

**Nathan Garvey. *The Celebrated George Barrington: A Spurious Author, the Book Trade, and Botany Bay*. Potts Point, NSW: Hordern House, 2008,**

**ISBN: 9781875567546**

**AU\$64.00**

**<http://www.hordern.com/publications/the-celebrated-george-barrington.aspx>**

Nathan Garvey's *The Celebrated George Barrington* aims to clear up, insofar as it is possible, the publishing history that created one of the most famous names in Georgian Britain. Probably the most written-about felon sent to Botany Bay during its earliest years, the actual George Barrington was transported for theft in 1791 after a long career as a gentleman pickpocket. Barrington's pose as a man of fashion, coupled with his eloquent rhetoric and displays of refined emotion in the dock, made him an object of interest to the popular press long before he was sent to Australia. The cultural currency of the 'prince of pickpockets' was such that, by the turn of the nineteenth century, 'Barrington' had become a by-word for a fashionable scoundrel, a common criminal who passed for one of the elite whose watches and snuff-boxes formed his livelihood. Once in the penal colony, Barrington seized the chance to leave behind the criminal life by earning the trust of Arthur Phillip, the first colonial governor, and eventually becoming a constable in colonial service

*The Celebrated George Barrington* breathes new interest into this familiar chapter of early Australia by delving into the voluminous literature about, and in many supposedly authored by, the gentleman pickpocket. This project involves a considerable amount of investigative research into the world of (usually plagiarised) sources, hack authors, political motivations and professional publishing rivalries that generated the 'Memoirs' and 'Voyages' published under Barrington's name from the 1790s well into the 1830s. During the twentieth century, as Garvey observes, scholars regarded such texts as 'a bibliographic curiosity of apparently little historiographic importance' (168). Following scholars like William St. Clair (*The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 2004) Garvey seeks to reclaim the significance of this archive, much of which is now resident in collections at the Mitchell Library and the National Library of Australia, for what it reveals about the emergence of the book trade.

What it reveals turns out to be quite a lot. The first two chapters of Garvey's study, 'The Prince of Pickpockets' and 'The Lives of George Barrington', offer outlines of Barrington's actual criminal career and begin the process of tracing his textual legacy. Starting with the original flurry of 'memoirs' that appeared after Barrington's transportation, in chapter 2 Garvey identifies two ur-sources for the pickpocket's life story, printed by the competing booksellers George Kearlsey and H.D. Symonds, who worked in association with 'J. Bird' (likely an alias for another printer). Symonds was largely reprinting trial reports; Kearlsey took a more 'novelistic' approach, eschewing public episodes in favor of depictions of private events sprinkled with jottings and poetry supposedly written by Barrington in his more sensitive moments. From the very beginning, Barrington's putative involvement in these productions was questioned: Garvey quotes a notice from the *Analytic Review* that dismisses Kearlsey's 'memoir' as

bearing ‘no marks of authenticity’. But the accounts sold well, and a series of piracies, with their own fictional additions and variations, soon followed, traced in meticulous detail in Garvey’s chart, ‘Stemma of the Barrington Biographies’. By this count, the original two versions of the *Memoirs* spawned ‘at least 19 other book-length biographies’ in the next 40 years (76). The machinery of the industry behind the Barrington books, pamphlets, and chapbooks had been set in motion.

Chapter 3 traces the many windings of Barrington’s ‘career’ as an author—after his transportation, he was referenced as the writer of a cascade of books about Australia and crime in general. Although he died in 1804, the books plagiarised from more official, expensive texts were published for years under the Barrington name, responding to the emerging market for cheap reading materials about the antipodes among working-class book buyers. One of the most interesting aspects of Garvey’s findings concerns how publications like the Barrington books helped subsidise the fortunes of printers engaged in a range of other work: the success of the first edition of the wildly popular *A Voyage to New South Wales* (1795), for example, shored up the finances of radical publisher H. D. Symonds, who served a term in Newgate for publishing a cheap edition of Paine’s *The Rights of Man*. Garvey explains how Symonds cobbled together the text of this *Voyage* by plundering John Hunter’s First-Fleet journal, among other previously-published sources, and then strung these observations together with some first-person narration by ‘Barrington’ chronicling his experiences in the new colony. From this original spurious narrative Garvey follows (many more) piracies, including the chapbooks produced outside London and sold by traveling peddlers in rural areas. Such is Garvey’s thoroughness that he also excavates translations of these texts from France and Russia, as well as other works—perhaps most diverting is *Barrington’s Annals of Suicide* (1803), a lurid anthology supposedly compiled by the Botany Bay constable in his spare time. And then there is also *Barrington’s New London Spy* (1804), a piracy of a guide from the 1770s on London frauds and cheats reissued as a production ‘edited’ by the famous pickpocket.

At various points, Garvey does touch on how the Barrington phenomenon accorded with larger cultural developments: the relation of criminal biography to the emergence of the novel, for example, or how the books reflected a broader interest in the kind of ‘voyage’ narratives (to the South Pacific in particular) that catered to dabblers in science. But a more sustained discussion of the larger significance of the ‘celebrated George Barrington’ as a cultural icon would be welcome here; the ultimate significance of all of Garvey’s admirable effort could be underscored more forcefully. The fact is that many readers dismissed the Barrington narratives as spurious, or likely so, from the beginning, as the *Analytic Review* (among others) suggests. How many among ‘Barrington’s’ audience of middling professionals and tradesmen actually believed what they were reading? Does it matter whether they believed it or not? These are a few of the questions raised by this investigation that Garvey does not take on. In his epilogue, the author concludes that his case study of Barrington reveals ‘the changing nature of print culture in the late Georgian era’ (171). To be sure, Barrington’s case emphasises how publishers responding to the emerging mass market could effectively steal the right to tell a celebrity’s stories—a phenomenon whose longevity is evident to any browser of

supermarket tabloids. Yet more theoretical scaffolding about the nature of identity and character, not to mention ‘celebrity’, in this period would help give Garvey’s claim more heft and meaning.

The greatest value of Garvey’s study resides in his concluding, 90-page bibliography of all books attributed to Barrington that were published between 1790 and 1840. Like the preceding textual analysis of this body of work, the bibliography divides the Barrington corpus into biographies of the pickpocket and works published under his name from 1795 onwards. This is a painstaking work of dedicated textual scholarship, with careful documentation of all matter from title pages, along with detailed descriptions of extant copies and textual variants. In addition, *The Celebrated George Barrington* is beautifully produced by Hordern House, including a number of illustrations from frontispieces and title pages that will be familiar to scholars of the Barrington legacy. If he leaves certain provocative questions unaddressed, Garvey has enabled other scholars to pursue such matters by compiling and organising a significant body of material on the history of the Georgian popular book trade.

*Toby R. Benis, Saint Louis University*