

imply. In another journal begun on the homeward voyage he wrote: 'We came to the house of our fathers with three as strong & healthy boys as ever lived, and in one day we were bereft of two of them; let us not boast ourselves therefore of tomorrow, but Watch and be prepared for our own Call, at whatever hour we may be Summoned.' There was 'no help for it' in Walter's phrase but to pack up, say their farewells, and return by the fastest route to the two infants left in Wellington. They travelled across America and reached home early in December, to find the children both in good health, reported Walter in bringing the journal to a close.

Outwardly in good health but perhaps not wholly unaffected by the absence of their parents. His younger son certainly gave Walter reason for mild anxiety in the months that followed their return. To Isabella, a pupil of Miss Dransfield's seminary in Camberwell, he writes in April 1872, 'Alick is a terrible Turk, and rules over every one in the house with a rod of iron, when he does not get his own way, but I think he is getting more easy to deal with than he was at first; in our absence he had been left very much to do as he liked.' And again in September: '. . . Alick . . . Seems to have far greater enjoyment in destroying his Toys than playing with them, and his face just beams with delight when he has been detected Knocking the head off a Doll or Smashing to pieces a Noah's Ark and its Contents.' But, as the correspondence unfolds, this picture is modified by glimpses of a sheltered and, it would seem, a happy childhood: Alick gardening with the nursemaid in the grounds of 'Elibank'; Alick picnicking with the family at Worser Bay or on holiday in Masterton and Auckland; Alick riding on his pony or playing with Sissy on the beach at the foot of Bowen Street; and, in due course at the age of five, Alick cheerfully following Robert to school. 'Which school?' again asks the nagging, inquisitive reader. And again the biographer is forced to admit that he doesn't know, adding in mitigation of his ignorance that the problem has baffled the combined brains of the Alexander Turnbull Library.

The elusive fact, one reflects with a slight twinge of conscience, is probably not essential to an understanding of Alexander's development. He spent little more than a year at the nameless Wellington school before setting out at the age of six on his first ocean voyage – a fact that is undoubtedly of the profoundest significance. In February 1875 Walter embarked for London with his wife and family, so initiating a new phase in his career. For more than a decade he was to commute between two hemispheres, one the focus of his affections, the other the centre of his commercial interests and the source of his increasing wealth. Of his numerous voyages in this period records of two survive – affectionate, nostalgic, tedious journal-letters dutifully compiled for the benefit of Alexa and the children. They add further to the score of