

Criminals and Publishers

A Swindler's Progress: Nobles and Convicts in the Age of Liberty

By Kirsten McKenzie

UNSW Press, 368pp, \$34.95, 2009

ISBN: 9781742231105

The Celebrated George Barrington: A Spurious Author, The Book Trade, and Botany Bay

By Nathan Garvey

Hordern House, 32799, \$64.00, 2008

ISBN: 9781875567546

Reviewed by Rachael Weaver

A Swindler's Progress and *The Celebrated George Barrington* both follow the fortunes of notorious criminals of the past as a means of exploring aspects of the wider cultural and political forces that surrounded them. This method of using criminal case studies as frames or snapshots for broader scholarly investigations is often a productive and dynamic way of doing cultural history—as shown in earlier examples of this form such as Richard Altick's wonderful book *Deadly Encounters: Two Victorian Sensations* (1984) or Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight* (1992). In both Altick's and Walkowitz's books, the stories of a few infamous individuals provide a central narrative thread for tying together a set of broader concerns to do with class, politics, gender, literary production and so on, with each offering densely layered accounts of the worlds being described. For Altick, the widespread press coverage of two violent crimes in the 1860s provides the starting point for an exploration of the British 'age of sensation', while for Walkowitz narratives of sexual danger open the way for an investigation of the cultural landscape of late Victorian London—the setting for the violent crimes of Jack the Ripper in 1888.

Many other examples of this approach to writing criminal histories have followed, investigating cases including the late-nineteenth-century murders of Scottish-born serial killer Thomas Neill Cream, the 1841 murder of Mary Rogers in New York (the story that inspired Poe's 'Mystery of Marie Roget') and the careers of thieves Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild. Kirsten McKenzie and Nathan Garvey both adopt similar strategies, though neither really reflects on

this methodology or their relationship to these earlier works. As well as sharing an approach, they have in common similar timeframes and settings: the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of London and colonial Australia. The contrasting styles and sense of focus they bring to their material, however, have produced two very different books.

McKenzie's *A Swindler's Progress* opens with a prologue set in colonial New South Wales in 1834, relating the entertaining tale of 'John Dow', a transported convict tried for defrauding the locals by passing himself off as 'Edward, Lord Viscount Lascelles, the eldest son of the Earl of Harewood'. The credulity of the victims and opportunism of the impostor are publicly aired at the trial, with the prisoner remaining firmly attached to his title. This courtroom drama then becomes the departure point for a sweeping exploration of colonial Australian social life, the convict system, and the strange fluidity of class boundaries in a developing culture as well as the contrasting world of the British aristocracy. The narrative of the real Edward Lascelles is what enables McKenzie to trace similarities and connections between these two seemingly very different worlds. Lascelles, a British nobleman whose taste for philandering and unfortunate marriages had seen him cut off from his eminent family, was at the time living in exile and thus 'missing', which may have lent some slight plausibility to 'Dow's' claims. Meanwhile, beneath the surface of the Lascelles' respectability and fortune was a history of shady commerce in the West Indies, of sugar plantations and slavery, which the family was eager to forget.

McKenzie sums up the set of parallels that forms the focus for her book in a somewhat breathless and informal final chapter, writing: 'an impostor had disconcerted an entire society that was itself on the make. And he had chosen as his model a man whose family had reinvented itself no less profoundly than had the colonists of New South Wales. This story of imposture and social opportunism bound together people, places and ideas right across the British imperial world'. As well as tracing a set of transnational links between the fortunes of an obscure convict-impostor and a family of old-time aristocratic arrivistes, she tells many related stories along the way, following the leads offered by the experiences of the twin 'viscounts'. In doing so she shows an impressive breadth of research as well as an obvious passion for the material, right down to a series of amusing asides, such as the tale of an inmate of Port Arthur who during the 1830s attempted escape by hopping away past the guards dressed as a kangaroo.

Although her emphasis is on attempting to use the stories of John Dow and Edward Lascelles to reshape understandings of the British Empire and national frameworks, McKenzie seems most comfortable when writing of colonial Australia, with part three, 'Antipodes', providing what is easily the most compelling set of inter-related narratives with a consistent overall focus on an unstable, rapidly evolving social and political world where the many

possibilities for transforming the self could be exploited by criminals like Dow and legitimate settlers alike. 'Major' James Mudie, the Hunter Valley magistrate and settler at the centre of the Castle Forbes rebellion, an uprising that resulted in the hanging of six assigned convicts, emerges as a fascinating villain in the volatile setting of this third part.

While the earlier sections, 'Arcadia' and 'Ruin and Disgrace', offer engaging narratives of social aspiration and scandal as well as coverage of the West Indian slave trade and the British political system, they sometimes seem distant from the original subject matter and caught up with excessive detail, for example, in the lengthy account of the 1807 Yorkshire election. In some ways the book seems uncertain of its own identity. It is presented in a sensational cover blurb as 'part mystery story, part family saga', and this idea is reiterated in the final chapter, where McKenzie notes 'it became increasingly clear to me that what I was writing needed to be told not as analytic history but as a narrative, and as a mystery story at that'. Yet this is not really played out in the book itself: it is clear from the beginning that Dow is not the 'real' viscount Lascelles, and developing the background for the book is only 'detective work' to the same extent that all research can be. This is notable only in the sense that it seems to highlight a tension between appealing to a general readership and exploring a set of more scholarly concerns—a problem most evident in the first-person final chapter, 'Reflections on a Swindler's Progress'. In some ways this takes the place of a more conventional introduction, with McKenzie describing how she came to the material and offering some general reflections on her methodology and approach. Coming at the end, however, after her tale has already followed the heirs of the Lascelles all the way into the mid-twentieth century, it seems reiterative and anxious, giving voice to ideas that have already emerged in the larger narrative, and not adding sufficient analysis to justify the change of style and pace.

In contrast to McKenzie's seeming ambivalence about writing scholarly histories, Nathan Garvey is fully invested in it, approaching his account of the popular narratives surrounding renowned gentleman-thief George Barrington with an almost forensic concentration and restraint. Originally developed as a doctoral thesis—a fact (unusually) that neither the author nor the publisher has tried to bury—*The Celebrated George Barrington* uses the Irish-born Barrington as a focus for exploring the print cultures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain. Barrington first rose to fame in the mid-1870s when tried in London for the theft of a snuffbox from a Russian count at the theatre. Newspapers reporting his trial emphasised his style and elegance as well as his convincing performance of innocence, and Garvey's description of his fall from this initial position of grace to notoriety in the public eye through the contemporary press coverage is well done.

Each time Barrington re-offended his convincing speeches in his own defence were met with increasing cynicism from the judicial system and journalists alike—and Garvey's affection for his subject is obvious in his estimations of Barrington's words as 'brilliant', 'skilful', and 'eloquent'. After being committed to several bouts of hard labour for his crimes, and following a period of exile from London, Barrington was eventually transported to colonial New South Wales in 1895, later going on to become a constable at Parramatta. With Barrington's departure from England came the first publications falsely attributed to his name, with publishers and booksellers drawing on his celebrity to promote works in which he had had no role.

George Barrington is not the subject here so much as the legend associated with his name, as Garvey notes: 'the legend is more readily recoverable, and potentially constitutes a more important subject of inquiry, than a speculation on the details of the 'real' George Barrington's life'. Barrington's relationship to print culture is mapped in three different sections: the first looks at the construction of the Barrington legend through the contemporary press, the second describes the publishing history of the Barrington biographies, and the third examines the texts that exploited his name and reputation. Together they offer an acute sense of the materiality of the Barrington books, their production, circulation, and to some extent their consumption as well as conveying a vivid sense of the opportunistic nature of the book trade.

Compared with the far-reaching scope of McKenzie's *A Swindler's Progress*, Garvey's book stays close to its primary subject matter. While this makes for a very focused narrative, the reader may sometimes be left wishing to explore some of the by-ways the story promises to open up: for example the details of Barrington's life in fiction are passed over with a brief mention, and although eighteenth-century biography is described as a form, few names are mentioned or specific cases offered in comparison with the Barrington books. As a work of excavation it can seem ungenerous to its predecessors, describing Barrington as having been 'all but forgotten in recent years' despite a 2001 biography by Sheila Box and multiple works by Suzanne Rickard including *George Barrington's Voyage to Botany Bay* (2001), an edited edition of a Barrington book with a 65 page introduction. Both are acknowledged, though mainly in footnotes, and then mainly to point out minor factual errors. But this kind of possessiveness is perhaps understandable in such an obsessive bibliographic project. Most of all, *The Celebrated George Barrington* is an extraordinary research feat, its annotated bibliography giving order to the tangled archive of Barrington publications as well as showing how his celebrity emerged from the print culture of his time. It's hard to imagine someone setting out to write another scholarly work on Barrington now—but if they did, Garvey's book would provide the ultimate research tool.

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