

here and there by an element of the melodramatic, the scandalous, or the tragic. In fact, they are more or less what you find in similar collections left by middle-class families with the foresight or imprudence to preserve their archives. In many respects they resemble the Field-Hodgkins papers, but the correspondence of a gifted artist lends that collection a peculiar distinction. There is no such character in the Turnbull circle, and Alexander, who stands at its centre, was in some ways a very ordinary person. 'Is he worth a biography?' commented a young scholar when, in answer to his inquiry, I mentioned my current occupation. Though I did not say so, he echoed the question I have pondered in recurring moods of depression. 'We are nobodies', Alexander once wrote of his family and himself. Pursuing that train of thought, I have occasionally wondered whether I wasn't engaged in compiling the life of a Mr Pooter. The correspondence of Alexander Turnbull abounds in Pooterisms, while the score of his limitations is an impressive one. Unlike Napoleon, the hero of his youth, he was not a great man – he led no conquering armies and founded no dynasty. Unlike one of his minor heroes, Nelson, or Cook, who ultimately seems to have replaced Napoleon, he never won a battle or explored an ocean. He was not a political leader or a social reformer or even a writer. On the other hand, he was never responsible for the death of another human being; he never ordered a flogging; he never (to the best of my knowledge) lived in adulterous union with someone else's wife; and his life was innocent of the intrigue and the ambition that beset the careers of most politicians and many literary figures. The list of his negative achievements and negative virtues could be extended, but they can be disregarded in the light of his one claim to distinction: Alexander Turnbull founded the library that bears his name. (And, as it has since occurred to me, the young scholar whose slighting remark touched off these reflections had drawn mainly on that same library for his own research into New Zealand history.)

This sedentary, unspectacular achievement – the foundation of a unique library – was at the centre of Turnbull's life and must necessarily be one of his biographer's chief concerns. But not, of course, to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, it would be a false view of Turnbull that presented him as a bibliophile and nothing more. Further, important clues to his development as a collector would be missed by disregarding other interests and activities. Here I speak with the authority of my own shortcomings, for some years ago I attempted to do precisely that. The simplified account I gave in *The Fascinating Folly* contains some errors of fact and, as I now realize, did less than justice to the variety of Turnbull's collection and the complex influences that shaped it. The new venture will, I hope, make amends for past omissions and misdeeds. But pending its completion – in the not too distant future, if my