

# A GIMCRACK WHIM COLLECTOR

By N. M. WOODALL

A REMARKABLE feature of the culture and learning of this country is the many unlikely people who have indirectly and even directly contributed to them. Such a man was James Salter, or Don Saltero, as he is better known. A simple man, with little personal charm or learning, something of a charlatan in an age of charlatanism, he made in his way a definite contribution to our awareness of culture.

In the Middle Ages churches were the only places where objects of interest were displayed to the man in the street, and even now many old churches, both in the country and in the City of London, contain a few curiosities. Next came the taverns and the coffee-houses, and then the privately owned collections which were almost shows—Campe's, which opened in 1710 near Charing Cross, or Rackshaw's, which occupied two rooms in Fleet-street from 1736. Then in 1753 the British Museum was founded, and that brings us back to Don Saltero, for he and the British Museum have much in common. They both owed so much to Sir Hans Sloane.

Sir Hans was a much travelled man and a great collector of the antique and the curious; and he had for a while as a servant one James Salter. Little is known of Salter as an individual. Steele described him as "a sage of thin and meagre countenance." He appears to have been of Irish descent, and he was certainly a shrewd and imaginative man, a queer Celtic mixture of showman and shyster, and yet with that real desire for knowledge which is the mark of the Celt.

When Salter retired from service he settled in Chelsea in 1673 and set up a coffee-house and barber-shop combined, where, we are told, he was famous for his punch; he entertained a little on the fiddle and shaved his customers, bled them and drew their teeth for nothing. This strange blend of hospitality proved most successful at a time when men had no clubs as they are known to-day in which to meet and talk—and there was plenty of talk here. The London historian Bowack says that "the place was noted for its good conversation and for many honourable worthy inhabitants, etc."

But Don Saltero, for by this name were both he and his coffee-house now famous, decided to enliven the place further and attract more custom by having on view a room devoted to curiosities—possibly the first of its kind in England and a forerunner of the many great institutions that exist to-day. Here his old master, Sir Hans Sloane, came to the rescue and an embryo collection of oddities was given to Don Saltero out of the duplicates and cast-offs of the great Sloane collection. These proved a popular success, and many other distinguished people gave contributions.

Soon people from all over London travelled to see the Knackatory, as it was called. Old Admiral Munden was a frequent visitor after he had retired from long service in Spain. It was he who christened Salter Don Saltero, possibly thinking of Cervantes's famous Spanish knight who made his helmet out of a barber's basin, and the name stuck and became famous. Benjamin Franklin came up the Thames to see the show. After several moves it was settled in its real and final home in Cheyne-walk, Chelsea.

What was there to see? One of the most extraordinary collections of objects of real interest, of utter rubbish and of ludicrous fancy that have ever been assembled together in one place. There were many catalogues printed and the British Museum still possesses sixteen different editions. The stairs were hung thickly with weapons, prints and casts. Around the walls and in glass cases were displayed many old maps and zoological exhibits; but the Don had, too, a more spectacular vein to his make-up. In case No. 1 was a "piece of Queen Catherine's Skin," "the Pope's Candle with which he

curses Heretics," "the pair of Drawers of a Chinese Lady," "a petrified Mushroom," "Lace made from human Hair, very curious" and "petrified rain."

Many among the Don's most fantastic exhibits had a strongly Biblical flavour. Case No. 6 had "Manna from Canaan; it drops from the clouds twice a year in May and June, one day in each month," "a Necklace of Job's Tears," "a piece of Nun's Skin," and, to my mind, best of all, a straw hat labelled "Pontius Pilate's Wife's Chambermaid's Hat." It was this last flight of fancy which aroused the ire of the otherwise admiring Sir Richard Steele when he wrote in the *Tatler* in June, 1709. Royal exhibits were popular too. They included "The flaming Sword of William the Conqueror," "Queen Elizabeth's Strawberry Dish, and her Chambermaid's Hat" (the Don seems to have had a weakness for chambermaids' hats).

For many years Don Saltero thrived. The Don himself died



*Saltero's Coffee house 10 April 1723*

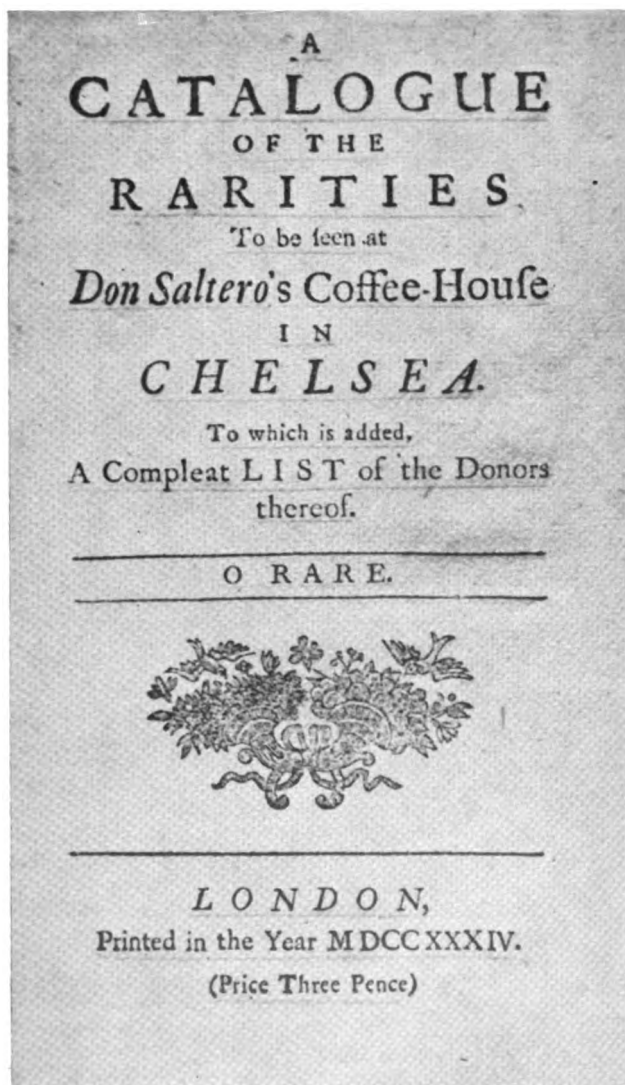
*James Saltero*

*Richard Steele*

*Hans Sloane*

*Don Saltero*

*Richard Steele*



AN EARLY-18th-CENTURY ENGRAVING OF THE CHELSEA COFFEE-HOUSE OF JAMES SALTER, OR DON SALTERO, WHO HAD BEEN SERVANT TO SIR HANS SLOANE. (Left) AN EARLY EDITION (1734) OF THE CATALOGUE OF RARITIES SHOWN BY DON SALTERO AT HIS COFFEE-HOUSE

about 1728, and his daughter, Mrs. Hall, and her husband carried on. Not long before he died, the Don appeared in print for the first time, in the *Weekly Journal*, where, under the date June 22, 1723, appears the following:

Sir,  
Fifty years since to Chelsea great  
From Rodman on the Irish Main  
I stol'd with Maggots in my Pate,  
Where much improv'd, they still  
remain;  
Through various Employes I've past  
A Scraper, Vertuos'-Projector,  
Tooth Drawer, Trimmer, and at last  
I'm now a Gimcrack Whim Col-  
lector . . .

and so on for four more verses, signed, "Don Saltero, Chelsea Knackatory."

Although the Knackatory carried on under Mrs. Hall until 1760 and as a business until 1799, it lacked the guiding imagination of its founder. On January 7, 1799, the house lease and the collection were auctioned. The whole 121 lots of the curios realised only some £50, the highest price for any single lot being £1 16s. for a model of the Holy Sepulchre. The house remained, a tavern still bearing a green sign with the gilt lettering "Don Saltero's 1695," but in 1867 all this was swept away, and the house, re-built, became No. 18, Cheyne-walk.

Illustrations: Chelsea Public Library.