

The Prince of
PICKPOCKETS

*I*n late eighteenth-century Britain, the name Barrington was a famous one. An Irish comic actor, John Barrington, had developed a reputation as 'the pre-eminent stage Irishman of his day' over an almost forty-year career in the theatres of Dublin, London, and most of the stages in between.¹ An Irish barrister, parliamentarian and author named Jonah Barrington was just rising to prominence.² There was also an English baronet family of Barringtons – whose seat was Barrington Hall in Essex – who maintained an interest in the House of Commons in this period.³ Above all, there was the family of John Shute Barrington, a theological writer and MP who was elevated to the Irish peerage in 1720.⁴ The children of this first Lord Barrington included four sons remarkable for the range of their worldly success – a politician who held high positions in government for over thirty years, a bishop, an admiral, and a judge who was also a noted antiquarian and Fellow of the Royal Society.⁵ In short, this was an extraordinary aristocratic family, 'eminently distinguished for Rank of Talents', as one contemporary newspaper put it.⁶ Yet when late eighteenth-century Britain read about a man often described as 'the celebrated Barrington', 'the noted Barrington' or 'the ingenious Mr. Barrington', it was reading about a different man from any of the above – a man whose claim to fame, as



Portrait of Barrington, published in 1810. Hordern House Rare Books.

much as he sought to avoid it, was as the greatest thief of his generation.

An early critical work on popular culture, Charles Mackay's *Memoirs of Extraordinary Public Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, reflected on the curious 'popular admiration for great thieves' in English history:

[whether] it be that the multitude, feeling the pangs of poverty, sympathise with the daring and ingenious depredators who take away the rich man's superfluity, or whether it be the interest that mankind in general feel for the records of perilous adventures, it is certain that the populace ... look with admiration upon great and successful thieves.⁷

More recent scholars, while allowing the antiquity of the English cultural tradition of popular veneration of robbers, have seen the eighteenth century as a critical period in the development of the 'cult of crime'.⁸ Christopher Hibbert's influential study, *The Roots of Evil*, argues that English culture of this time indulged, as no era before, in the 'romance of crime'.⁹ This romanticisation appears to have been made possible by a progressive decline in violence and violent crime in England through the eighteenth century, a trend Robert Shoemaker attributes to changing attitudes, particularly amongst the gentry, towards the social (un)acceptability of violent actions.¹⁰ Perhaps it is symptomatic of this growing repugnance for antisocial violence that the most famous thief of the late eighteenth century was not a bold, macho highwayman, but a sophisticated, elegant pickpocket who went by the aristocratic name George Barrington. That this may have been something of an epochal shift is worth considering; though the pickpocket would seem to have little of the refractory glamour attached to the highwayman, this figure was perhaps more attuned to the spirit of the age. At least one contemporary writer was prepared to risk charges of foppery by announcing his preference toward 'being genteely eased of my purse by the accomplished Barrington, to being knocked down and robbed by a villainous footpad'.¹¹

Yet while the pickpocket Barrington followed a criminal course fundamentally dissimilar to the bold robbers 'whose peculiar chivalry formed at once the dread and delight of England'¹², he can nonetheless be placed in the tradition of quasi-heroic popular thieves stretching back to Robin Hood and beyond. Comments made by foreign visitors surprised by Barrington's 'great reputation' echo the bemusement of earlier visitors in the popular reception of British criminals of previous eras.¹³ But it was the magnitude of the reputation itself, rather than the man behind it, which was the most salient point of comparison between Barrington and earlier criminals who had captured the

public imagination. If Barrington was able to maintain somewhat more control over his 'public image' than, for example, Jack Sheppard – whose feats of escape became so exaggerated that Defoe was able to represent him as 'a Creature something more than Man, a Protœus, Supernatural'¹⁴ – all his considerable skills at self-representation could not prevent the growth of a reputation as a super-thief, the 'Prince of Pickpockets'.¹⁵

The apocryphal nature of much that was written about the famed pickpocket leaves the details of his life, particularly his early years, shrouded in obscurity. Barrington made repeated claims to being by profession a surgeon¹⁶, and it does seem likely that he had some medical training. The philosopher and prison reformer Jeremy Bentham found Barrington acting as a medical officer while on the prison hulks in Woolwich in the late 1770s, a version of events supported by the fact that Barrington was once identified in court by a man 'who had been in the care of him at the hulks'.¹⁷ This in itself does little to clarify Barrington's background, however. While arguing that eighteenth-century medical practitioners should not be automatically caricatured as quacks, Irvine Loudon has emphasised the profound diversity among those who identified themselves as medical practitioners, noting 'the absence of a clear distinction between the orthodox or regular practitioner and the unorthodox irregular or quack'.¹⁸ Moreover, as medicine had not yet become a clearly defined profession, it was not uncommon that 'educated men ... "took up" medicine as a hobby or as a means of helping their less fortunate neighbours'.¹⁹ Barrington, whose articulate speeches in court suggest that he was well educated, may have fallen into this latter category as easily as into the former.

Of course, the post-1790 biographies of Barrington, which sensationalised his 'life', assumed criminal activity was his main livelihood before and after leaving Ireland. The version of the

Memoirs of George Barrington that would become the most influential account of Barrington's life casts its protagonist in a particularly incorrigible light, representing his claims to being a surgeon as nothing more than a ruse, just another in the series of impostures which, for that text, defined Barrington's identity.²⁰ In this version of his 'life', Barrington runs away from a grammar school in Dublin and joins a company of travelling players, where he receives his training both in dissimulation and in crime.²¹ While this would seem a very convenient way of constructing Barrington's background to fit his later life, it is not out of the question that he had become a professional thief and gentlemanly impostor very early on. The *Morning Post* of Friday, 27 October 1775, reported that on the previous day, 'a young man with the appearance and dress of a gentleman, was detected picking a gentleman's pocket in the park'. On that occasion, the ignominy of a trial was spared the genteel pickpocket, but a traditional form of rough justice was meted out: the alleged offender 'was delivered to the mob, by whom he was conducted to the canal'.²²

If the subject of this report was in fact Barrington, he was apparently undeterred from the practice of picking pockets, and was quickly to become familiar with more formal legal proceedings. Barrington's arrival in the public sphere was, moreover, a truly sensational event. The London papers had been carefully detailing the movements of one Count Orlov, a visiting Russian nobleman known for ostentatious displays of wealth.²³ On Friday, 27 October 1775, Orlov attended Covent Garden theatre. As the papers the following week had it, while the nobleman was putting on his coat in the lobby after the performance,

he felt a man's hand in his pocket, and instantly missed his snuff-box; he seized the person directly, and received his box; the man was taken into custody, and carried before the Magistrates in Bow-street