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## THE SERVICE OF THE ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY

C. R. H. TAYLOR

THE service of the Alexander Turnbull Library is conditioned first by the nature of its collections, which are the direct outcome of its origins. Alexander Turnbull, with considerable but not unlimited means, aimed originally to make an imperial collection, but soon narrowed his scope to New Zealand and the Pacific on the one hand, and on the other, English literature of the 17th to the 19th centuries. Inevitably as a private collector, he had odd interests apart from these fields, and he developed them variously. Thus his maritime books are of exceptional importance, as are the several groups that can come under the heading of graphic art. This includes early MSS., incunabula and other printing down to the private presses of the present day, as well as examples of bookmaking and illustrations since the fifteenth century. The section on drama and the

Mr C. R. H. Taylor is Librarian, Alexander Turnbull Library. This address was given at the first general session on 'The Library in the Community' at the 1954 Conference.

stage is probably as much an expression of this kind of interest as of its relationship to the stream of literature.

In the intervening years there have come small collections, usually by gift, that have character of their own. Hence the Earp collection is devoted to bee-lore, the Hogg collection, not to animal husbandry, but to Scottish literature, the two Trimble collections to Italian statecraft and to Irish history respectively. In addition, the Esperanto collection was bequeathed by a Christchurch enthusiast, a considerable group of Joan of Arc has recently been accepted, and two well assembled collections on flags make the result one of the best in existence, and one often used. The Wood bequest on illustrations of the 1860's is probably unexcelled. The Shetland Society, the Numismatic Society, the Philatelic Society have deposited their libraries with the Turnbull. The Polynesian Society library, by virtue of a close liaison is readily available and frequently used, especially for loan purposes.

The result is that in the subjects that the Turnbull covers, it can provide material on the scale of a very much larger library. This is of course only saying in another way that there are exactly those advantages in specialization. Our trend today is to stress this aspect still more. For instance, the Pacific scope of the collections now aims to have little more than representation in the more distant parts of the Pacific, such as Indonesia and Malaya. China and Japan, except in so far as they impinge on the South Pacific, are virtually excluded, though there is an increasing interest, especially with the archaeologist and ethnologist, in a fuller study of the Orient.

The second factor affecting the library's service is its status. For want of a better term, I construe this to include its repute as well as its physical position. At the opposite end of Wellington from the city library, and in the centre of the official quarter, the Turnbull is inevitably drawn upon heavily and increasingly by government departments. For mere convenience people appeal to us because we are handy. From understandable ignorance of our limits, many others seek our help. We try to keep on the shelves much of what people expect us to keep. Only if a subject is completely out of our field do we say 'Sorry, we cannot help you: try so and so'.

#### PROPER FUNCTION OF A RESEARCH LIBRARY

With this introductory view I can proceed to say what service we do provide. For the greater part it is a service that other libraries cannot provide, and it will be obvious that for the more advanced student and the more remote kind of problem the library can offer advantages. But there is another aspect to research in a library like this that is perhaps not fully appreciated. This is what one might dramatically term the challenge of the material itself. I can only deplore of course, the almost inevitable story that a real find comes to light in a heap of neglected material on the floor. I suppose the researcher is entitled to his mite of melodrama. There *are* continual discoveries to be made, new light to be cast on accepted narratives or facts. Professor Davidson of the Australian National University of Canberra wrote recently in *Historical Studies* that much of New Zealand's history needs rewriting, and widely accepted views need re-orientating.

It is not the function of the library to go beyond a certain point in assessing books and manuscripts in cataloguing or calendaring. Indeed

there are plenty of scholars who regard the librarian as a mere servant as did Carlyle, and are frequently astonished that the reference assistant can show him short-cuts and sources of knowledge unsuspected. When some years ago two research people identified an important early map in the library, they took satisfaction in the assertion that the library authorities did not know what it was. My predecessor defended himself for not having proclaimed it himself. I say that need not be his function, nor was the implied criticism justified, for the scholar librarian is one that the professional librarian, today anyway, probably rightly admires with some reservation.

Use of the Turnbull Library by Victoria University College students as well as faculty is considerable, and the departments of English and History in particular rely upon its resources. It is regular practice for groups to attend the library with a tutor to examine early texts or original sources. Our building up of stock, especially in serials, is done with an eye to dovetailing with the University holdings. In smaller degree do we collaborate with the other university colleges, but as a rule borrowing is done by direct arrangement with the faculty member doing the research.

In our acquisition policy, it is probable that we operate on lines different from all other libraries in New Zealand. When important material comes on the market in the high-price field, an endeavour is made to acquire it for the Turnbull. This means that for a single purchase of a group, or an individual book, a price running into hundreds will not be a deterrent if the occasion warrants it. And as there is no other institution concerned with the acquisition of historical pictures, apart from such as are primarily works of art, I have followed in Turnbull's steps in acquiring such pictures. They are documents often quite as significant as written or printed material.

#### PECULIARITIES OF TURNBULL LIBRARY PRACTICE

It is undoubtedly a fact that the practice of segregating what we call Pacific from Non-Pacific material, in our shelves and in the catalogue, is an immense advantage for the student. Recently I have had two expressions of appreciation on this very point, one from Dr Derrick Freeman who has just returned to take up the lectureship in Anthropology at Otago. He has studied in most libraries with Pacific material in England, and still prefers the Turnbull. Mr W. J. Cameron, writing from the University of Reading, where he has a lectureship in English, wishes for the particular resources of the Turnbull, despite the Bodleian and the British Museum within forty miles. In some measure, this stresses the experience of many libraries, that small units are more manageable, more congenial, less awe-inspiring, than the great all-purpose library. An example of this kind of what I may call individual development, is in the Turnbull collection of pamphlets. Where another library might relegate them to the vertical file or shelf boxes, or class them as books (if they aren't thrown out), here they are always shelved chronologically, and the shelf-list becomes a tool of particular and quite unexpected advantage. For the student working in a period, his attention can readily be drawn to an unsuspected facet of his subject that neither catalogue nor a bibliography may indicate. The custom of compiling indexes to periodicals and notable books, to obituary notices and portraits has added greatly to reference facilities. I learned from the Public Library of New

South Wales the great value of a reference catalogue of obscure material in journals, MSS., books of cuttings and notes, etc., and ours has proved of increasing value these many years. For your delectation, I may say that three or four years ago this was almost the one feature of our operation that a service inspector criticized, as he didn't believe lightning struck twice in the same place.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

The use of MSS. is quite wide, and I must admit that our approaches to it are not as full as I could wish. I have hopes of a printed catalogue of the MSS. holdings this year, and that should be of wide service outside the library building. In the past, it was the custom for MSS. received in unbound state, to be mounted, guarded or panelled and then bound. Now we prefer to assemble groups in folders which in turn are filed in neat boxes on the shelves. Some MSS. are of positive reference value, and the catalogue or reference catalogue will analyse them. Others, such as the original MSS. of printed books, have, apart from some sentimental interest, only an occasional use for checking a misprint, a name or the nature of a revision. In developing original sources available for research, it is sometimes not possible to secure original manuscripts themselves; our frequent practice these many years is to borrow and copy by whatever means is convenient. Where bulk and time are a problem, photostat or microfilm is used, otherwise typed copies are made. Many hundreds of volumes on the shelves have come this way. But great quantities of such material present the same sort of challenge as do many of the rare books. There must be many more tomes or studies to be written to extend our knowledge of our past, to correct misinterpretations, to elucidate obscure points and so on.

In the field of reference inquiries, surely the bane of our lives is the never-ending genealogical quest. And yet, it is most difficult to distinguish in merit between this kind of search and many another. Plenty of American libraries have full-scale sections devoted to this kind of service. Well, we still do it. Another of our commonest is the demand for the identification and, covertly very often, the valuation of old books. Every day brings such visitors, and every mail its meed. Books without title pages are occasional snags, but the usual question is the simple one: Is this book any good? What is its value? I know it's not recommended practice in some libraries to give valuations, but to quote recent records, or to state the status of a book is usually adequate.

It is often a canon among reference librarians that they provide the books, but don't do the work. We will do it occasionally for people at a distance or overseas, but our job is to provide the wherewithal: and that's not always easy.

The medium of service is varied. Usually the reader takes notes from the material set before him. We don't mind copying short passages for correspondents, but we supply microfilm, photostat, copycat or photograph prints for either. And this leads me on to the service that we have developed beyond the practice of most libraries, the photograph collection. From 150,000 negatives and prints we have a continual stream of orders for photos of people, places, events, ships, buildings, fashions, floods, and fires throughout New Zealand's history. It engrosses the attention of two staff members.

## LECTURES AND EXHIBITIONS

It probably conveys the wrong concept of the library's activity to say that our public relations are part of a publicity policy. This is undeniable, but the reason is less a matter of exhibitionism than an attempt to bring some of the information in the library before the less research-minded among the community. Hence we give a series of lectures to all kinds of organizations, some that foregather in the library, and many whose assembly place is outside or even at a distance. Often these talks are illustrated by material from the library brought for the purpose.

And finally, and by no means least, is our policy of exhibitions. During my visit to the Huntington Library, at San Marino, California, Dr Max Farrand, then Director of Research, told me that a research or rare book library could gain incalculably by its exhibitions. Within the library they have since been a feature, of a quality I would fain improve, but in the past year and a half we have been able to carry this feature to a much better stage by taking it out to the man in the street. Now the exhibitions that we set up, often in conjunction with relevant organizations, in our show windows in Lambton Quay, not only interest, but actually inform. People who don't need (or dare) to consult the library, can get something from these shows. Often they are encouraged to follow up and find their interests fostered. And the library gains in sympathy, prestige and real utility.

So, in telling you this much of our service, I think I can end by quoting that inimitable American poet, Walt Mason, who said:

'Give value for the shining yen you put into your till.' We believe we do.

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