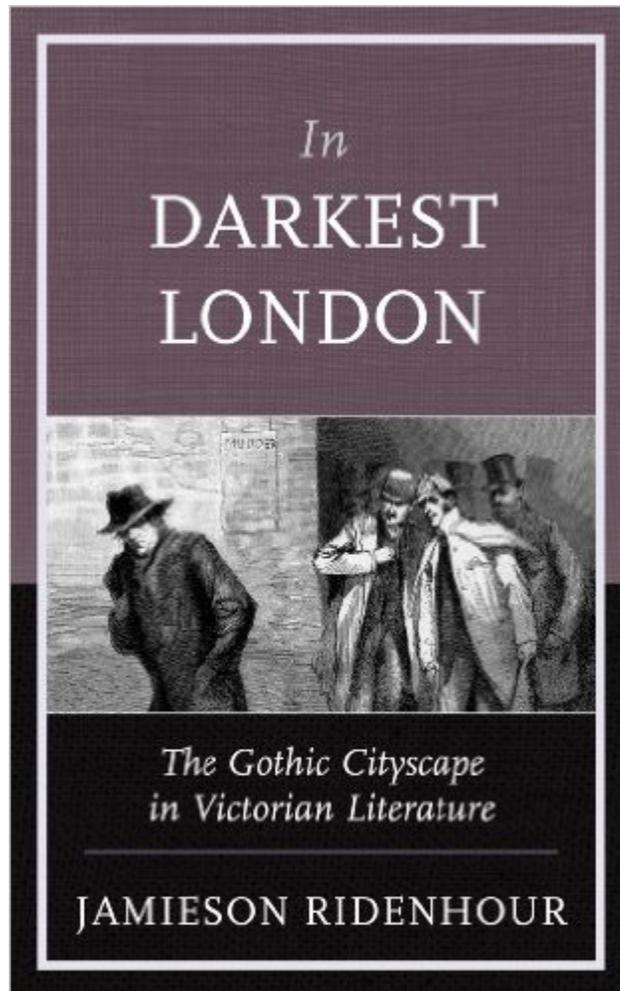


**In darkest London**  
**The Gothic cityscape in Victorian Literature**  
**Jamieson Ridenhour**  
**The Scarecrow Press Inc (US: Maryland, 2013)**  
**ISBN 978-0-8108-8777-0**  
**Book review by Sally Ramage**



Jamieson Ridenhour has written a lovely book- carefully and lovingly crafted and academically accurate. The book is of a similar title to Margaret Harkness' book published in 1889 and reprinted in 2003.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harkness, M. (reprinted 2003) *In Darkest London*, Cambridge: Black Apollo Press.

Scarecrow Press Inc is a subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group (see [www.rowman.com](http://www.rowman.com)) has done a splendid job of setting the tone of this book with a carefully chosen front cover.

It has often been said that writing a book is not something one does for ego gratification or monetary reward, but rather to share a few professional insights with professional colleagues who appreciate one's lifelong interests and also to make a contribution to the literature in the particular field.

Indeed, on the subject of Victorian London and London's previous history, much has been written. Many films have also been produced and many writers in those times and up to today have produced volumes about London, both fiction and non-fiction.

This author has cited a list of works, fascinating in content. The list indicates the careful and laborious nature in which this author set about writing this book for us. Miraculously, today's electronic improvements have brought to life many old works and so only a very few texts must have been very taxing in nature. To pore over texts such as *British Novelists and their Styles, being a critical sketch of the history of British Prose Fiction*, published in Boston,

Massachusetts by Gould and Lincoln in 1859; and the article titled ‘Vampyre’ published in 1847 in *Punch* magazine must have been difficult.

I can vouch for the difficulty in reading reprinted old books since I myself, researching the case of the 18<sup>th</sup> century William Murray, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Mansfield and Lord Chief Justice of England, his grand-niece, born to a slave girl with his nephew, then a Royal Navy captain, and the slave trade case law commonly known as *Zong* (case law *Gregson v Gilbert*) was studying a 1799 non-fiction law book titled *A system of the Law of Marine Insurances* originally published in 1799, now reprinted; and the fictional work *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens<sup>2</sup>.

Jamieson Ridenhour set out his book in six chapters, namely, the Gothic in history; ‘darkness enough’: the Gothicity of Victorian London; London Chiaroscuro: a Gothic map of Victorian London; walking in the City of Dreadful Night: the Gothic *flaneur* (‘*a stroller, a poet, who idly walks the streets of the city*’) dialogues in the dark: bakhtin in London and ‘in which our teleological superiority is eroded’.

Modestly, there is, on the last page of Ridenhour’s book, *In darkest London*, just four lines about the author, who in fact is an associate

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<sup>2</sup> See Sally Ramage, The true story of Dido Belle by Paula Byrne’, *Current Criminal Law*, Volume 7, Issue 4, June 2015, at pgs 2-20.

professor of English at the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota, United States.

This book examines the fiction and non-fiction works of the period first termed ‘Urban Gothic’ in the mid-nineteenth century. This style of writing swept under its umbrella novels such as: *The castle of Otranto*;<sup>3</sup> *Strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*;<sup>4</sup> *The picture of Dorian Gray*;<sup>5</sup> *Dracula*;<sup>6</sup> *Frankenstein*;<sup>7</sup> and *The Vampyre*.<sup>8</sup>

Later, writers in the United States were influenced by this Gothic style and American authors Edgar Allan Poe<sup>9</sup>; Nathaniel Hawthorne; and Herman Melville’s writings were termed American Gothic fiction and have remained literary classics.

Historic London cannot be written about without acknowledging the prolific works of Charles Dickens (author of great fictional works); William Hogarth, prolific producer of satirical and other paintings; nor indeed of the Slave Trade; and or crimes including the murders by serial killer ‘Jack the Ripper’ and the pollution, disease, and poverty in terribly

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<sup>3</sup> Author, Horace Walpole, 1764.

<sup>4</sup> Author, Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886.

<sup>5</sup> Author, Oscar Wilde, 1890.

<sup>6</sup> Author, Bram Stoker, 1897.

<sup>7</sup> Author, Mary Shelly, 1818.

<sup>8</sup> Author, John Polidon, 1819.

<sup>9</sup> Poe’s works include *The tell-tale heart*; *The Raven*; *The fall of the House of Usher*, and also poetry; a textbook; a book on science; and hundreds of other works.

overcrowded insanitary housing<sup>10</sup> due to the huge and rapid increase of London's population. Poverty was rife, as was disease and crime. Those of the population who were comfortably off did not link the lack of food, clothing, money, opportunities, education and housing to crime. Instead they believed that this was a 'criminal class', quite distinct from the 'working class'. The phrase "criminal class" meant at that time, 'those who lived by crime and who lived in certain areas of large cities and entry to the "criminal class" gave the criminal the support of comrades, help in getting accommodation and access to receivers (of stolen goods)'.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, Spitalfields (the name taken from St. Mary's *spittel* (hospital for lepers) has once been a prosperous place where tradesmen lived, mainly silk weavers<sup>12</sup> who lost out to the Midlands and Cheshire and so began its decline into 'crime infested slums'. This led to hastily, unplanned expansion of London. Yet even the government refused to accept the link between poverty and crime.<sup>13</sup>

This book, *In Darkest London*, is a very serious and beautiful read and I heartily recommend it.

ENDS+

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<sup>10</sup> Jack the Ripper committed his heinous crimes in Whitechapel, known then for its 'Poor House' the *Whitechapel Union*.

<sup>11</sup> Whiting, J.R.S. (1986) *Crime and Punishment- a study across time*, Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes (Publishers) Ltd.

<sup>12</sup> Sally Ramage, '

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

