

THREE AND A HALF TONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Turnbull Library's Historical Collection

ACROSS the road from the side entrance to Parliament Buildings in Wellington stands the Turnbull Library, an old-world three-storey building in red brick that houses what is probably the best collection in the country of books dealing with New Zealand's history. In the last few years the library has reached such proportions that the weight of books is putting a good deal of strain on the building, and this strain has been increased by the recent addition of a collection of over 50,000 historical photographs. Most of the negatives are of the old glass-plate type that was used before dry-plate photography became the general rule. They are stacked in large filing cabinets against the walls of a room on the third floor, and their total weight is in the region of three and a half tons.

Under the supervision of the photograph librarian, G. C. Heron, the collection had a few months ago reached a total of 20,000 plates. Since then it has increased to over 50,000, partly as the result of an appeal that the library made for the preservation of old professional photographers' collections. But the Turnbull photograph library is still expanding, and more old negatives and prints are coming in every week. At present negotiations are under way for the purchase of a Nelson collection

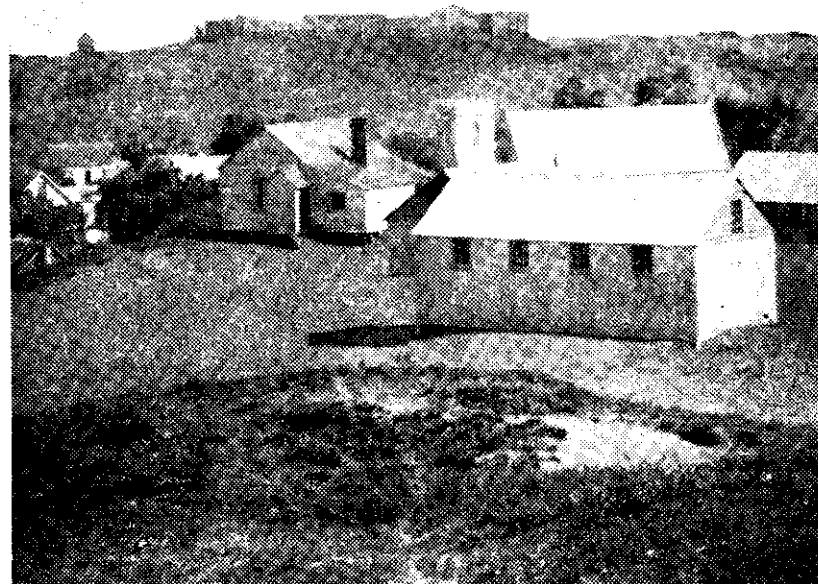
which should prove to be the library's most valuable acquisition yet.

"Many people are not aware of the great historical value of old photographs," Mr. Heron told *The Listener*, "and this applies particularly to the stocks of old negatives belonging to retired or deceased commercial photographers." In their own right old photographs had an historical value almost as great as the many rare books the library possessed. The idea of preserving them was not new, he said, and many museums and libraries had photograph sections which were used for reference and illustration purposes.

A National Home

But the purpose behind the Turnbull collection was broader than this. They were trying to build up a national home for old photographic collections, a place where these could be sorted, cleaned, catalogued, and their historical importance assessed. Once the preservation of the original negatives was ensured, prints from them could be made available to the public at a nominal figure. The library had already met several requests from writers and historians for photographs, either for book illustrations or for use to check on small historical details such as clothing fashions, hair styles, and other matters not usually mentioned in history books.

The photographs also had a considerable educational value, Mr. Heron said,



YORK STOCKADE, Wanganui (on skyline)—a photograph taken about 1860 by W. J. Harding

and many prints from their collection had been used in school journals and film strips. The library had also had many requests from collectors for ship photographs, and they were particularly lucky in possessing the Layton and Dickie collection, which provided a complete record of the ships that had visited New Zealand between 1900 and 1930.

Unfortunately, many valuable collections were destroyed or ruined before the Turnbull Library heard of them.

For instance, most of the Weidner collection from Kaikoura was lost through being left out in the rain in an open paddock. Other collections had been burnt, or dumped on the town tip, and in one instance a glasshouse had been built from a number of valuable old plates. On the other hand some people realised the value of old collections but did not know what to do with them, he said. One collection the library had acquired had been stored in boxes in the corner of a museum, and fungus had attacked and destroyed many of the glass negatives.

We asked Mr. Heron how he learned of the existence of old collections.

"Some of them I track down from the credit lines beneath illustrations in old books," he said, "and others by following up names found in old business directories." He found he soon developed a bit of a flair for detective work, and it was altogether a fascinating job, with plenty of exciting finds and plenty of heartbreaks, too.

Tarawera Eruption

One of the most interesting collections they had acquired was that of Thelma Scott, of Christchurch, which contained some excellent Maori portraits. They also had Crompton Smith's Tarawera eruption series, J. McAllister's photographs of central Taranaki history and country life, and a number of scenic, mountaineering and Maori life pictures. In a few weeks' time the library would hold two exhibitions of some of the most interesting photographs in these collections.

"How are the old plates preserved?" we asked.

"As soon as a collection arrives at the library, each plate is placed in a special envelope made of chemically inert and moisture-resisting material," he said. If fungus had got into the emulsion this had to be cleaned off to prevent it spreading and ruining the whole plate. The negatives were numbered, all known particulars, such as subject, date,



PIONEER LANDSCAPE, an eloquent picture of burned bush-land in Taranaki—a photograph taken by the late J. McAllister