

Basic Detail Report

00017357

Title

Ballad 'The Swaggering Man'

Date

1819 - 1844

Primary Maker

John Pitts

Medium

Ink on paper

Dimensions

Overall: 246 x 90 mm, 0.023 kg

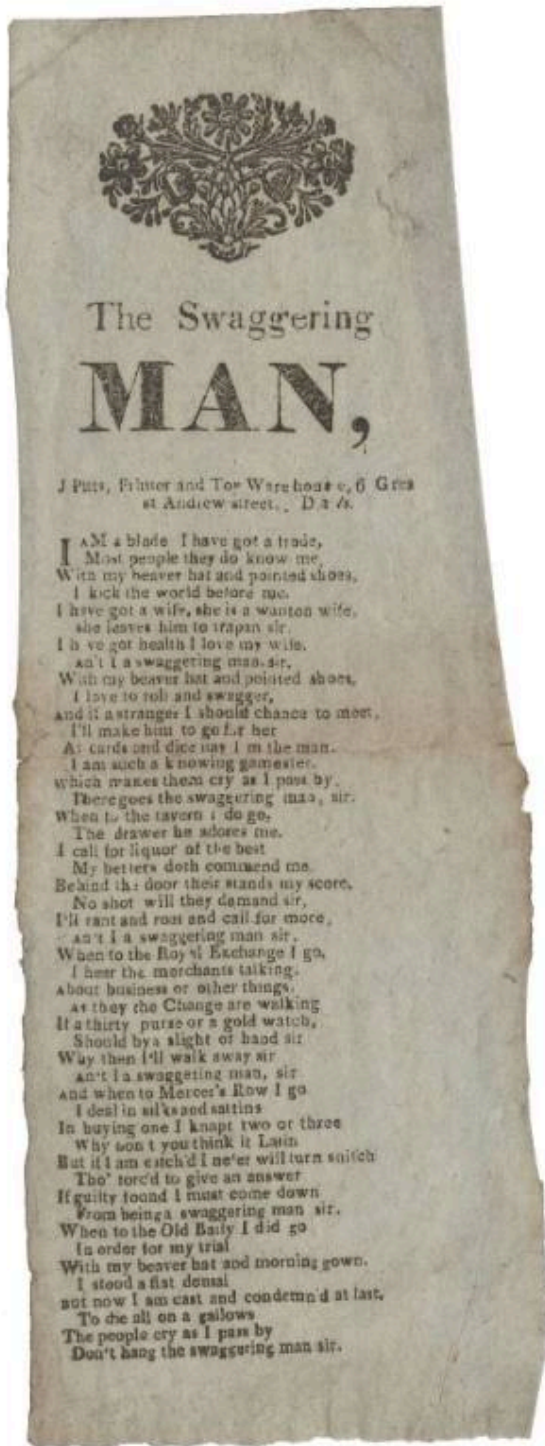
Name

Broadsheet

History

Broadsheets or broadsides, as they were also known, were originally used to communicate official or royal decrees. They were printed on one side of paper and became a popular medium of communication between the 16th and 19th centuries in Europe, particularly Britain. They were able to be printed quickly and cheaply and were widely distributed in public spaces including churches, taverns and town squares. The cheap nature of the broadside and its wide accessibility meant that its intended audience were often literate individuals but from varying social standings. The illiterate may have also had access to this literature as many of the ballads were designed to be read aloud. The ballads also covered a wide range of subject matter such as witchcraft, epic war battles, murder and maritime themes and events. They

were suitably dramatic and often entertaining, but occasionally they were designed as elaborate cautionary tales for those contemplating a life of crime. The broadside ballads in the museum's collection were issued by a range of London printers and publishers for sale on the streets by hawkers. They convey, often comically, stories about love, death, shipwrecks, convicts and pirates. Each ballad communicates a sense that these stories were designed to be read aloud for all to enjoy, whether it was at the local tavern



or a private residence. One such ballad, 'The Swaggering Man' is alleged to have been written about one of the most famous convicts in history. George Barrington was born around 1755 near Dublin, Ireland. He attended a reputable school but fled it at the age of 16 after stabbing another boy with a penknife and stealing money and a gold watch. He then met some local players, who made their money swindling and pickpocketing unsuspecting victims. The group's leader, John Price, taught the new apprentice the art of pickpocketing, and so Barrington's notorious career began. In the early 1770s, Price and Barrington moved to London as partners in crime and flourished in their lucrative business in theft. Price was subsequently arrested in 1773 and sentenced to transportation to America. Barrington quickly became notorious, earning many labels including 'prince of pickpockets' and 'prince of rogues'. He posed as a gentleman, led a lavish lifestyle and counted influential people amongst his acquaintances and victims. In 'A Voyage to Botany Bay' (a text attributed to Barrington and first published in 1795), the introduction notes: 'It would prove unuseful and even tasteless to follow Mr. Barrington through all his early scenes of dissipation and licentiousness: we shall therefore content ourselves with giving the most remarkable of his feats, as detached anecdote.' The text goes on to list his most famous crimes. Barrington once posed as a clergyman, pickpocketed members of the English Court and managed to cut the diamonds off the clothing of a Knight of the Garter, completely unobserved. Over the 1770s, he was arrested numerous times and once, in 1775, he was caught stealing from the Russian Count Orlov. The target was a snuff-box encrusted with diamonds worth 30,000 pounds (around 3.7 million pounds in 2011). Barrington's charm and clever oratorical skills, however, consistently ensured that justice was never fully carried out. In the end, he often served only part of his sentence on the prison hulks at Woolwich. Despite his charm, however, on 15 September 1790 Barrington was tried at the Old Bailey (Central Criminal Court in London) for stealing a gold watch and chain belonging to Henry Hare Townsend Esquire, at Enfield racecourse. He rose to the occasion yet again, putting on a performance that allegedly brought the jury to tears. He was given a relatively lenient sentence of seven years transportation to New South Wales. One quote from Barrington during the trial demonstrates his charisma and was published in 'A Voyage to Botany Bay': 'The world has given me credit for much greater abilities than I am conscious of possessing: the world should also consider that the greatest abilities may be so obstructed by the ill-nature of some unfeeling minds, as to render them nearly useless to the possessor. And where was the generous and powerful man to come forward, and say - "Barrington, you have some abilities which may be of service to yourself and the public, but you have much obstruction - I feel for your situation, and shall place you in a condition to try the sincerity of your intentions; and as long as you act with diligence and integrity, you shall not want for countenance and relief?" Alas! My lord, had never the supreme felicity of having such comfort administered to his wounded spirits, as matters have unfortunately turned out.' Barrington was transported to Sydney in the supply ship ACTIVE and arrived in September 1791. He was sent to work on a farm at Toongabbie and after a year was given a conditional pardon and posted as a watch on the government supplies. He appeared to have reformed from his criminal activities and was subsequently granted a full pardon by Governor John Hunter and appointed chief constable in Parramatta in 1796. Barrington acquired several plots of land around Parramatta and the Hawkesbury. By 1800, however, Barrington was declared insane. He resigned his post and received a pension until his death on 27 December 1804. Barrington's reputation as an author has been proven to be false; there is no solid evidence of him ever writing the works which have been attributed to him, including 'A Voyage to Botany

Bay', 'The History of New South Wales' (1802) or the prologue spoken at the opening of the first colonial theatre in 1796. As a well-known personality in both London and New South Wales, unscrupulous publishers may have taken advantage of his reputation to promote their literature.