

as he can muster. In the act of composition when he is seated at his desk and must choose this fact or that, one word or a synonym, a particular document or some alternative, it all depends. It depends on the nature of his subject, on the kind and extent of his sources, on the purpose for which he is writing, and, not to be exhaustive, on his own preferences and limitations.

To turn from the impersonal biographer to myself, what, I ask, has guided me thus far in writing the life of Alexander Turnbull? What are my aims? They are so simple and self-evident that I would blush to name them if I were still capable of that youthful accomplishment: I have been seeking to create a true picture of the man. Though my purpose is simplicity itself, how different the realization. It has meant establishing – or attempting to establish – innumerable facts not only about Alexander Turnbull but about his parents, his relatives, and his friends: when they were born, when they were married, when they died, how much money they left, details of their occupations, their diversions, their perpetual travels in the First Saloon. Hence the continuous flow of questions from Green Bay, Auckland, to the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, and from there to Somerset House, London, the Commissary Office, Edinburgh, the Sheriff's Office, Jedburgh, to name only some of the repositories called on to supply dates and documents. And hence, I must emphasize, the immensity of my debt to Mr Bagnall and his staff, especially Miss Margery Walton who with more than saintly patience has borne the brunt of my inquiries.

A framework of verified facts is an indispensable part of any biography – or such is my pedantic assumption. But the truth about a man will not, of course, be revealed by the registrars of births, deaths, and marriages. More personal sources are required if the biographer is to penetrate to the region of domestic privacies or create even a faint semblance of the living man. He needs letters, diaries, journals, together with first-hand impressions and fragments of gossip if they can be found. Some such records of the Turnbull family do exist, covering a period of about six decades. For the early years Walter Turnbull, Alexander's father, is the chief witness with half-a-dozen shipboard narratives, including two versions of a journal he kept when he emigrated to New Zealand in 1857. In addition there is a small packet of letters sent to his elder daughter Isabella while she was at school in Britain during the seventies and an unfinished memoir of his childhood. His wife, Alexandrina or Alexa, is represented by only one document, a long journal-letter describing part of the 1857 voyage. It is unfortunate there is not more, for Alexa was a livelier observer than the rather prosy Walter and remains a shadowy figure after her arrival in Wellington. Alexander, the youngest son, contributes most to the family archives.