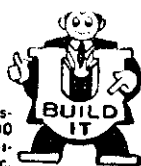


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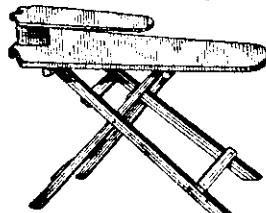
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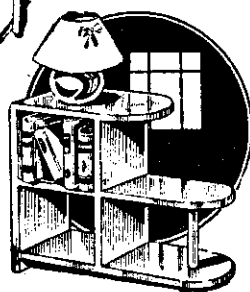
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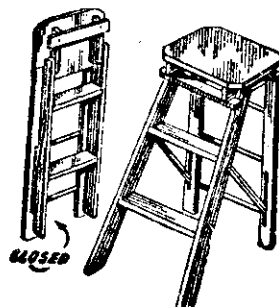
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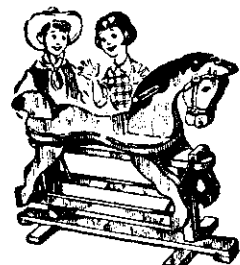
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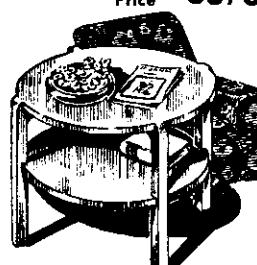
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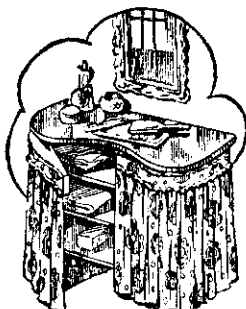
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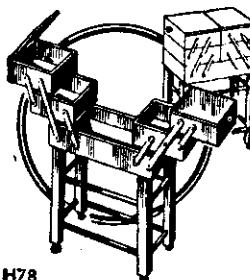
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The Edges of Oblivion

THERE are times when even a bibliophile will say that books are a nuisance. They are greedy for space, and need more attention than might be supposed from their general immobility. If they are left too long undusted and unnoticed they submit to invasions by silverfish and other insidious creatures. Worst of all is the effort of moving them. The problem is illustrated on a grand scale by activities at the Turnbull Library, described in an article on page 16. Private collectors are never faced with an upheaval of that magnitude, but experience fits them to understand and sympathise. The owner of books does not like to make many moves. Among New Zealanders, who unpeg their tents with the casualness of desert bedouins, he has the look of a stationary man. Today, perhaps, he is heard of less frequently, for the times are against him: he needs too much room.

Public libraries of the "Crown Jewel" sort are moving into the same position. They are treasure houses to which new collections are being added. Books already in them are becoming more valuable as they grow older; they must be cared for and preserved, and yet space must be found for new arrivals. Unlike libraries which meet the demand for fiction and the lighter sorts of contemporary writing, they cannot be drastic in culling, but must keep what they have for the nation and for posterity. It could be pointed out, with some justice, that the difficulties arising from this deliberate and necessary hoarding are by no means confined to New Zealand. According to a writer in the *New Statesman and Nation* (who quoted an official report), arrears in the cataloguing of presented books at the British Museum amount to 70,000 volumes. In the Department of Manuscripts the catalogue of additions is 28 years in arrears. "More than 5000 manuscripts are in need of binding,

while the present average progress is 120 a year." These, however, are not problems of space. They are results of understaffing and shortage of money, and are part of a wider congestion in art galleries and museums—an embarrassment to be expected in a country with venerable institutions. In spite of war and devastation, much has been saved from the past; and new discoveries are still being made. Further, the best work of contemporary artists and craftsmen must also be preserved. In some fields the aim is not selection but completeness, so that the dilemma becomes a question of physical and financial capacity.

New Zealand is less embarrassed than most countries with the remains of ancient cultures. Our art treasures are comparatively few; even the Turnbull Library is modest in size by world standards, and appears to be large only because for years it has been housed in a building too small for its purpose. Its value is in the quality of the collection, known and respected by scholars overseas. The present difficulties have nothing to do with congestion elsewhere. This country is not heavy with history: the nation is young enough to be building foundations, and old enough to understand that there must be room for books and archives. The longer these tasks are delayed, the harder they will become. Our best literary treasures have come to us from abroad, but the archives are our own. To protect a good library is to pay a little of our debt to Western culture (for its great books are better able to survive if they are dispersed) and to make an investment of intellect for which future generations will be grateful. And in saving our archives we are simply making sure that we remain a nation with a history. The past and the future have their point of meeting in our collections of books and documents. It is there that, in more than a figurative sense, the nation lives.



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