The National Library contains a great deal of material relating to George Barrington. Suzanne Rickard explores this material...
The Library's collections illuminate Barrington's remarkable career from his humble beginnings in 1755, as George Waldron, the son of artisan parents, through the years he took to become the celebrated gentleman thief. He successfully aped the manners and fashions of London's modish young dandies and then, with apparent ease, stole their valuables. His highly successful 'thieving' years in the metropolis were reported with relish by contemporary newspaper hacks. Official historical documents, including convict records, permit us to track him down after his transportation to Botany Bay in 1790, and to note his surprising elevation to Superintendent of Convicts at Toongabbie in 1796. A solitary death notice survives which records his untimely death at the age of forty-nine, at Parramatta, in 1804.

According to the annals which form part of the extensive Ferguson Collection at the National Library, Barrington's criminal career began at the tender age of fifteen. He ran away from home and school after assaulting a fellow pupil, having stolen his headmaster's precious gold hunter and a purse of twelve guineas to help finance his escape. In Drogheda he was enticed by the limelight to join a group of travelling players and showed promise as a young actor, taking the part of Jaffier in Otway's *Venice Preserved*. But he quickly recognised that a thespian career promised uncertain financial returns and decided to invest his newly-found talents in more lucrative fields.

With the help of a criminal accomplice, John Price, he changed his name, successfully disguised himself as a gentleman gambler and launched a new career. Picking the pockets of race-goers in Maynooth and Dublin was a great financial success, and he managed to filch a substantial income with undetected and gracious skills. But his new occupation came to a halt when, in 1773, his accomplice, John Price, was arrested.

George Barrington, as he was then known, made a judicious and hasty escape to England where he intended to lie low and try for an acting career on the London stage. His acting success came, but not on the stage as he had planned. It was earned in the mêlée of crowded theatre foyers and pleasure gardens. Barrington earned his enduring reputation not as Ireland's great actor, but as England's most renowned 'Prince of Pickpockets.'

Celebrated in the infamous Newgate Calendars, his status was certainly elevated through sensational newspaper reports and the day-to-day grape-vine of rumour and salacious gossip. Journalists took delight in alerting hapless patrons of theatre and turf to his phenomenal thieving skills, hinting at his rumoured whereabouts and describing his latest disguises. When he was finally convicted in late 1790 and sentenced to transportation, Barrington turned on the press and blamed his misfortune on its 'envenomed tooth of calumny'.

Nevertheless, Barrington revelled in his clandestine fame and contemporary publishers, too, were quick to cash in on his infamy, publishing such scandalous volumes as *The Memoirs of George Barrington: Containing Every Remarkable Circumstance, from his Birth to the Present Time... with the Whole of his Celebrated Speeches, Taken from the Records of the King's Bench, Old Bailey, etc.*

Life in the colony had a reforming effect upon the infamous London pickpocket. Judge-Advocate David Collins, Captain Watkin Tench, and Governor Hunter all commented upon Barrington's remarkable transformation. The *Historical Records of Australia* contains testimony to Barrington's thoughtful, sober and...
zealous demeanour. As Superintendent of Convicts at Parramatta, he apparently carried out his duties with commendable diligence. It was always the best plan to set a thief to catch a thief. Impressive though his colonial metamorphosis was, it has been eclipsed by his legendary notoriety in London.

The 'Prince of Pickpockets' reputation was fostered by an unflagging ability to produce elegant treatises in his own defence. This finely-honed skill never deserted him, even when he was forced to confront the most senior judges at the Old Bailey. In celebrated court-room appearances, Barrington impressed with erudite oratory. Jurors and judges were astonished to find such a person in their midst, able to present such eloquent pleas for mercy and understanding. Barrington often outclassed his accusers and demonstrated an intimate knowledge of the law. Having argued on the weaknesses of the prosecution's case (often related to lack of tangible evidence) he regularly, though not always, eluded a verdict of 'guilty'.

As if oratorical talents were not enough to justify his equivocal reputation, then literary gifts have been added to Barrington's list of talents. This extraordinary thief was misleadingly represented as the author of a leather-bound, illustrated and hand-tinted colonial diary entitled, A Voyage to New South Wales: With a Description of the Country, Manners, Customs, Religions, etc., of the Natives in the Vicinity of Botany Bay, first published in 1795. Unscrupulous nineteenth century publishers used every opportunity to tout Barrington's name in the certain knowledge that it alone would boost their sales. It was in the 1930s that Australian historian Arthur Jose, and bibliographer Sir John Ferguson, succeeded in disproving Barrington's claims as an author. But for them he may have continued to bask in undeserved glory as a colonial diarist of great repute. A Voyage to New South Wales is one of the important early entries in Ferguson's Bibliography of Australia, and is a noted bibliographic curiosity. Although publishers adopted George Barrington's name to ensure sales in the Old Dart, expert opinion confirmed that many entries were lifted straight from the observations of the respected colonial diarists, Watkin Tench and David Collins. Barrington's contribution to this publication remains tantalisingly unproved. This rare edition, and those that followed, helped establish Barrington's reputation. Entrepreneurial publishers simply stole diarists' words, in much the same manner as Barrington had stolen purses.

George Barrington's presence at the National Library is the direct result of the dedicated sleuthing tasks undertaken by the bibliographers, Ferguson and Edward Petherick, and the collector, Rex Nan Kivell. Scholars are indeed fortunate that they are able to recreate the details of Barrington's crowded life through the eclectic collections which span the worlds of history, art and fiction.

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George Barrington, unlike many of his fellow transported criminals, was an uncommonly gifted criminal. A hand coloured mezzotint depicts A Fleet of Transports under Convoy. From the Rex Nan Kivell Collection Photographed for reproduction by NLA Photographics

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History and libraries are essential and mutual companions. In Canberra, library users familiar with the diversity of bibliographic services often begin research at the National Library of Australia. First time library users who are unfamiliar with the diversity of the services offered, are encouraged to
learn that the collections within the National Library, in all interstate libraries and in many learned institutions, can be easily identified through microfiche and through the National Library's link with the Australian Bibliographic Network. Through computerised satellite database networks, librarians are able to further assist readers by logging into world-wide systems of bibliographic information on specialised library collections of printed books, journals, manuscripts, pictorial collections, maps and ephemera.

The excitement of discovering the riches hidden within the Library's collections is an experience awaiting all researchers. From within the microfiche catalogues and card indexes, the potential for unexpected discovery is ever present. With the assistance of specialist librarians, fruitful information can be retrieved by simply identifying appropriate subject classifications or by hitting the essential 'key-word' on the library's computer terminals. However, unlocking the Library's accumulated store of knowledge is often achieved through a fortunate combination of academic skill, educated hunches and that special ingredient—serendipity.

Serendipity, the faculty of making desirable but unlooked-for discoveries, plays a vital part in any research program. When I visited the National Library in 1989 to look for thesis material in Australian colonial history, I made one of those discoveries. A brief enquiry to the Library's Pictorial Section on the provenance of three hand-tinted plates dated 1803, depicting early Sydney scenes, led to my introduction to George Barrington. At the outset, pictorial experts simply identified the engraver, Woodthorpe, and provided specific historical details about the origin of the prints and the London publisher. But this casual enquiry yielded far more than artistic provenance, and ultimately led to renewed inquiry into the life and legend of George Barrington.

The Library's pictorial staff were able to confirm that the coloured engravings were, in fact, book plates which had originally appeared in a volume attributed to George Barrington, written from Parramatta in 1793, and published in London in 1795. This volume, A Voyage to New South Wales: With a Description of the Country, Manners, Customs, Religion, etc., of the Natives in the Vicinity of Botany Bay, by George Barrington, now Superintendent of Convicts at Parramatta, contains a preface—by Barrington—which graciously, albeit ironically, acknowledges the wisdom and justice of His Majesty, King George III.

The National Library was able to identify other important material relating to Barrington held outside the Library through the Australian Bibliographic Network. Through the network, a manuscript letter written by Barrington in 1777 seeking mercy from a victim of his depredations, a Mrs Ann Dudman, was identified in the Mitchell Library's collections in Sydney. This letter may be the only tangible evidence of Barrington's literary skills to have survived. The National Library has also assisted in identifying a Staffordshire pottery show cup, the 'Barrington' Mug, emblazoned with the figure of Barrington stealing the watch of Mr Henry Townsend, Esquire, the act which led to his downfall. The cup is part of the permanent collection held at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.

From the National Library's collections it becomes clear that Barrington's historical and literary careers have flourished since the 1770s. George Barrington was an uncommonly gifted criminal. Historical evidence gleaned from the collections attest to his special charisma, a quality evident from earliest youth. He was a man who managed to attract attention in whatever role he chose to adopt. His pleasing good looks were enhanced by an array of clever disguises and, following a series of daring thefts, he was ensured celebrity status in the metropolitan press and in London's convivial coffee houses. His exploits in London and New South Wales have crossed the boundaries of time and history and will continue to captivate the imagination of historians, artists and dreamers.

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