

Reviews

Alexander Turnbull: his Life, his Circle, his Collections. By E. H. McCormick.
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, 1974. xvi, 324 pp. N.Z. price: \$10.

ALEXANDER HORSBURGH TURNBULL was born in 1868, the son of a Wellington merchant who, leaving Scotland because he could not see himself being able to support his wife at the standard to which she was accustomed, became exceedingly prosperous and influential in his new country. Alexander entered the firm of W. & G. Turnbull in 1892 and in due course assumed full control. Under his guidance, the firm wasted away, until it was sold, in 1916, to Wright Stephenson. Educated in England, he was a reluctant colonial, contemptuous of local society and politics. He was a snob and a family autocrat. In his later years, he was a recluse and possibly a drug addict. Despite his passion for yachting, he was not the kind of person who would go down well in New Zealand today. And yet when he died in 1918 he had collected, organized, and housed the library which was accepted by the Government and named after him and which is the most notable collection in New Zealand, a source of pride and a focus of national consciousness for New Zealand scholars and a consolation for those who regret their separation from the centres of world scholarship.

The problem in writing the history of such a life is to uncover the excitement that hides beneath the unexciting facade. Librarians and book collectors tend to be anonymous creatures, and those whose feats of scholarship astonish their fellows can be excused for being unaware of the ground they stand on. E. H. McCormick, whose exacting standards are based on an awareness of what it is that makes them possible, was the best able to write what A. G. Bagnall calls, in his foreword, 'a sympathetic and scholarly biography of New Zealand's greatest book-collector', and if some criticisms can be made of his book they are caused by the nature of the material and in any case are outweighed by his understanding of how a notable collection is built up and his ability to display the process in action.

Turnbull was a born collector, starting with coins. His taste for English literature, which led to the formation of his Milton collection, seems to have been formed at his school, Dulwich College. His interest in New Zealand books was aroused when he visited the colony at the age of seventeen, and he soon settled on the idea of collecting everything relating to New Zealand. The family's numerous travels to and from New Zealand no doubt led to his interest in voyages. While he lived in London, as a young man with an ample wallet (despite the canniness of his father), he bought extensively and with discrimination, a combination of qualities which enabled him to establish relations with booksellers who served him well after he entered into his New Zealand exile. Quaritch, for instance, in one of his many letters, offered 'Milton (John) Lycidas . . .

First edition, a remarkably fine copy, almost uncut, old marbled paper wrapper' for £111: 'May I have the pleasure of sending it to you?' When he left England, his collection was valued at £1,500, and his expenditure increased year by year, especially after he became independent of his father.

At the same time, Turnbull collected for a purpose. When his work was almost finished, the library was, as McCormick says, 'in default of other institutions . . . well established as a bibliographic and reference centre.' Turnbull had the instincts of a librarian. While he took care to get good copies of important works in the fields that interested him, he also spent a lot of time tracking down ephemera and manuscript material. He was largely responsible for the transfer from Cape Town to New Zealand of Sir George Grey's library of Maori books and manuscripts. He maintained close relationships with Hocken, McNab, and other bibliophiles, bibliographers, and historians. He took pains to master modern techniques of cataloguing, bought library shelving, and, in the end, planned the building which is still, in the mind of the public, the Alexander Turnbull library.

The building up of a library is the result of many small transactions, detailed in themselves but guided by a series of principles which are not always explicitly stated. McCormick has been right to quote case after case of purchases, finds, and quests, because this is how it is done. Nevertheless, the detail he gives might be a bit overpowering for readers who are more interested in the results than in the ways in which they were achieved. Many readers would be prepared to forego some of the individual purchases in favour of more analysis of the collections and their development. However, it is difficult to cavil at something that is so well done within its terms of reference.

As to Turnbull's life, apart from the inherent ordinarieness of the man, there is the same adherence to the surviving record which makes the reader wish for a little more commentary. McCormick anticipated criticism of this kind in an address which was printed in the *Turnbull Library Record* of August 1970: 'A framework of verified facts is an indispensable part of any biography — or such is my pedantic assumption . . . they are sufficiently full to permit an approach which I find best suited to my tastes and limitations: namely one that allows the biographer to retire into the background, leaving facts and people to speak for themselves as far as possible.' And so, while Alexander was writing to his brother from London or his uncle from Wellington there is a great deal of detail about family affairs and some about business. For other periods this kind of information is not available. The book purchases, fortunately, are well documented. Even father Walter's voyage out is described in familiar detail because he kept a journal. But why the firm declined under Alexander's management is not made clear. Nor do we learn how the Government was persuaded to take over the library so smoothly after his death — Bagnall's account, in the same issue of the *Record*, of the troubled childhood of the library *after* Turnbull's death, does not clear up this point, which is interesting to those who have tried to get good ideas accepted by persons in authority.

McCormick has chosen to stick to the facts, and his commentary is in the choice he has made of them, his deep understanding of Turnbull as collector and librarian, some little bursts of asperity, and, for those who know the author, the inflections in his voice. What he has chosen to do he has done magnificently and

the result is not only a biography of Turnbull but also a case study in how a scholarly resource comes into being. The production of the book is in every detail worthy of the author's work.

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The Durham Report and British Policy: a Critical Essay. By Ged Martin. Cambridge University Press, 1972. 120 pp. U.K. price: £2.60.

THIS is an important and challenging book which should be widely read — though unfortunately the print is so small and close-packed as to be something of a deterrent to readers. The argument of the book is that Lord Durham's report had much less influence on events than has generally been thought and that the central importance which most historians have attributed to it in the growth of the Commonwealth is based on a myth.

It will be granted that Mr Martin has made a more thorough examination of private papers bearing on Cabinet discussions of the Canada question than any previous historian and this enables him to make some interesting points. It was largely to appease Howick, he says on p. 8, that Melbourne sent Durham to Canada; but, he argues, 'there was little they could do at that distance of time and space to influence the crisis in Canada. The immediate concern of the Melbourne Government . . . was not to save Canada but to save themselves' (pp. 11–12). It may be so, but it is stretching a point to say that 'Durham was appointed to govern Canada, not to report about it.' Surely a report is implied in Lord Glenelg's remark in his despatch of 20 January 1838 that 'your Lordship will probably have to recommend the adoption of some legislative measure in this country.' And though he had resigned his post, Durham in the House of Lords debate after he had submitted his report, said 'I was urged repeatedly by Her Majesty's Government to produce this report at as early a date as possible, in order that it might be ready before the meeting of Parliament.' This hardly bears out Mr Martin's remark that 'he had no right to expect that it would be treated as a public document' (pp. 28–9).

Mr Martin is no doubt right in saying that the report had a poor reception from the British public and press, though in fact there was little interest and less knowledge about Canadian questions outside a small circle. His argument that 'Ellice's scheme for Canada Union was the more influential' seems justified by the evidence and it would seem therefore that the common conclusion that the decision to unite Upper and Lower Canada was a victory for Durham is not well founded. But after all it was responsible government rather than union that was the key to the development of Canadian self-government and in the long run British North American view's of Durham's recommendations mattered more than Great Britain's. As early as April 1839 Hincks was urging La Fontaine that 'A really responsible Executive Council would accomplish all that we want As to the Union question, you should not mind Lrd D.'s motives but the effect of the scheme'; and in Nova Scotia 'Durham's *Report* had run like wildfire in *The Nova Scotian* to every village of the province'.¹ Mr Martin makes too much