

EARLY DAYS IN THE TURNBULL LIBRARY

There must be few people who are fortunate enough to find themselves, especially when no longer young, in perhaps the one job in the whole country they would most like to have. That is what happened to me, and I still wonder sometimes how it all came about.

Towards the end of 1925 I came up to Wellington from Dunedin to stay with some cousins, in order to recuperate after an illness. My plans were uncertain at the time, and one day my cousins said to me, 'Why don't you try for a position in the Turnbull Library?' And they explained what the Turnbull Library was, and where it was. I took their advice, and sent in an application, but there was no vacancy at the time, so I went off to Auckland to visit relations there. It was my father's home town – he was born there in quite early days – but I had never been there before. Naturally I found it an interesting place and was pleased to make the acquaintance of relatives I had not hitherto met, but this could not go on for ever, and I was wondering what my next move had better be when a message came from my Wellington cousins saying 'Turnbull Library enquiring for you'.

Back I came to Wellington by the next day's train and there were the inevitable interviews and two or three weeks of waiting while applications were being considered. I believe the only other applicant at that time was a well-educated Russian woman, a refugee, who spoke several languages, but of course knew nothing about New Zealand history and literature.

At last my appointment was confirmed and I reported for duty at the Library on 13 December 1926. The number 13 has never had any terror for me and from this time on I regarded it as, if anything, a lucky number, especially when I found that this was the date on which Tasman had discovered New Zealand. For some obscure reason, this seemed to me a good omen. It was also just the day before my own birthday.

The Library was open to the public in the sense that people could come in and use it, but the front door was kept closed, and visitors had to ring to be admitted. At that stage it was a wise precaution, because the smallness of the staff made supervision difficult and also the greater part of the Library was still not catalogued.

The large room on the ground floor was the Rare Book Room and it was also used by Mr Andersen as his office. He had a table for each of his different activities – the Library itself, the Polynesian Society, any book he was engaged on at the moment, etc. The small room adjoining also housed rare books and series like Book Auction Records. The portrait of Alexander Turnbull hung over the fireplace. The portrait of