

## A TROUBLED CHILDHOOD

### 'The nucleus of a National Collection'

The bequest to the Crown by Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull was the first in New Zealand of its kind, and in its range, character and value was then and still is unique. How did Government rise to the challenge of this splendid cultural if quite unsought legacy so far from the normal preoccupations of New Zealand, particularly at the end of the first World War? Were there people about who knew what should be done and were able to provide for future development as well as ensure appropriate custody for the collection? If we can be permitted to exercise summary judgement in anticipation of a conclusion before we have presented any of the evidence a provisional answer could be, on the whole, favourable except in the provision of funds – favourable or, less warmly, satisfactory at least by the standards of the time having regard to the general poverty of professional library expertise, the lack of any endowment and the fact that the Library's first fifteen years spanned one major and two mini economic depressions. With the virtue of hindsight and the courage of our slightly better resources we must avoid the temptation to hasty or complacent judgement and even have regard to the idiosyncracies of librarians as well of the administrators with whom, too often, the final decisions rested.

Space, time and discretion command that the outline history must be covered in varying depth and completeness. It is nevertheless possible to survey the initial decisions and some of the Library's struggles during the 'Andersen incumbency' a little more closely than has hitherto been practicable. Even a modest two decades take us to 1940 when the writer himself had been on the staff for more than two years. Much more importantly 1940 is an archival frontier at which point in terms of the thirty-year rule of access even an enlightened archives administration would say that use of contemporary files should stop. For various good reasons a closer perusal must be left to our successors as either historians or historian-librarians.

The Library climate at the time of the Turnbull bequest may help us to place the difficulties of the Library's beginnings in a suitable context – that is, if the use of this modern metaphor of 'climate' is not far too pretentious a way of summarising the scattered and unrelated thinking on librarianship in the early twenties. The New Zealand Libraries Association was in recess; a halting subsidy scheme lamely assisted a local authority public library movement, weak except in the four centres whose city councils mostly were still accustoming themselves to the necessity of making a modest provision beyond the range of a subscription system; the university libraries were enduring a starved