

# Britain's Literary Heritage

## POPULAR LITERATURE IN EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

### UNIT EIGHT

**The Barry Ono Collection of Bloods and Penny  
Dreadfuls  
Section 6**

### Primary Source Media



## POPULAR LITERATURE IN EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

### **Unit Eight: The Barry Ono Collection of Bloods and Penny Dreadfuls Section 6.**

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#### PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is the Eighth unit of the Research Publications series entitled Popular Literature in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Britain.

Unit One covered the Robert White Collection of Chapbooks from the University Library, Newcastle Upon Tyne. This is particularly rich in Scottish and Newcastle imprints, especially for the eighteenth century.

Unit Two covered the Sabine Baring-Gould and Thomas Crampton Collections from the British Library, London. These are well known for the richness of their ballad literature and the Crampton collection focuses on ballads published by H. Such in London and Jackson of Birmingham in the nineteenth century.

Unit Three commenced publication of the Barry Ono Collection, also from the British Library, London. This collection, continued in Units four, five, six, seven and the present unit and future units offers unparalleled holdings of bloods, penny dreadfuls, and penny-issue novels, as well as fine examples of broadsheets, gallows tales and some of the first popular comics. As such, it adds excellent coverage of new genres, as well as filling out some that have already been touched upon.

'Barry Ono' was the stage name of Mr. F.V. Harrison, a music hall artist and self-proclaimed 'Penny Dreadful King'. During his life he amassed over 500 volumes of collected penny parts, which he bequeathed to the British Library in 1946. As Louis James has observed in his Fiction and the Working Man, 1830-1850 "only a moiety of this literature has survived". Most was simply discarded by its readers who were eager for the next installment. Very little found its way into libraries and much has decayed due to the poor quality of the original paper. In this light the survival of the Barry Ono collection is remarkable.

It would be a mistake to think this fiction was only read by the working classes. In a speech in 1878 Lord Shaftesbury observed that "it is creeping not only into the houses of the poor, neglected, and untaught, but into the largest mansions; penetrating into religious families and astounding careful parents by its frightful issues." After the explosion of printing caused by the invention of the rotary steam printing press this material poured onto the sheets to be taken up and read by all classes and to the rapidly expanding juvenile market by the end of the nineteenth century.

'Penny Bloods' and 'Penny Dreadfuls' are characterized by poor printing, lurid woodcut illustrations and tales of ghosts, ghouls, demonology, occultism, torture and unbridled lust. In many ways they fulfilled the same roles as the eighteenth century Newgate Calendars and Gothic novels, giving explicit details of terrible murders and misfortunes and playing upon the sex and blood lust of their audience.

'Penny-issue novels' include such famous serial novels as Black Bess (about Dick Turpin) or the Maniac Father which ran for up to 5 years with a cliff-hanger at the end of each episode. Others were bowdlerized versions of contemporary middle class novels (eg. Current American Notes by Buz, which is a fairly obvious take off of Dicken's own American Notes).

Whatever their literary merit may be, these items are very important in documenting prevailing moods and attitudes and in providing the substance of popular culture. They are also an important pre-cursor of radio, film and television in many ways and some of the genres will seem familiar. For example:

- Criminals with a heart of gold (eg. Black Bess, Robin Hood)
- Sea stories (eg. Black Rollo, The Mutiny on the Lapwing)
- Romance and Adventure in the Middle Ages (eg. Barons of Old)
- Detective Stories (eg. Ruth, the Murdered Child)
- Horror (eg. Grimm's Goblins, the Black Spectre)
- Cowboys and Indians (eg. Buffalo Bill's Wild West)
- Schooldays (eg. Tom Willdrake's Schoolboys, Tom Truant)
- Tales of Empire (eg. The Young Australian, Jack Harkaway)
- Romantic Fiction (eg. Phoebe; or the Miller's Maid,  
Lady Hamilton)
- Poor boy made good (eg. Charity Joe)
- Crime and punishment (The Modern Newgate Calendar,  
Famous Crimes) and many more.

In the early Victorian Era, the popularity of anti-heros such as highwaymen, for example, the story of Gentleman Jack; or, Life on the Road show the appeal of the criminal. Criminals symbolised ... "human freedom as opposed to organisation, and spirit in the face of dull respectability", said Louis James in his work Fiction For The Working Man 1830-1850. (London 1963) He went on to add that ... "elements of public interest in criminals went beyond the central aspect of morbid curiosity and sadism. We all have elements of crime in us, and in different circumstances might be in the dock. In reading of violence, larceny and murder we are vicariously exploring the dark corners of our own personality."

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Adventure abounds in many of the 'Penny Bloods' and 'Penny Dreadfuls' adding a little light relief to gruesome tales. Tales of foreign lands prove to be a popular subject where readers are introduced to the exotic wonders of worlds they will in all probability never see. Africa, and in particular, South Africa were frequently used as a background for the hero's or heroine's exploits. In many of these stories, the protagonist was of British nationality and concepts like national pride and patriotism were essential threads running through the story.

As well as the two previously mentioned genres, love, romance, magic and the occult feature quite strongly in this series. Collections such as The Hogarth House Romances and The Illustrated Garden of Romance contain a variety of love stories and adventure-romances. These cater mainly for the female audience and do much to describe attitudes to women at the time.

The project opens up new areas of research for literary scholars, social historians and social scientists as well as being of interest to those studying printing history and the development of illustrations in the popular press.

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### POPULAR LITERATURE IN EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

Unit Eight: The Barry Ono Collection of Bloods and  
Penny Dreadfuls from the British Library,  
London.  
Section 6.

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