

Alexander Turnbull's first book

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Turnbull, when a youngish seventeen, on his second voyage to New Zealand, during December-January 1885-86, in the company of his parents—his second within twelve months—took as shipboard reading a copy of the *The King Country*, by one J. H. Kerry-Nicholls published seventeen months before. Dr McCormick, in his biography has pointed out that while Turnbull appears to have made no surviving notes of the earlier visit to his country of birth, on the second tour, possibly stimulated by Kerry-Nicholls, he kept a rough diary of his thermal regions and South Island 'Grand Tour'.¹ The book did even more. After his return to England in May 1886 he became a book collector with a maturing interest in New Zealand to which he was soon to return permanently. Years later he wrote on the fly-leaf of his copy of *The King Country*: 'This was the first book of my collection. I bought it to read going out in Ionic in Dec. 1885.' Dr McCormick has also noted Turnbull's lapse of memory in naming the vessel as the *Ionic* instead of, more correctly, the *Doric*. The present commentator accepts the biographer's reasons that the slip is in the name of the vessel rather than in the date of the voyage for the 1886 diary includes information taken from the book as one but recently scanned.²

Who was the author and what of his book which marked so important a step in the development of New Zealand's leading bibliophile? At the moment, paradoxically, we know less about Kerry-Nicholls than we do of the most obscure years of Turnbull. It took an unreasonably long time, with the help of others, to establish that he died in 1888,³ a mere five years after his New Zealand visit. Where, or under what circumstances, is at the moment unknown although he lived in London after his return from New Zealand until at least July 1887. What information we have is gleaned from references in his only book, *The King Country*, and from the few surviving letters so far traced. The small engraved portrait on the title-page shows a characteristic Victorian profile of a man possibly in his mid-thirties, dark beard, waxed moustache and hair with centre-part. He probably had sufficient income to indulge his taste for travel and is unlikely to have married.

The New Zealand journey, so he claimed, was undertaken purely for scientific purposes in the interest of further geographical and geological knowledge. He had 'penetrated into some of the wildest parts of Australia, explored the principal islands of the