

## ALEXANDER TURNBULL – SOME BIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS

Address delivered at the Alexander Turnbull Library on  
Thursday, 16 July 1970, by Dr E. H. McCormick

With some reluctance, I must confess, I have interrupted my shamefully protracted labours to speak informally this evening on Alexander Turnbull. I hope I am committing no grave breach of confidence in disclosing that when Mr Bagnall invited me to do so he anticipated my unwillingness 'to tear myself away from Auckland', as he expressed it. But, he pointed out, I would have to visit the Library at some stage to check up personally on a number of outstanding points – and, he may well have implied, to give some relief to his staff distracted by my constant inquiries. Further, he wrote, it might be an advantage for me to stand off from my subject, disregard the detail, and look at it in what he termed 'a much smaller compass'. Taking my cue from these hints, I shall try to present an objective view of the enterprise to which I am committed, attempt to see Turnbull in summary – or at least in relatively simple – terms, and touch on my aims, methods, and assumptions.

I say assumptions, for I have no theories of my own and in the course of fairly extensive reading I have discovered none that seemed directly relevant to the particular problems that confronted me. But I have occasionally come across some statement by masters of the art – or craft – of biography that seemed to illuminate and confirm my pragmatic approach. There is, for example, the much quoted passage by Dr Johnson. The biographer, he wrote, should 'pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and to display the minute details of daily life'. Or again there is Virginia Woolf presenting a rather similar view in a series of concrete questions. 'When and where did the . . . man live;' she asks, 'how did he look; did he wear laced boots or elastic-sided; who were his aunts and his friends; whom did he love and how; and when he came to die did he die in his bed like a Christian, or . . .'

However reassuring the dicta of one's illustrious forerunners, they are again of little practical use and perhaps raise more questions than they answer. The minute, mundane details rather than the public performance, yes, one assents. But *which* details from the overwhelming multiplicity to be found in the least complicated of lives? And what if it happens that no personal minutiae have survived – particulars of the hero's taste in footwear, for instance? Ultimately the biographer must deal with his problems according to circumstances and with such skills