

BILL DIREEN

Overboard 2



*160 years of fine acquisitions
leading to disposals
on an unprecedented scale
at the National Library of New Zealand*

A PERCUTIO PUBLICATION

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1
The *White Swan*
1862

Many New Zealanders know that their parliament moved from Auckland to Wellington in 1865 so that South Island members would not have so far to travel. But some temporary sessions were held before that date, in Wellington.

In 1862 a temporary session of Parliament was planned for mid-winter, making it necessary for Auckland members to voyage to the future capital by steamer. They took all their documents and reference volumes with them in crates. A small library had been purchased the year before for £200.

Premier William Fox (1812-1893), members of the Ministry, the Chief Justice and a number of members of the General Assembly were made to wait while the pumps were repaired and a water-filled compartment emptied. Eventually the steamer *White Swan* left Auckland with fifty passengers, taking the Eastern route past East Cape and Hawke's Bay. It stopped at Napier and departed again at 5 p.m. on Saturday, June 28th. The seas became rough in the night, and at 6 a.m.

Sunday, 18 miles south of Castle Point on the Wairarapa Coast the vessel must have touched a reef. The brush was light, and its captain thought it was a log of wood at the time, but a compartment began to fill with water.

In spite of heavy surf, and within five minutes, all the passengers and crew had made it to shore on boats, not far from the wreck of the steamer, which Captain Harper had intentionally run ashore. This was a precaution, taken while he still had control of the vessel, and it probably saved many lives.

It must have been at this point that Premier Fox is reported to have offered £150 to get the cases of documents and books out of the hold. The able-bodied crew, from stewards to oilers and wipers, warmed to the task, placing them on deck.

What occurred next was the first of many disposals of books that have befallen New Zealand's International Research Collections.

Premier Fox ordered the men to float the cases ashore by throwing them into the sea. The forces of nature had other ideas, and the cases of precious books and papers sailed in the opposite direction. They were never seen again.

In years to come, this calamity came to serve guileful MPs. If it was not expedient to find a document as

requested in the House, it was fairly common to hear a parliamentarian say it must have been “lost in the wreck of the *White Swan*”.

A Happy Ending

After the loss of New Zealand’s first library, the Library Committee persuaded Parliament to vote £500, along with private bill fees, to replace the lost books and expand the library. A long list worth £800 was ordered from England, by far the largest purchase up to that time. British Treasury, hearing of the parliamentarians’ misfortune, donated many more volumes, so that books were arriving in New Zealand for months afterwards.

In the years that followed, many of the internationally produced gems of the General Assembly Library were acquired or donated at the same time as Alexander Turnbull was building up his own private collection. This became the Alexander Turnbull Library. Turnbull’s focus was on documents that were directly of New Zealand origin (“anything whatever relating to this Colony”), and that is the Turnbull Library’s focus today. But he also had specialist interests in overseas subjects, such as the life and poetry of John Milton and the history of the printed book. The International Research component of the General Assembly Library (also known as the GAL) was more wide-ranging than

Turnbull's private collections, and the GAL had some "antiquarian" books of value, of its own. Many years later, the gems of the General Assembly Library were transferred to the Alexander Turnbull Library. This is another symptom of the condition.

From 1978, the Bible Society in New Zealand donated 189 printed bibles, medieval manuscripts, and related material to the National Library, and those treasures were sent to the Alexander Turnbull Library, which by then, apparently, had become the only repository for antiquarian overseas books. Sending them to the wider scoping National Library was never considered, presumably because the National Library no longer had any antiquarian collection to prize. It had no department, space or budget to look after them.

To return to 1862, the shipwreck proved to be a soggy beginning for the General Assembly Library, but decades of acquisitions and donations were to follow, resulting in one of the finest libraries of the 19th century. Its catalogues were painstakingly recorded, and proudly published.

The General Assembly Library would become the National Library of New Zealand in 1965, but first, fifty years of global and cold wars would have an impact upon the growing collections.

2

Parliamentary-Poets

1862-1965

By 1875 the General Assembly Library contained 8,000 books of the highest quality, housed in six rooms behind Parliament, making it “the country’s premier library” (*nzbhistory.govt.nz*). It continued to expand, thanks to a budget guaranteed by representatives. Compiling its catalogues demanded great dedication. Historian John E. Martin relates that Duncan McColl’s early death was attributed to “the overwork involved in preparing the catalogue”.

Two men have been called “the father of librarianship” in NZ. New Zealand premier Alfred Domett, a friend of Robert Browning, managed to secure funding, and made extensive use of the library while writing an epic poem. The other was Herbert Leslie James, who brought New Zealand’s collections into stream with the rest of the world. He edited the 1897 Catalogue, and introduced the card system which classified each book according to the international Dewey decimal system.

Perhaps examples of James' card catalogues, or those of Guy Scholefield (1877-1963), are stored somewhere. Scholefield, chief librarian, tasked himself with meticulous card cataloguing after 1926. The card catalogues of the library were believed to still exist in 1986 (year of publication of *Parliament's Library*).

The printed catalogues and a few inventories can tell us roughly how many books the library held. The 1875 published catalogue listed 8,000, and updates followed with complete bibliographical details. In 1880, it held 18,562 works, and, by 1897, close to 40,000 volumes. In 1898, Premier Richard Seddon laid the foundation stone for a new library building.

Many parliamentarians not only read but wrote poetry, paving the way for the likes of Katherine Mansfield, R.A.K. Mason and Denis Glover. 'Colonial' poetry may be found in the *Oxford Book of Australasian Verse* (1918), the *Anthology of NZ Verse* (1956), selected by Robert Chapman and Jonathan Bennett, and the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1960), edited by Allen Curnow and others. Edward Tregear is the only parliamentarian-poet to make it into Vincent O'Sullivan's *Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry* (1987). There were many of them by today's standards, and all made use of the Library.

William Pember Reeves (1857-1932) brought in major changes to the arbitration practices of the time. He would write:

*Who serve an art more great
Than we, rough architects of State?*

A Colonist in His Garden

Tregear (1846-1931) 'could read and write Greek and Latin by the age of seven' (K.R. Howe). He lived for long periods in Māori communities. He was a researcher in comparative mythology, religion and linguistics, and drafted labour legislation that was progressive for the time. He wrote *Hedged with Divinities*, a fiction about the last surviving male. He also wrote:

*How old with age and young with youth this miracle of birth,
This subtle net of threads which bind the multitudes of earth.*

The Veils of Phantasy

Charles Christopher Bowen's (1830-1917) Education Act of 1877 resulted in a national system of primary education:

*With the dawn,
Hope sheds its radiance o'er the time to come;
And visions of a mighty future rise,
Whilst looking out upon the brightening land.*

Moonlight in New Zealand

Sometimes a parliamentarian-poet made reference to his reading, as when Alfred Domett referred to philosophical squabbles, and to a wide range of philosophies — Indian, German, Shakespearian:

*Thus Locke by Berkeley—Berkeley thus by Hume,
Was pounced on in retributive swift doom*

[...]

*Then Brahma's essence, subtilised and thinned,
In "Perfect Wisdom" Kapila's self-styled grew
To Absolute Spirit—Thinking Substance pure
And abstract as that pure unworldly Jew,
The spiritual Spinoza, ever drew.*

*But when unflinching Hegel flatly laid
The axiom down he would not have gainsaid,
Disdaining compromise—dispute—or flout
(Settling so coolly Hamlet's staggering doubt)
"To Be is Not-to-be" and Not-to-be
"To Be"—agree to that, or disagree,
"Tis Logic's first great axiom, and most true
"What could a youth with risible organs do,
At this, Philosophy's last grand exploit?"*

Alfred Domett, *Ranolf and Amobia*, Canto 2

A later premier, Julius Vogel, one of whose objectives in parliament was to improve international communications, penned the 'utopian' novel, *Anno Domini 2000, or, Woman's Destiny*, in which Britain is an Imperial Federation and women have more political power than in its year of publication, 1889.

The library was as prized by its guardians as by its writers. Charles Wilson (1857–1932), who later became the first superintendent of the Alexander Turnbull

Library (1918), argued successfully for an iron fire-proof wall to be built into the 1898 library. His wall saved an estimated 8000 books from destruction in 1907 when fire destroyed the rest of the building. While the furnace in the rest of the building raged, Wilson supervised the emptying of the warming library shelves onto the forecourt of Parliament. The operation was completed in 45 minutes. In contrast to the loss of the infant library after the wrecking of the *White Swan* in 1862, the second General Assembly Library of 1907 was saved!

The library expanded with scholarly and practical studies, geographical surveys, anthropology, studies of religion and other up-to-date international research. Library rules were occasionally not respected. There are details, in the archives, of books going missing, or being neglected.

During World War I, the General Assembly Library shed nearly 6,000 volumes of fiction. Nevertheless, the library had grown to 110,000 volumes by 1926.

After the Second World War, books were offered to other libraries or private institutions. This was done with letters of request, replied to, with due formality, by the librarians.

Such minor disposals did nothing to impede the acquisition of researches into the humanities, world philosophy, literature, and advances in science.

The need for a publicly accessible National Library had often been discussed, and had been briefly attempted. Librarian James Collier (c.1847-1925), who compiled the first Bibliography of NZ literature, envisaged a freely accessible national library, and after his appointment in 1885, he opened up the library to students during recess.

In the twentieth century, recess privileges were granted, suspended, and granted again, giving institutions like the Wellington School of Design students and individual researchers like Katherine Mansfield access when Parliament was not in session. Guy Scholefield examined the borrowing cards of Mansfield. She requested works by the European writers Henrik Ibsen, Heinrich Heine and Friedrich Nietzsche.*

An Australian National Library was created in 1960, for “maintaining and developing a national collection of library material, including a comprehensive collection of library material relating to Australia and the Australian people”. (Australian National Library Act, 1960). New Zealand followed suit, passing its own National Library Act, in 1965.

* See p25, Endnotes, for details of Katherine Mansfield's European reading in the General Assembly Library.

3

From Pillar to Post

1965 to 1987

The National Library was formed by bringing together the General Assembly Library, the Alexander Turnbull Library and the National Library Services.

Since the General Assembly Library of 300,000 books had acted as a 'de facto national library' before amalgamation, the creation of a national library immediately legitimized the General Assembly's international collections. Significant acquisitions followed from 1965 to 1985. But the General Assembly Library (GAL) was Parliament's Library, and also had a focus on parliamentary needs. In spite of (or because of) copious acquisitions 1965 to 1986, a huge shedding soon occurred. In 1986, GAL regained independence and was renamed The New Zealand Parliamentary Library. It left "stacks" of international literature behind in the guardianship of the National Library of NZ, which proved unable to assimilate it correctly. Indeed, the task of future directors would be its annihilation.

Meanwhile, Alexander Turnbull Library continued its

function, defined in 1925, of acquiring 'history, geography, ethnology and folklore' of New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific. The National Library would make its own acquisitions, which had, naturally, a weighty international aspect. The National Library increased its reserves of international research, but the international nature of its collections and its foundational ambitions, was never pronounced, making the international collections susceptible to 2021 'disposal fever'.

There was an increasing need for storage space, particularly to house the books received from the GAL and its subsequent international acquisitions. A black line was drawn diagonally across interior GAL book plates. The stamp MANGAROA referred to an inadequate storage warehouse.

Storage space was inadequate and yet international acquisitions carried on. By 1986, the separation of the General Assembly Library from the rest of the National Library became law. The shedded GAL "world" collection was now the sole responsibility of the National Library.

4

Refurbishment

1986-2012

It is clear from the ‘years of publication’ of books on the threatened lists that National Library librarians in charge of acquisitions from 1965 to 1986 were as assiduous as ever, accessioning new books in the spirit of the General Assembly Library international research tradition.

The opening of the newly constructed National Library building (1987) might have given researchers reason to believe the National Library in Molesworth Street, Wellington, would have more shelf space, and that items held in the various “bookstacks” around Wellington and Lower Hutt would be brought there. It was not to be. Its top floor was removed from the design. Books remained scattered and many would later be stored even further away than Mangaroa.

In 1988 the library was given a new name National Library of New Zealand/*Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa* which, translated into English, means “the wellspring of knowledge of New Zealand”. Disposals still had to be approved by the Minister in charge of

the National Library. The National Librarian would have the power to

make arrangements with any appropriate authority for the transfer to that authority of the use or custody of any library material belonging to the National Library [with] the consent of the Minister, given after having regard to the advice of the Trustees.

—National Library Act, 1965

One researcher has told me he thought the library “did pretty well” during this period (1988-2009). The atmosphere was presumably constructive. In spite of this, disposals of an unclear nature took place in 1999, when “189,450 titles out of 710,00, or 26.6% [of the collection], were deselected after a review by *external experts*” (my emphasis). The shedding of 32,000 of them in 1999 is discussed in Part 5.

The new National Library building of 1987 had been designed to have another floor on top of it, but it was not constructed due to insufficient funding. In 2009, refurbishments were announced and the library was closed for more than two years. A leaky roof was cited.

But Jim Traue (chief librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library and member of senior National Library management from 1973 to 1990) asserted in August 26th, 2009: “In doing their best to persuade the Government that it was urgent to do a major makeover, the library management overcooked the

facts. The library has got a couple of minor leaks [apart from] in the State Services Commission basement, which the library leases as a major storage area.” Fully funded reconstruction began in 2010, but it privileged a corporate rather than a public dimension. As a result of these refurbishments, the number of books on the ground floor may be counted on one hand. In that year the National Library was placed under the aegis of a different department. Disposals would now have to be approved by the Minister of Internal Affairs. Something hardly in the interests of a wide-scope national library was happening.

The refurbished building was spacious. It had room for the Archive of NZ Music (est. 1974), for the Alexander Turnbull collections (est. 1920) and in September 2019 for Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision (est. 2014). And it could offer rooms for events, lectures, cocktails and banquets. A site at Whanganui, the former Wanganui Computer Centre, was created for books, archives and documents and came to be owned by the National Library of NZ in 2010, which leased out its top floor.

Various announcements have been made this year (2021) about the National Library’s determination to dispose of the international research collections, which they categorize as “Overseas Published Collections”, referring to them as “OPCs”. Strategy after strategy has been announced to try to justify mass disposals. Each new self-justification is an admit-

tance of the speciousness of the previous one. Meanwhile, as lovers of learning and literature try to see through the smoke, thousands more books vanish from the stores and are passed on to willing receivers. Opponents to these actions believe such disposals are tantamount to theft. Being unable to afford a legal challenge, their only hope (July, 2021) lies with the responsible minister. She must exercise the right of veto invested in her ministry by law.

A glance at the first section of “Unclassified Non-Fiction”, one of thirty four lists published to invite “expressions of interest”, discloses books on the Social Sciences, Linguistics, Languages, Religion, Ethnology, History, Geography, Gender Studies, Philosophy, Greek Studies, Scottish Studies, Asian studies, Colonialism/Post-colonialism, Psychology, studies of Censorship, revolt, reforms, religion, Egyptian history, Architecture, Abolition and Slavery, Agriculture, alcoholism, alpine flowers, railways, mythology, logic, mathematics, calculus, astronomy, astrology, atomic theory, Australia, European history, Chinese art, Beethoven, language learning, the history of the book and of printing, bookbinding, posters, drawing, Russia, Orthodox belief, birds of different countries, bronzes, marble sculpture, funerary rites, criminology, faith healing, church corruption, catalogues of other libraries of the world, pedagogy, Jesus Christ, Socrates, Plato, the American civil war, aviation, democracy, tyrannies, commercial London, positivism, boxing, Belgian literature and the literature of our former

allies, literature of our former enemies, conservatism, Thomas Carlyle, cricket, Japanese painting, Cyprus, Napoleon, desert warfare, dialectics, manufacturing, history of the encyclopedia, diplomacy, poetry, Darwinism, engraving, Dreyfus, drug addiction, Dutch painting, early Hindu civilisation, early American philosophers, early Christian architecture in Ireland, Hebrew grammar, the Russian revolution, economics, Marxism, education, electricity, El Greco, English earthenware, England, environmentalism, Vesuvius, essays, etching, ethics, faith, fairies, food, fanaticism, fatigue, fencing, freedom, folklore, forestry, aesthetics, the future, gardening, genetics, genocide, geometry, geology, Germany, Giovanni Bellini, Glasgow, God, government, war, theatre, insurance, health, Henry the fourth, all the Henrys, all the Harolds, heroes and hero-worship, heredity, Herodotus, high-risk exposures, highwaymen, the thirty years war, the hundred years war, the Peloponnesian war, the Sino-Japanese conflict, water-colours, earthquakes, glass-cutting, artillery, republicanism, Rationalism, antisemitism, the Irish famine, road transport, Greco-Roman antiquities, Jews in England, palaeontology, pleasure, pastimes, vacation behaviour, Homer, homosexuality, gender rights, the Hopi Indians, horses, horticulture, suburbia, Socialism, the Huguenots, human origins, Methodism, hunger, hurricanes, hydrodynamics, hunger, hygiene, idolatry, parasitology, masonry, anthropology, Impressionism, industrialisation, India, injustice, insularity, international relations, defence policy, botany, interpreting,

cooperation, the classification of animals, neurosis, delusions, Freud, Islam, Israel, temple sculpture, Immanuel Kant, the kindergarten system, Korea, Labour, human values, land nationalisation, law, the League of Nations, metaphysics, dyspepsia, gods and ghosts, communes, libertinage, celibacy, lives of saints, lives of composers, lives of kings and queens and emperors, the lives of insects, tea, life, death and destiny, Confucius, liquid crystals, woodcuts, liturgy, locomotives, the logs of twenty ships, nursing, London, the Medicis, love, lyric verse, prostitution, seismology, mind and matter, physiology, personality, mechanics, dozens of memoirs and portraits, mental illness, metallurgy, microscopy ...

And that is scrolling only from “A” to “M” of one file, representing just a fraction of investigations in the national store, and a tiny percentage of printed reserves held in guardianship.

Italo Svevo wrote a short story in which a commission ordered a military inquisition of the nation’s library, which was suspected of containing “ideas hostile to military prestige”. All who were literate, from common soldiers to their General himself, read the books, and felt their lives had been renewed. A great silence fell upon the library and the General in charge of the inquisition was summoned to appear before the Commission. He was unable to fault the library, even though its content may have contradicted or challenged persuasions and beliefs current at the time. He was

forced into early retirement.

The General in Svevo's story would have agreed with Jim Traue, who wrote in October 2020:

The National Library, as our one library of last resort, has a responsibility to ensure that no book, once deemed worthwhile by being selected for a library's collection, will ever disappear from the nation's bookstock.

5

“What Need One?”

King Lear, II, iv

A study of south-west India
1909 to 2021

In the early days, the General Assembly Library was linked to a bindery and gilding stamp press for applying insignias. This year, I purchased a 1909 study of southern India, bound and gold-stamped by the General Assembly Library.

The study by Edward Thurston focuses on the stratified communities of the area around Kerala. It is the culmination of a “systematic and detailed ethnographic survey of the whole of India” commissioned by the Indian Government in 1901. Thurston was financed for five, extended to eight, years, to record the “manners and customs” of 40 million people “spread over an area exceeding 150,000 square miles”. He also made field recordings of Indian songs and dance music, and furnished a museum of artefacts gathered while he was doing his researches in the extreme heat. The books carry the General Assembly Library insignia. They belonged to GAL from 1909

until 1987. About that time they joined the National Library's international research stacks. The GAL book plate was struck through, and a stamp was applied: MANGAROA, a Hutt Valley warehouse. This had a sprinkler system, and visitations from local bird-life. Once the seven volumes of research came definitively into the hands of the National Library, it added a letter stamp along the top and bottom edges of the pages. When, years later, they were disposing of the set, the National Library letter stamp was ruled through with a black felt pen.

As for the provenance of the set, the booksellers could not help me. I had dealt with two as the complete set had been split. The books had come through a Dunbar Sloane auction and a Book Fair. No one I asked knew when or how they had been disposed of, but it was probably in 1999, when several disposals occurred totalling 189,450 titles (26.6% of the collection). One of the unclear 1999 disposals was discussed briefly in Parliament.

Hansard contains an exchange between Marian Hobbs and Nick Smith. Ms Hobbs is asking the minister then in charge of the National Library whether he was aware that 32,000 books had been sold to a local bookseller. The minister, Nick Smith, admitted he had not given his approval. In his defence, Mr. Smith said he was surely not required to give approval for each individual book. Ms Hobbs did not pursue the matter.

The following year, 2000, Christopher Blake, National Librarian, was given approval by Marian Hobbs, the new Minister responsible for the National Library, to send books to Whanganui, the site now called Wairere House. Books were moved there over time, after being added to the Library's online catalogue. The cataloguing was completed by 2005. New shelving was installed for the books but little else was done for the books' welfare. Wairere House is now deemed unsuitable as a repository. There is no director or staff looking after the books in Whanganui, it is managed from Wellington. The building has minimal environmental controls.

There is no funding to improve the welfare of the books. Their deterioration is inevitable without correct storage facilities.

Single Volume Résumé

A single volume résumé with the same title as Thurston's seven volume study was published in 1975, and the National Library subsequently purchased it. It has the same title and number as the in-depth set.

And now this single volume is found on the lists of unwanted books published by the National Library inviting "expressions of interest": it awaits its fate at Whanganui.

And so the library will be bereft not only of the

1909, seven volume set about India, sold for a pittance in 1999, but also the single volume selections, the 1975 volume.

There are 640,000 such books on their lists, each with its story to tell. Every month, thousands more books are “received” like stolen goods by otherwise respected institutions and libraries. Multi-volume original researches, and slimline abbreviated re-editions are being deleted from the national catalogues—just as King Lear’s royal retinue was diminished, cut by cut.

*Regan: I entreat you
To bring but five-and-twenty. To no more
Will I give place or notice.*

*Lear: I made you my guardians, my depositaries;
But kept a reservation to be followed
With such a number. What, must I come to you
With five-and-twenty, Regan? Said you so?*

*Goneril: Hear, me, my lord.
What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?*

Regan: What need one?

Lear exclaims, “Oh reason not the need!”

Sources

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Book Guardians Aotearoa, who published earlier versions of Parts One and Two on their web-pages opposing book disposals: <http://bookguardiansaotearoa.com>.

If you agree that these disposals must cease, and that funds should be immediately allocated for the correct storage of all books, speak up. Write to the minister and tell her so:

Jan.Tinetti@parliament.govt.nz

<p><i>Is sàmbach an obair dol a dholaidh.</i> Going to ruin is silent work. Gaelic proverb</p>
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It is time to speak up.