Nathan Garvey, *The Celebrated George Barrington, A Spurious Author: The Book Trade and Botany Bay* (Hordern House Rare Books, 2008)

The author of this handsome book, Nathan Garvey, has previously written about early Australian Literature and specifically about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century book trade. *The Celebrated George Barrington* is based on his doctoral thesis and is an enquiry into the print cultures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the nefarious practices of popular publishers and of a time before copyright. The book is of particular interest to the specialist reader as almost half the book is devoted to references and a bibliography. The numerous illustrations enliven the whole.

George Barrington (c1758-1804) was born in Ireland and was possessed of a Romantic demeanour and sartorial elegance. Unlike most thieves of the time he was educated, articulate and presented himself with a dramatic flair. He seems to have been an ineffectual criminal who, from the age of twenty, was convicted of numerous pick-pocketing offences. His sense of drama, his continual rebuttal in the law courts that he was a victim rather than perpetrator led him to be satirised and demonised in the popular press. After his transportation to Australia in 1790 he became an author feeding the British desire for details of life in the colony. As it happens, Barrington did not write any of the accounts attributed to him. Fascinatingly, he continued to have a literary career long after he had been confined to a facility for the insane and even beyond death. Nathan Garvey’s book is thus not about the person Barrington, but a publishing phenomena.

Garvey places the interest in Barrington as being in the tradition of ‘quasi-heroic popular thieves stretching back to Robin Hood and beyond’ (13). The detailed descriptions in the press of his appearance whenever he was to be found attending court, concentrating on his good looks and elegance, fed a nascent celebrity cult. From the mid-1770s, in attempts to defend his reputation, Barrington was in the habit of writing letters to newspaper editors. These efforts were largely self destructive as the personality ‘Barrington’ became more and more widely known his ability to pursue a normal life and engage in meaningful work disappeared.

Barrington was one of the early convicts to serve on the infamous prison hulks at Woolwich, established as the colonies in the Americas ceased to exist after the War of Independence. Garvey tells us that: ‘While Barrington languished in the hulks, the press ensured that the public were not likely to forget him, and curiosity about this new form of punishment was also fed by a media always ready, for a price to oblige’ (25). The press dealt lovingly on the fact that genteel offenders like Barrington were treated like common criminals. The press of the day did not make much of another fact; that the hulks engendered a shocking mortality rate.

In Australia, as a transported convict, George Barrington really rose up the ranks of celebrity status. The verifiable facts are scant. Barrington was a model prisoner and was granted a conditional pardon in 1792, one year after arrival. The pardon was made absolute in 1796, thereafter Governor Hunter appointed Barrington to the post of Chief Constable at Parramatta; the former convict died insane in 1804.
Nathan Garvey tracks the many memoirs and romances, attributed to Barrington, which were published throughout the nineteenth century. Although most of these works were utterly fraudulent and others were plagiarised they attracted the interest of writers such as Charles Dickens and Edgar Alan Poe. Barrington’s name was still synonymous with Australia’s convict past in the early twentieth century. However, in the wake of the nationalist fervour after Federation interest in the convict history waned and was not revived until later in the twentieth century. Nathan Garvey, while despising the spurious authorship of the early Barrington books – their blatant dishonesty, disregard for accuracy and tendency to reduce colonial relations with the indigenous people to a saccharine romanticism – places them in an important context. ‘These works helped to shape European views of Australia during the crucial early years of colonisation’ (169).

George Barrington, the man, never emerges in the pages of The Celebrated George Barrington. This is particularly apt for a character who in various guises was never more than a cipher. For the man who died insane after reinventing himself as a model prisoner and then a police constable this is tantamount to tragedy.

There is throughout Garvey’s work a tone of sympathy for the ineffectual criminal. Defending himself before the judges in the courts of eighteenth century Britain, George Barrington argued that he was a victim, more sinned against than sinning. The books purported to have been written by Barrington after his transportation to Australia (and after death) stole his identity while elevating him to a weird celebrity status.

Barrington was born in the eighteenth century, and his experiences of the publishing industry belong to the anarchic period of the British Regency. Barrington only lived for a few years into the next century. His existence as a purported author beyond death and the theft of his identity strikes one as utterly alien and at the same time disquietingly modern.

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