

JOHN PEARSE AND HIS SCRAPBOOK,
1851-56

A visitor to the Library may now see an album of brown paper bound in a flimsy light brown cloth showing signs of wear at the spine. On its 93 mounted pages, each 22 x 15 inches, are pasted 357 individual items: 127 watercolours and wash drawings which vary from the size of a postage stamp to 11 x 17 inches. No more than a dozen depict buildings or scenes of which we have any other contemporary visual record. There are also three annotated maps; three manuscript and 75 miscellaneous items: documents of travel, newspaper clippings, accounts of the earthquakes of 1848 and 1855, Mr Hart's Address to the Electors of Wellington, house plans, drawings of the vegetable caterpillar and the seahorse, albatross feathers, pressed ferns and invitations to balls. This miscellany makes up one of the most moving and informative social documents to return to New Zealand. This is a visual record of colonial life from June 1851 to July 1856: a period, until now, much less well-documented than had been the immediately preceding decade.

Not only is the scrapbook itself an event, but file letters leading to its acquisition also document one of the happy pursuits and processes of the Turnbull Library. The chase begins with the transmission of hearsay—the adumbration of a clue—in a letter to the New Zealand Embassy, Paris, 23 March 1967, in which Mr A. G. Bagnall mentions verbal information from Mrs Shirley Leach 'that a Miss B. Pearce [sic] of given address owned a scrapbook containing original watercolours of early Wellington interest.'

It was possible a little later to correspond directly with Miss Pearce who gave further information about her great grandfather, John Pearce, a virtually unknown but most perceptive resident of Wellington in the 1850s. Miss Pearce also explained that the album was a valued possession of her sister and herself and that while she hoped it would eventually return to New Zealand, there were in the meantime some difficulties. A member of the New Zealand Embassy staff, Mr H. V. Roberts, was kindly shown the album by Miss Pearce and stressed in general terms its value and importance.

Nothing further, in the short term, seemed practicable and there the matter rested for two years until Miss Walton was able to visit Paris in August 1969 at the conclusion of a private visit to the United Kingdom. Miss Walton, through the good offices of Mr O. P. Gabites, the New Zealand Ambassador, saw the album with Miss Pearce in a crowded and dazzling hour. This display of active interest convinced its owners that it should come to New Zealand on loan for close study. Early in 1970, the scrapbook was taken to London for colour and black and white