



George Barrington's Voyage to Botany Bay: Retelling a Convict's Travel Narrative of the 1790s

Introduced and edited by Suzanne Rickard, Leicester University Press,
London, 2000, xxiv + 181 pages and 31 b&w illustrations, ISBN:
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- 1 Readers of this book might be forgiven for assuming it was written by George Barrington, the celebrated 'genteel' pickpocket who was transported to New South Wales in 1791. Barrington, who had been forced to flee from his native Dublin in 1773 to escape arrest, maintained himself in London as a gentleman of fashion by stealing from the pockets of the rich, gaining notoriety in the 1780s through several well-publicised court appearances. His career ended in 1791 when he was convicted for stealing a gold watch and was sentenced to transportation 'to parts beyond the seas'.
- 2 Yet the only connection between George Barrington and *George Barrington's Voyage to Botany Bay* is the use made of Barrington's reputation by unscrupulous publishers who wished to exploit popular interest in both criminals and Botany Bay. In the early 1790s, a number of titles attributed to Barrington were in circulation, all of them a composite of several authorised accounts of Australia and none of them written by Barrington himself. Not surprisingly, these accounts say little of Barrington or his own voyage out, and the sea passage from the Cape to Botany Bay is covered in only half a sentence: 'As nothing material happened during the voyage I shall not trouble you with our different

bearings and distances'. Piracy in the eighteenth century was as evident in the publishing houses of England as it was on the high seas.

- 3 Despite the fact that Barrington, apparently having undergone a religious conversion at sea, became Superintendent of Convicts at Parramatta in 1792, the account of New South Wales says little about convict life and concentrates instead on the customs of the indigenous population and its encounters with the British. Since the sources from which Barrington's supposed work was compiled are readily available today, the importance of this text lies not so much in its contents but in its place in publishing history, and particularly in the publication of personal narratives by convicts.
- 4 In a substantial introduction, Suzanne Rickard traces the development of the Barrington legend, which in Barrington's lifetime was greater than those of Dick Turpin or Jonathon Wild, and she demonstrates how that legend depended on a popular market for convict literature. More might have been said of the social context which allowed convicts to become legends, and rather too much attention is given to trying to unearth the life of the 'real' George Barrington, which, though intrinsically interesting, is something of a red herring. The most intriguing aspect is the way in which Barrington not only became a figure of popular culture but, as Rickard shows, became the author of books which made available for popular consumption simplified and abridged versions of the more expensive accounts written by John Hunter, Watkin Tench and Arthur Phillip. So successful was this that publishers continued to issue new texts attributed to Barrington long after his death in 1804.
- 5 For those unacquainted with early accounts of New South Wales, this book offers a fascinating and accessible insight into late eighteenth-century attempts to comprehend the Antipodes. However, in the manner of Barrington's text itself, appearances can be deceptive. This is really two books in one, and Suzanne Rickard's introduction represents a major contribution to our understanding of the place of the convict in publishing history. For the introduction alone, here is a book worth buying.

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