

THE MILTON COLLECTION IN THE ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY

The text of a paper delivered at the Conference of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand held at the Alexander Turnbull Library in February 1977.

The title of this paper is misleadingly definite. The words 'The Milton Collection' carry an implication that books are or are not part of the collection with no possible doubt. This would be true if the collection was closed with no further additions possible, as it might be if frozen at Turnbull's death in 1918 and one spoke of 'Alexander Turnbull's Milton collection', but even that in itself is not a definite entity.

As anyone who has read the biography by E. H. McCormick¹ will be aware, Alexander Turnbull had been buying books, New Zealand books and general English literature, during the years he lived in London after leaving Dulwich College and all his collecting interests tended to be broadly rather than narrowly defined. A decision of early 1917 left a large number of the books that Turnbull bought from Quaritch in the last months of his life in England, to await the end of 'Germany's submarine warfare',² and when these books were processed by the staff of the officially established institution not all were identified as Turnbull's purchases by the use of his own book-plates. In the way these things happen his book-plates were also used in some of the books bought or given to the Library at a later date, so that it is not always possible to be sure that a particular book was bought by Turnbull himself.

We can take the central core of the Milton collection to be the editions of Milton's works, in the original or in translation. (I diverge here to say that I am restricting myself to works published before 1801 and all comments about proportions, and any numbers, refer only to pre-1801 material; this also applies to works outside the central core of editions, and I am leaving the entire area of nineteenth century material—which is extensive—out of consideration. Except in a very few cases, which are indicated, I refer only to works actually in the Turnbull Library.)

Taking then the central core of the collection, the editions, a reasonable estimate identifies about seventy percent, 120-odd, of the 174 issues and editions in the Library in 1974 as Turnbull's own purchase. W. R. Parker's survey of the seventeenth century editions³ identified 111 issues; the Library had 72 of these in early 1974 and Mr Elliott then estimated⁴ that 66 of these had been acquired by Alexander Turnbull. It can