

The Book-Collecting Practices of Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull



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Cover page image: One of Alexander Turnbull's three armorial bookplates.

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Introduction

Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull (1868–1918) was one of New Zealand’s pre-eminent collectors. From the mid-1880s to his untimely death on 28 June 1918, Turnbull built a collection in excess of 50,000 books, serials and newspapers, along with works of art, photographs, manuscripts and maps – all of which he left as a bequest to the Crown in order to establish a national research library of international importance.

Unlike the two other great New Zealand book collectors of the time – that is Sir George Grey (1812–1898) and Dr Thomas Morland Hocken (1836–1910) – Turnbull was amongst that first generation of native born collectors like the MP and historian Dr Robert McNab (1846–1917). While a biography on Turnbull was written by Dr Eric McCormick titled *Alexander Turnbull: His Life, His Circle, His Collections* (Wellington, 1974), Turnbull’s book collecting practices and related correspondence remain understudied and much remains unknown about his methodologies and relationships with overseas suppliers.

Based on an extensive search of McCormick’s papers held by the Alexander Turnbull Library and a thorough reading of his biography I found no evidence that McCormick sought archival sources outside of Australasia and so potentially much was missed regarding Turnbull’s life collecting history. Furthermore, when C. R. Taylor (Turnbull Librarian from 1937 to 1963), wrote to multiple British book dealers in 1939 to request information related to Turnbull’s acquisitions only one firm, H. W. Davies in London, responded with a list of books purchased by him.¹

¹ File ‘Late Alexander Turnbull – Miscellaneous Enquiries, 1937–1970’, R19168124, Box 23, National Library of New Zealand Collection, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

In addition, the personal papers left by Turnbull as part of his bequest include major gaps in his outward and inward correspondence and purchase records. His letter books, for example, only cover from 1891 to 1900, leaving a further eighteen years of collecting effectively unrecorded with the exception of a handful of individual letters.

As we mark 100 years since Turnbull's death and bequest, further research is vital in the process of fleshing out the whole man and his book collecting activities. Discovering outgoing correspondence, records of sales in account books or customer lists would be a key in obtaining a fuller picture of Turnbull as a collector.

This research also sought to address questions within a wider context. What can the study of Turnbull's collecting practices tell us about the social nature of book collecting during the late nineteenth century, or, indeed, the status sought by or bestowed upon members of the wealthy middle class who amassed libraries? Did Turnbull seek higher social aspirations by acquiring books as objects to be admired like his collection of Māori artefacts he donated to the Dominion Museum (now Te Papa), or was his book collection built more for scholarly use and the advancement of knowledge?

Through a fuller examination of Turnbull's surviving personal papers and other relevant archival collections, this study not only sought to develop a more complete picture of one of New Zealand's most important and prolific book collectors, but also contribute to the history of private libraries during a significant period of bibliographical, cultural and social history.

Key Learnings

The questions raised in the Introduction were addressed by undertaking archival research in the United Kingdom – research that proved very beneficial. Working from the index to Turnbull’s letter books I identified the surviving archives of five book dealers who sold material to Turnbull and their corresponding holding institutions: Maggs Bros and Bernard Quaritch Ltd (British Library), Bertram Dobell (University of Oxford), John Grant and William Brown (National Library of Scotland).

In the British Library I uncovered 120 pieces of correspondence written by Turnbull to Maggs Bros alone, none of which had been known about prior. A sample cross-check of books mentioned as being purchased with the National Library catalogue revealed the records for these titles often lacked either the name of the dealer from whom Turnbull made the acquisition or certainty that this book was indeed in Turnbull’s personal library. This research therefore afforded the Library the chance to enhance these catalogue records and fill in some gaps in Turnbull’s collecting.

All of the letters and bank drafts found are dated after 1900, as mentioned the terminus of Turnbull’s letter books. The majority of the correspondence was written during the First World War period, which provided a fascinating insight into Turnbull’s collecting – and by extension Antipodean book collecting in general – during a time of war. For example, on 31 August 1915, Turnbull enquired with Maggs if a recent parcel sent by them was ‘on board the ill-fated ‘Arabic’ – torpedoed by the Germans’.² The parcel in question contained the private journal of Edward Belcher (1799–1877), who served aboard HMS Blossom during its survey

² Alexander Turnbull to Maggs Bros, 31 August 1915, Maggs Bros Archive, English Files box 31, British Library.

of the Pacific and Bering Strait in 1825. Thankfully, the manuscript was not aboard the 'Arabic' and reached Turnbull safely.³

These 'war' letters also revealed the financial burden the conflict placed on Turnbull's collecting. 'I fear', Turnbull wrote on 14 April 1916, 'I shall have to give up book buying for some months, probably till the end of the year My new house has cost more than I anticipated and the war taxation here is heavy and will become more so this year. I would not like you to cease sending me your reports but I shall not avail myself of your offers, probably, so freely as I have done hitherto'.⁴

There was also further evidence of his non-book collecting during this period, such as the following practical rationale on the collecting oil paintings. On 29 August 1916, Turnbull wrote to Maggs that he had, 'entirely given up collecting oil paintings now, as I have no room to hang them, even in my new house [on Bowen Street] I am confining myself now entirely to engravings and water colours, which I can keep in portfolios and cabinets'.⁵ This statement contradicts McCormick's comment that his Bowen Street residence provided Turnbull, 'for perhaps the first time in his collecting career ... ample space at his disposal'.⁶

My research also uncovered further evidence of Turnbull's motivation behind the rebinding of books. It was fashionable during the nineteenth century for collectors to have their books rebound to suit their individual tastes. Turnbull was no exception and it is well known and

³ (Sir) Edward Belcher, 'Private journal, remarks etc HM Ship Blossom on discovery during the years 1825, 6, 7', Alexander Turnbull Library, MS-0158.

⁴ Alexander Turnbull to Maggs Bros, 16 April 1916, Maggs Bros Archive, English Files box 43, British Library

⁵ Alexander Turnbull to Maggs Bros, 29 August 1916, Maggs Bros Archive, English Files box 50, British Library.

⁶ E. H. McCormick, *Alexander Turnbull: His Life, His Circle, His Collections*. Wellington: Alexander Turnbull Library, 1974, p. 272.

documented that he asked his British dealers to send newly purchased books to some of London's finest bookbinders. His reasoning, stated in a letter to Maggs Bros, was more than just aesthetic, however. On 2 August 1915, he wrote, '[my books] are handled & I hope will still more be used in the future by students I prefer to give up the sentimental value of retaining the original covers in order to have the volumes put into a more permanent binding'.⁷ Despite Turnbull's taste as a collector for fine, unblemished copies, he still wanted his books to be used and not simply admired as objects on a shelf.

The Maggs Bros cash books also proved useful in providing a window onto Turnbull's spending. Over a seven-year period – May 1910 to May 1917 – Turnbull spent nearly £2,000 buying books from the firm.⁸ This sum is the equivalent of £163,000 (over NZD \$300,000) today and as there was a gap in the record the total expenditure must have been higher.

Much of the Bernard Quaritch archive held by the British Library was beyond the scope of this project, i.e. outside Turnbull's collecting dates. However, the Quaritch clients list from 1887 to 1889 not only recorded Turnbull's name as was expected, but also the names of two other Wellington gentlemen, A. R. Atkinson and A. H. Miles, who were marked as being 'friends of Mr Turnbull'.⁹ Neither individual is found in McCormick's biography; the question of why Atkinson and Miles were marked as his friends, opens up a new line of enquiry into Wellington's book collecting culture during the late nineteenth century and Turnbull's place within it.

⁷ Alexander Turnbull to Maggs Bros, 2 August 1915, Maggs Bros Archive, English Files box 30, British Library.

⁸ Cash Books, December 1911 to May 1913 and March 1915 to May 1917, Maggs Bros Archive, 2569 and 2570, British Library.

⁹ Clients List, 1887–1889, Bernard Quaritch Ltd Archive, Add MS 64221, British Library.

A visit to Bernard Quaritch's shop added further value. Their commission books recorded Turnbull's attempts to acquire books in some of the early-twentieth century's biggest sales. Correspondence bound-in towards the end of Quaritch's catalogues also allowed insight into some of Turnbull's competitors, which included the British Museum and the Library of Congress – both of which lost out to Turnbull. This added further context around the competitive nature of auctions and Turnbull's determination to acquire much desired books.

Being present in London I was also able to research a related subject, namely Turnbull's acquisition of medieval manuscripts. Such objects were not a serious area of collecting for Turnbull. Only a single manuscript, written in the mid-twelfth century and containing two separate works on music, was included in his bequest.¹⁰

This book was purchased by Turnbull in 1900 from Bernard Quaritch. However, in *Medieval & Renaissance Manuscripts in New Zealand Collections*, the authors note a second medieval manuscript with a Turnbull bookplate being sold by Sotheby's in 1933.¹¹ Little was known about the history of this manuscript, other than it is an early-sixteenth century Book of Hours written in France.

Utilising the resources at the British Library, however, I was not only able to identify the dealer who purchased the manuscript in 1933, but also trace its nineteenth-century ownership, which revealed it was acquired by Quaritch in 1889. Since Turnbull was living in London that year and just developing his book collection, thanks to dealers like Quaritch, it can be

¹⁰ Boethius, *De musica*; Guido de Arezzo, *Micrologus*. England, twelfth century, Alexander Turnbull Library, MSR-05.

¹¹ Margaret Manion, et al. *Medieval & Renaissance Manuscripts in New Zealand Collections*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1989, p. 177 n.2.

presumed the manuscript was purchased by him directly that year, which explains the firm's later offer and Turnbull's acquisition of the twelfth-century manuscript – a point in Turnbull's collection history hitherto unknown.

In Oxford and Edinburgh, further information was found in their respective archives, including further evidence of expenditures and books Turnbull requested dealers to seek out. Perhaps the most interesting, however, was a single letter amongst the papers of Bertram Dobell held by the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford. On 15 March 1910, Turnbull wrote Dobell to thank him for sending two books as a gift and took the chance to reminisce about his book-buying days in London, visiting Dobell's shop and being set on his 'career of a lunatic book collector'.¹² As evidence of Turnbull's collecting while he was resident in London is exceedingly scarce this single letter is of real importance in the additional information it provides on Turnbull's nascent collecting years.

Advancement of the WCMT Purpose

The immediate benefit of this trip on a professional level was furthering not only my knowledge, but the knowledge of others of Turnbull's legacy as collector and founder of New Zealand's preeminent research library. It is also intended that the results of this research will raise wider public awareness of the man whose collecting activities and generosity have benefitted New Zealanders and the wider international scholarly community for generations.

Research Sharing and Application

So far I shared what I have learned through two presentations to library staff:

3.8.18 Alexander Turnbull Library staff meeting (40+ attendees)

¹² Alexander Turnbull to William Dobell, 15 March 1910, Papers of William Dobell, Bodleian Libraries.

17.10.18 National Library of New Zealand, Content Services Team (80+ attendees)

It is my intention to deliver further presentations in 2019 and 2020 (the year of the Library centennial), including a public lecture as part of the annual curatorial series. My next step is to marry-up Turnbull's correspondence located in the UK with the related dealer correspondence held in the Turnbull Library in order to have a complete picture of these bibliographical exchanges. This research will result in a published piece on Turnbull's book-collecting correspondence in an international journal in order to foster greater awareness of his collecting history with academics and independent researchers in the field around the world.

As previously mentioned the results of this research will also be used to enhance relevant National Library catalogue records beginning in 2019 once a workflow is developed with the Content Services Team. Furthermore, copies of my report will be distributed to key heritage collections across New Zealand.

Conclusion

Prior to taking up this research trip I had a good knowledge of Turnbull as a book collector and the library that bears his name before embarking on this trip, thanks not only to being employed as a curator with the Alexander Turnbull Library, but also to the biography written by the historian Eric McCormick, a history of the Alexander Turnbull Library by Rachel Barrowman and the writings of numerous scholars and librarians. However, there always seemed to be more to learn about his personal collecting and gaps to fill in its history. What I found by delving into archives in London, Oxford and Edinburgh proved this theory correct, fleshed out some of what was already known, added new information and raised more

questions. As a result, I am enthusiastic to continue my research into Turnbull's collecting life and how it fits within the broader context of book-collecting history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Appendix: Travel Diary

London

4 to 19 June 2018

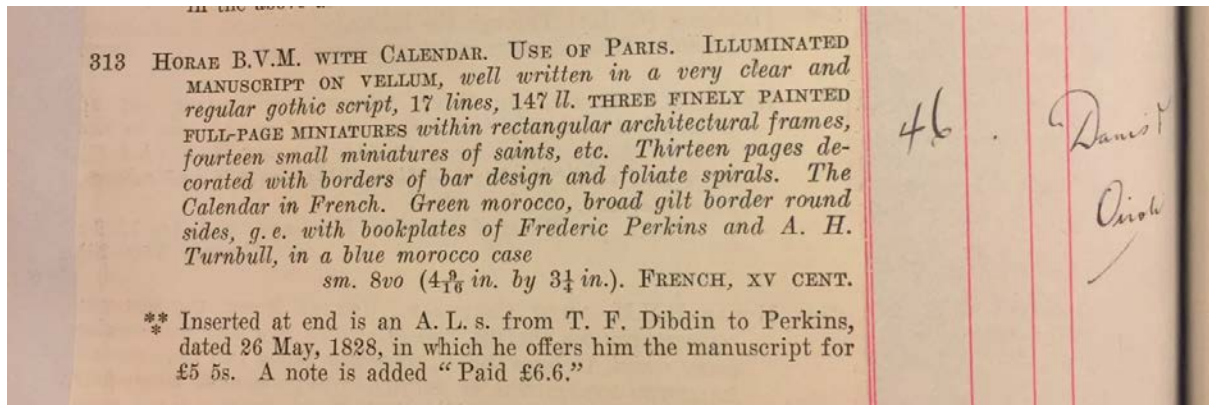


Figure 1 British Library, Euston Road entrance

Having arrived in London on 4 June, the first day of my research began on the following day. Catherine Angerson (Curator, Modern Archives and Manuscripts) at the British Library kindly arranged for me to consult the Maggs Bros archive in their offices rather than in the Manuscripts Reading Room due to it being an unprocessed collection. This also avoided the Maggs folders and bound volumes counting against the ten-item limit that researchers can request per day, which made accessing this material much easier and quicker given my working timeframe.

In total there were 80 folders and six bound volumes for me to examine. I was fearful of what I might find, since the Maggs material was unprocessed and uncatalogued. Thankfully, the

correspondence files were arranged alphabetically by sender, which meant I was able to work my way through rather quickly and finished this leg of the research trip well on time. This also afforded me the chance to explore the ownership history of a medieval manuscript once in Turnbull's possession that he apparently traded or sold during his lifetime.



Oxford

19 to 22 June 2018



Figure 3 Magdalen College, Oxford

I arrived in Oxford in the late afternoon. From the train station I walked to Magdalen College, where Daryl Green (Librarian, Magdalen College) arranged for me to stay. I met with Daryl that evening for dinner and he gave me a tour of the college grounds, its old library and the college archive – housed in a fifteen-century tower.

The following day I registered with the Bodleian Libraries and proceeded to its special collections reading room to consult the papers of the London book dealer Bertram Dobell (MSS. Dobell).



Figure 4 Bodleian Libraries, Oxford

While Turnbull was not mentioned in any of Dobell's diaries I did find four letters (three printed and one handwritten) among Dobell's correspondence papers, including a fantastic letter from 1910 in which Turnbull refers to himself as a 'lunatic book collector'!

Edinburgh
22 to 27 June 2018



Figure 5 Edinburgh, Scotland

I travelled to Edinburgh on the 22nd, where I had just enough time to register at the National Library of Scotland. While the special collections staff was very helpful and had all the items I requested ready in advance this was perhaps the least successful leg of my trip.



Figure 6 National Library of Scotland

The archive of book dealer John Grant included a few entries on Turnbull in a desiderata book. However, none of the books sought by Turnbull were found in the National Library catalogue and so were never found by Grant. Turnbull was also mentioned twice in Grant's cash books.

The second and more extensive, of the two archives, of the dealer William Brown, included a near complete run of catalogues annotated by Brown. Due to pressures on staff time, however, the reference team was unable to examine these catalogues prior to my visit. Therefore, it was not until my arrival that I found the catalogues annotated as described, but in Brown's personal code, which no one seemed to know how to decipher.

I examined a decade's worth of catalogues looking for abbreviations that may be clues that Turnbull was the buyer referenced, e.g. 'AT', and then checked the National Library of New Zealand catalogue for the books against which these specific annotations were made. None, however, were found in the Turnbull collection. I therefore abandoned this line of enquiry and used my remaining time in Edinburgh to revise a conference paper.

Greifswald, Germany

27 June to 30 July 2018



Figure 7 Greifswald, Germany

2018 marks the 550th anniversary of the death of Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of printing by means of moveable type in Europe. To honour this event the Alfred Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg in Greifswald, Germany, in connection with the State Library Berlin, held a two-day conference titled 'Gutenberg500'.

The conference convenor, Dr Falk Eisermann (State Library Berlin), invited me to deliver a paper on collectors of fifteenth-century printed books in Australasia. While this part of my trip was not included in my Fellowship application and was self-funded I mention it here because I was able to incorporate some of what I learned during my time in the United Kingdom into my conference paper.

References

Archives

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