

HISTORY 2146B

Victorian Murder and the Justice System

Fall 2026 | Winter 2027 | 2026 – 27

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This is a draft outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Description

This course uses ten of the most famous Victorian murders and murderers to explore the broader issues raised by the context of the crimes: detective policing, the selection of judges, press coverage of crime, the black market in corpses, insanity and criminal responsibility, insurance fraud, race relations in imperial Britain, and child abuse. The eleventh case study focuses on the man who carried out state-sanctioned killing: hangman William Calcraft.

Course Syllabus

‘The invention of murder’: while the incidence of homicide has a long history, in Britain morbid public fascination with this particular crime dates from the 19th century. That fascination coincided with radical innovations not only in policing, punishment, and the criminal trial but with advances in medical science and a marked competition between medical and legal professionals. Appropriate staffing of the coroner’s office was one issue, but the way in which mental health issues were to be defined, and their legal consequences determined, was also subject to considerable debate. The broadening of the ‘public sphere’ enabled by significant expansion of the print media in this period meant that all of these developments were widely broadcast and discussed. This course draws upon significant murder trials across the 19th century to illuminate these various issues. It concludes by examining the office of the hangman, the person entrusted by the state to execute those convicted of murder.

Students will write a 1500-word written assignment, an online mid-term test, and a final exam.

On completion of this course students will:

Be familiar with the contours of the Victorian criminal justice system

Possess a basic understanding of the 19th century conflicts between the legal and medical professions where mental health was concerned

Be aware of the development of the press and the role it played in publicizing justice issues relating to murder

Have gained insight into the issues which preoccupied the Victorian public where murder was concerned

Methods of Evaluation

Written assignment (1500 words, due 8 Feb.):	30%
Mid-term (22 Feb.):	35%
Final exam:	35%

Attendance at lectures is necessary to pass the mid-term and final exam. I do not provide notes for students who have missed lectures. Mid-term and final exam answers **MUST** reflect lecture material and assigned readings.

You are expected to meet the word-length specified for the written assignment; do not exceed it. A late penalty of 2% per day, including weekends, will be assigned if this assignment is not received on the due date. Late papers will also be graded without comment. Extensions **must** be applied for via Academic Counselling. Requests for extensions made after the deadline will not be accepted.

Course Materials

There is no textbook. Weekly readings will be assigned and made available online.

Course Schedule

- 1. (4 Jan.) Introduction**
- 2. (11 Jan.) The Ratcliffe Highway Murders (1811)**

In December 1811 two families were murdered at night, in their East End homes. These atrocities reignited debate on whether London required a professional police force, but fierce opposition to such a force meant that no change was forthcoming. This lecture considers the reasons for that opposition as well as exploring the means by which the murders were investigated.

3. (18 Jan.) Eliza Fenning (1815)

Eliza Fenning was hanged for attempting to poison the family who employed her. Her case is a rare instance of public doubt re the conviction. Many believed Fenning to be innocent, and the conduct of the Old Bailey judge who presided over her trial was heavily criticized. We will examine the way in which such judges were selected, and the role played by politics in the selection process.

4. (25 Jan.) John Thurtell (1824)

John Thurtell – onetime second lieutenant in the Royal Marines, amateur boxer and trainer of pugilists, bankrupt bombazine maker and failed publican – was hanged for the brutal murder of game shark William Weare. Press coverage of the inquest, investigation, arrests, pre-trial proceedings, trial, and execution was extensive. This lecture uses the Thurtell case to explore the history of ‘trial by newspaper’, setting that history within the broader context of the history of the newspaper press.

5. (1 Feb.) Burke and Hare (1828)

In the early nineteenth century medical schools were in dire need of cadavers for dissection. From the mid-eighteenth century they had been entitled to the bodies of convicted murderers, but the numbers were insufficient. This situation led to an active black market trade in corpses. Burke and Hare were among the suppliers: they murdered sixteen people and sold their bodies to John Knox, who used them for his anatomy lectures. We will also consider the activities of ‘resurrection men’, who stole from graveyards, and the government’s ‘solution’ to the problem, by which unclaimed bodies of people who died in a workhouse were forfeit to the state for medical research.

6. (8 Feb.) The Russell Murder (1840)

Lord William Russell, the younger brother of the Duke of Bedford, was murdered in his sleep in May 1840 by a recently hired manservant. Metropolitan London had by this time acquired a professional police force but it did not contain a detective division. Intense criticism of the way in which Russell’s murder was investigated contributed to the establishment of Scotland Yard in 1842. We will use this case as a springboard for discussion of the history of detective policing.

Written assignment due

Reading week

7. (22 Feb.) Mid-term exam

8. (1 Mar.) Daniel M'Naghten (1843)

Daniel M'Naghten assassinated an English civil servant, whom he may have mistaken for the prime minister, Sir Robert Peel. At the time of the murder M'Naghten was suffering from paranoid delusions and a persecution complex and at issue during his trial at the Old Bailey was the legal defence of insanity. The jury's decision to acquit led to public outcry and in the debate which followed the rules establishing criminal responsibility were formulated. We will examine the history of the treatment of insanity in the criminal courts, and the competition between the medical and legal professions in attempting definitions.

9. (8 Mar.) William Palmer (1856)

William Palmer was a genteel murderer, a doctor convicted of the strychnine poisoning of his friend, John Cook. He may also have murdered others, including his brother and four of his own children. The reasons appear to have been financial: this is the first of two cases considered involving insurance fraud. We will look at the history of poisoning as a method of murder, and contemporary fears of cases going undetected during outbreaks of cholera, the symptoms of which were similar to arsenical poisoning. We will also look at gender and poisoning – a crime which was considered effeminate.

10. (15 Mar.) Serial murderers: Mary Ann Cotton (1873) and Jack the Ripper (1888)

Mary Ann Cotton has been claimed as one of England's first serial killers. Her social status was much lower than Palmer's, but she too poisoned family members, including three partners and eleven of her children, after insuring their lives. The sums involved were much smaller, but the motivation was the same. Cotton was eventually tried and convicted for the murder of a stepson.

'Jack the Ripper', whose identity has never been discovered, is the best-known Victorian murderer. This lecture will focus on the failed police investigation into the Whitechapel murders as well as Hallie Rubenhold's recent work (*The Five*) on his victims, which goes a long way towards restoring their dignity.

11. (22 Mar.) Mass murder and culpability: Jamaica and the 1865 Morant Bay/Governor Eyre controversy

A Black uprising in the British colony of Jamaica in October 1865, known as the Morant Bay Rebellion, began as a peaceful protest march to a courthouse, but the British volunteer militia shot seven of the protesters. Subsequent suppression of the uprising was brutal: the British declared martial law and sent in troops; hundreds of Jamaicans were killed. At home in the UK this heavy-handed response divided the public. Charles Dickens supported the governor of Jamaica, Edward John Eyre; Charles Darwin deplored his actions. Proceedings

were brought against ‘the monster of Jamaica’ three times; in each case they were dismissed. This lecture will explore the arguments advanced on both sides of the controversy to reveal contemporary attitudes towards race and empire.

12. (29 Mar.) Amelia Dyer (1896)

In Victorian Britain unwanted babies could be adopted in exchange for money, a practice known as ‘baby farming’. Neglect and death of the infants in question was common but Dyer, ‘the Ogress of Reading’, deliberately murdered those in her care – perhaps as many as 400. She was eventually convicted and hanged for the murder of one. We will use this case to explore the history of child protection.

13. (5 Apr.) ‘Judicial Murder’: The Victorian Hangman

By the time Queen Victoria came to the throne the application of the death penalty, once the punishment allotted to all felonies, had been seriously curtailed. Murderers, however, were still hanged. We conclude the course by looking at the career (45 years) of Victorian Britain’s most famous hangman, William Calcraft.

Additional Statements

Audio or video recording of lectures is not permitted.

The best way to get in touch with me outside of the classroom is via email. I answer emails between 9 am and 5 pm, Monday to Friday. Please remember that office hours are not simply – or even primarily! – for dealing with problems. You are welcome to come and discuss course material in these hours.

You may use generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course for activities such as supplementary research and to refine your ideas or draft an outline to organize your thoughts—but not for generating prose. All writing submitted in this course must be your own and your mid-term and final exam **MUST** reflect lecture material and assigned readings. If in doubt, please ask me for clarification and advice.

Please review the Department of History’s shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.