

## THE LIBRARY AND THE COSMOS

Address delivered at the Alexander Turnbull Library on  
Tuesday, 30 June 1970, by Professor J. C. Beaglehole

I never wanted to be an engine-driver. I liked travelling by train when I was a boy, with my brother, out to the Lower Hutt in the holidays, when the Hutt was still country, with paddocks as far as you could see, and horses, and once out of the train you got into the buggy behind a horse; and when you got into the train you each had a penny cake of chocolate, to be consumed on the journey in case of extreme hunger; but I never wanted actually to drive the train. My idea of romance was libraries. I don't know why this was so, unless it was because I was one of those fortunate boys – and there could not have been very many, really, in New Zealand in those days – who were brought up in the midst of books, to whom books, of all sorts, were as much part of the intimate family environment as my mother's brown scones or the round piano stool that went up and down, so that when you got tired of practising you could twirl round and round on it. That familiarity did not lessen the romance for me, though it may have done so for another of my brothers, whose idea of romance was to clean our doctor's motor-car on Saturday mornings. There were not so many cars in Wellington, it was still possible to walk across Willis Street on the spur of the moment without being killed; and they were still called motor-cars, not cars. I am not simply indulging in the idle chatter of a born free-associationist, as I know I am: I am trying, if only for myself, to picture a period. The period was that of the early years of Alexander Turnbull's Library.

I may have been an extreme case of my particular sort of romance. I just don't know. And I don't mean that I had no other interest at all. I was not interested in football, but I was interested in food, and marbles, and making toy theatres. It just happened that I had a natural affinity with the printed page. As for the Cosmos, there it was, but it never struck me that it might be wondered about. I was never quite certain about the meaning of the word – I am almost, as a matter of fact, impelled to look it up again now, to give my ideas exactitude – but I knew it had something to do with the universe, and the universe was the stars, and I admired the stars; but how much more interesting the spangled firmament on high would have been if it had been books. It was not; and there was nothing to do but accept it unquestioningly. Perhaps that was why, when I first came across Margaret Fuller, I was a bit puzzled. You will remember that remarkable blue-stockings