

Taonga (treasures) at the Alexander Turnbull Library: documentary heritage in Polynesia

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Abstract:

The Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL) is New Zealand's premier research library in the field of documentary heritage. Its statutory purpose is to preserve, protect, develop, and make accessible its collections for all the people of New Zealand in perpetuity and in a manner consistent with their status as documentary heritage and taonga [treasures].

The Turnbull recently underwent one of the most significant restructures in its 90-year history, in response to the changing environment for research collections. The restructure sought to realign resources with the increase in born digital material and to broaden its reach to new and diverse audiences. The conversations about taonga [treasures] and how we define what is rare and unique in the ATL setting were a vital part of the restructure process.

This paper will focus on two particular areas. The first is Māori language material and Māori related material e.g. whakapapa [family history], oral histories, paintings, photographs as well as manuscript material. One of the most important collections in the Turnbull Library is the Donald McLean Papers in Māori. This series comprises almost 3,000 letters written to McLean by Māori from throughout New Zealand. It is the largest surviving group of 19th-century letters in Māori. Donald McLean (1820-1877) was arguably the most influential figure in mid-19th century New Zealand history. He was a dominant figure in relations between Māori and the Government during this tumultuous period. Being able to preserve and make accessible collections such as this requires a special understanding and relationship with Māori donors and researchers. Letters of understanding are being developed with iwi [tribes] to ensure that we are able to continue to develop and honour the nature of these truly special collections.

The second area of focus is our digital collection strategy and the growing understanding of the importance of collecting resources such as websites where the rarity is often defined by the impermanence of these sources rather than the number of copies available.

Keywords: New Zealand, Māori, New Zealand history, Research libraries

Background and history of Alexander Turnbull Library

In 1918 Wellington merchant, yachtsman and book collector Alexander Turnbull left his private library to the nation. Hailed as “the most generous bequest to the people of New Zealand ever made by a New Zealander since the beginning of New Zealand time” (*New Zealand Times*, 1st July 1918), it forms a major cornerstone of New Zealand’s national collection of historical and heritage material.

Turnbull was a member of a wealthy merchant family and was able to use his significant income to build his collection of material relating to New Zealand. He succinctly outlined his collecting intentions as “Anything whatever relating to this Colony, on its history, flora, fauna, geology and inhabitants, will be fish for my net, from as early a date as possible until now” (Barrowman p.8).

As well as collecting works relating to New Zealand Aotearoa Turnbull collected the works of John Milton extensively, and the library now has holdings of Milton's works, which are "ranked among the finest in the world". He also developed good collections of seventeenth-century poetical miscellanies and of Dryden material. However his main focus was New Zealand and Pacific material in a wide range of formats including, photographs, manuscripts and drawings, paintings and prints.

Turnbull's house, specifically designed and built for his collection, was purchased by the government following his death and in June 1920 the Alexander Turnbull Library was opened to the public as a national reference and research library. In 1965 the National Library Act established the Turnbull as part of the National Library of New Zealand. It is in effect a library within a library and the National Library of New Zealand (Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa) Act 2003 affirms this by stating that the purpose of the act is to “(...) maintain and enhance the Alexander Turnbull Library, as part of the National Library”.

The Act further confirms in subpart 2 “The Continuation of Alexander Turnbull Library”:

- (1) There is the library known as the Alexander Turnbull Library, consisting of
 - (a) the documents bequeathed to the Crown in 1918 by Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull of Wellington by the second codicil to his will set out in [Schedule 1](#); and
 - (b) bequests, donations, and other additions to, and acquisitions for the purposes of the Alexander Turnbull Library.
- (2) The Crown must continue to own the collections of the Alexander Turnbull Library in perpetuity.
- (2A) The chief executive, in consultation with the National Librarian, must provide
 - (a) separate and suitable accommodation in a national library building for the collections of the Alexander Turnbull Library; and
 - (b) for the development of the research collections and the services of the Alexander Turnbull Library, particularly in the fields of New Zealand and Pacific studies and rare books

Rachel Barrowman in her 1995 book “The Turnbull a library and its world” gives us the following formal definition of the Turnbull Library, as agreed in 1989 by representatives of the Trustees and Friends of The Turnbull:

The Alexander Turnbull Library's role within the National Library's functions is to preserve New Zealand's recorded heritage within the wider National Library group of services and collections. It is a research library with a major responsibility in this field. Its identity and integrity must be seen to be successfully maintained from the perspective of the use, potential donors and the public at large [and further] that this can be achieved with its location, services and collections in the National Library building' (Barrowman p. 186)

Thus the direction for the Turnbull was set and carried out successfully for several decades. Research collections of considerable breadth and depth have been developed and made accessible to researchers both in New Zealand/Aotearoa and across the world.

In 2010 the Turnbull library undertook a review of its service model and organisational structure to ensure that it was well placed to meet the demands of the research environment of the future.

Two key objectives of the review were:

- Assess and recommend an appropriate organisational design that will best deliver future services in the new generation environment;
- Incorporate principles that support the Library's Bicultural plan.

The resulting structural change allowed more resources in two particular areas. The first will not be a surprise, that of digital collecting and online delivery, the other change is unique to the New Zealand environment, that of services and support for Māori.

Services and support for Māori

The library's legislation specifies in its purpose that it is "to preserve, protect, develop, and make accessible for all the people of New Zealand the collections... in a manner consistent with their status as documentary heritage and taonga". The Alexander Turnbull Library holds the world's most extensive collection of documentary taonga Māori. Taonga is difficult to define and there is not one agreed meaning as it is a dynamic term and meaning often depends on the context in which it is being applied. One definition put forward by our Māori specialists is: "Taonga is the term used to describe material deemed by New Zealand's indigenous people, the Māori, to be of significant cultural and spiritual value" (Diamond, Taungapeau & Tikao 2013 p. 1).

The National Library developed a strategy to identify and better meet the needs of Māori, *Te Kaupapa Mahi Tahi – A Plan for Partnership 2005-2010*. This plan established the framework for the National Library and Turnbull to develop and maintain effective relationships with iwi (tribes). The Turnbull also has a policy on Kaitiakitanga or guardianship, this policy recognises that the library and iwi are partners in preserving and providing access to taonga.

This relationship has become even more important in, what is referred to as, the post-Treaty settlement environment. The Treaty of Waitangi is New Zealand's founding Nationhood document. It was signed in 1840 by more than 500 Māori Chiefs (including 13 women) and while it established British rule over the country it also guaranteed Māori the ongoing ownership of their lands, fisheries and other possessions.

The principles of the Treaty were not always upheld and the Waitangi tribunal was established to hear land claims. In 1985 a law change enabled the Tribunal to hear claims back the 1840s. This change meant that the documentary heritage materials held by Turnbull were heavily consulted when Māori were researching Treaty claims. There have now been over 30 claims settled with tribes and there are more settlements in process. Letters of Commitment have been developed with some iwi and the National Library and other memory institutions. The letters outline a collaborative partnership approach to the care and management of taonga.

The Turnbull restructure gave an opportunity to strengthen staff resource in the area of supporting Māori services. There are now seven positions in the library with a Māori specialist focus, including for the first time a Curator Māori. There is also a Māori arrangement and description specialist. This role works across all formats within the collection and has enabled more confident arrangement and description of Māori materials by the team as a whole. Further capacity in this area is provided through a number of other generic roles that require some Māori specific competencies for example knowledge of Te Reo Māori and the ability to facilitate Iwi/Māori access to matauranga Māori by creating pathways to information in the collections. This capacity will enable the library to better manage and make available Māori resources and toanga.

Some of the toanga Māori that the library holds include the following:

Niupepa (Newspapers)

The Library holds a significant collection of newspapers in Māori from 1842 -1933. The niupepa were copied onto microfilm by the library and have since been digitised as part of a collaborative project with a number of the New Zealand Universities. The online collection consists of over 17,000 pages taken from 34 separate periodicals. 70% of the collection is written solely in Māori, 27% is bilingual and about 3% is written in English. There were three main types of niupepa published; government sponsored, Māori initiated, and religious.

There are four main parts to the Māori niupepa collection:

- facsimile images of the original pages
- text extracted from the newspapers (for searching)
- bibliographic commentaries for each newspaper title
- English abstracts for each issue

Further information about the Niupepa Collection can be found in *Rere Atu Taku Manu! Discovering History, Language & Politics in the Māori Language Newspapers*, edited by Jennifer Curnow, Ngapare Hopa, and Jane McRae, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2002.

Letters in Māori

The Turnbull Library holds what is believed to be the earliest known independently written Māori letter. In 1825, Eruera Hongi wrote to Church Missionary Society missionaries, requesting writing paper and an invitation to visit England.

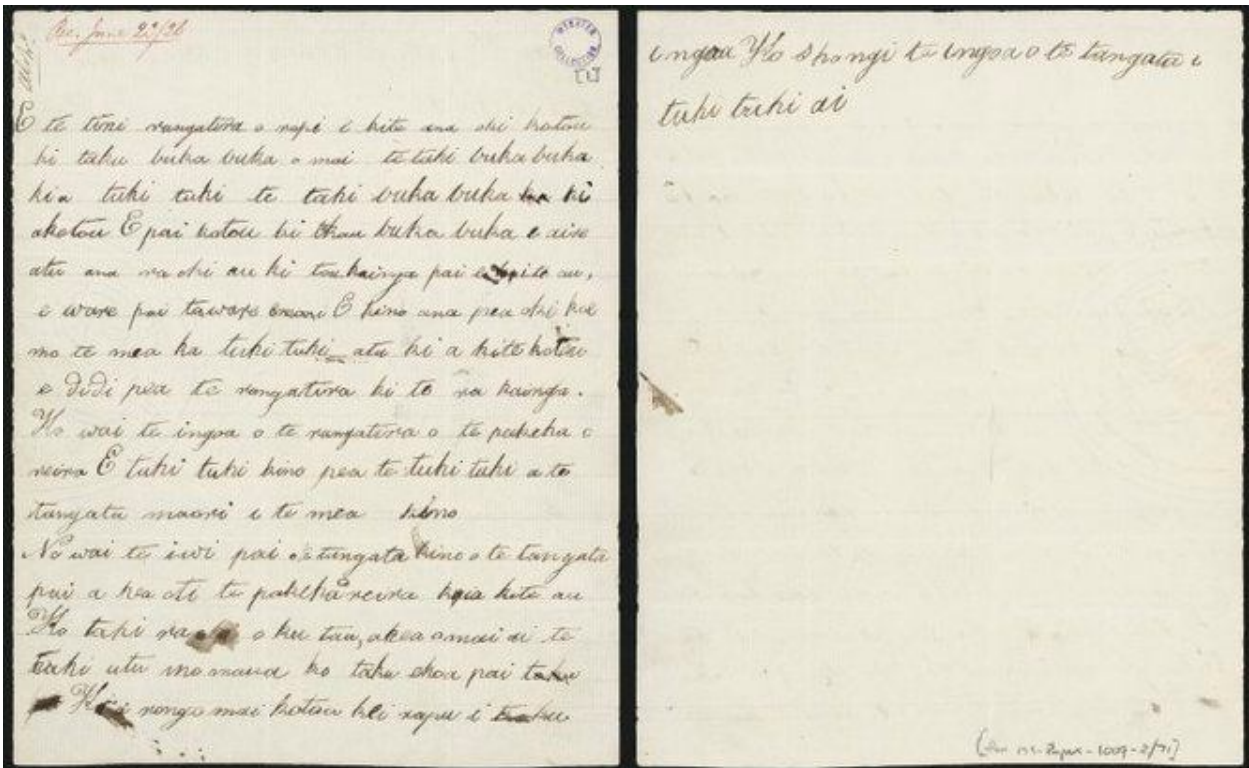


fig. 1: Māori letter from Eruera Hongi to Church Missionary Society missionaries. Webster, Kenneth Athol, 1906-1967 : The Webster collection and papers / of Kenneth Athol Webster. Ref: MS-Papers-1009-2/71-01. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22790823>

Drawings of and by Māori

Here is an example of a drawing in the manuscripts collection. This is a page from a journal kept by Thomas Laslett, about his four visits to New Zealand in the 1830s and 1840s. The visits were timber-gathering expeditions and Laslett became Timber Inspector for the Admiralty. This drawing shows a canoe prow and a drawing by an unidentified Māori of a man on a canoe. The latter has been labelled by Laslett 'A native friend who had been watching me while I was making the sketch to the left asked for the loan of my pencil and permission to try his hand at an illustration in drawing a canoe. The above is a specimen of his work.

Drawings like this are not common in the Turnbull collections. The Library holds 10,000 drawings of Māori by others but the number by Māori themselves could be as little as 20.



fig. 2. [Waka drawings]. Laslett, Thomas, 1811-1887 : Journals. Ref: MS-Papers-8349-3-167. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22701155>

Case study: McLean the man and his papers

In addition to the taonga discussed previously there is the collection of McLean papers. The collection came to the library in three parts. The first part was donated in 1939 by family members persuaded by McLean's biographer (Cowan) to make the deposit; the second, ten years later, by his widow and the third part purchased in 1969: "these the chief librarian told the press, will fill gaps in New Zealand history which have thwarted scholars for years" (Barrowman 1995, p. 130).

Who was McLean?

It has been argued that no other single person played as significant a part in mid-nineteenth century New Zealand history as McLean. There were other figures, governors, politicians, soldiers, iwi and hapu leaders, missionaries and others whose actions and arguments shaped that history. But none had such an ongoing influence in that period, between the 1840s and the 1870s when European colonial control was being asserted, tested and extended.

Donald McLean arrived at the Bay of Islands, in the far North of New Zealand, just after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. He was a young Scotsman looking for a fortune. He was ambitious, confident and competent and quickly rose through the colonial government. He was the person who drove the land purchase activities of the Government, and the first Secretary of Native Affairs. His support of the disputed Waitara purchase at Taranaki was instrumental in the outbreak of war in Taranaki. In the early 1860's he turned aside from central government to build up his landed estates in Hawkes Bay. However he was soon involved in local politics and before too long was Superintendent, of the Hawkes Bay Province, before returning Wellington as an elected politician. Through the mid-1860s he was in charge of the campaign against Te Kooti on the East Coast and from 1866 until just before his death in early 1877 he was the Minister in charge of Native Affairs. He was a very influential person at a particularly important and difficult time in New Zealand's history.

The Donald McLean papers

The largest series are the English-language letters – 14,500 of them – from many hundreds of correspondents, public and private: government officials from interpreters to heads of departments, politicians, governors, family members, and the retainers looking after his landed estates. It was a large and ever-changing network, and a rich resource for researchers into local history, biography and, in the context of this paper, for Māori history and relations between Māori and Pakeha – for the main purpose of most letters was to keep McLean informed about what was going on in Māori New Zealand.

The McLean Māori letters

The Māori letters numbering almost 3000 are written in te reo Māori and cover almost 40 years of interaction between Māori and the Crown and are generally about land sales. The initial period of contact between Māori and land purchasers and agents such as Donald McLean are generally warm and congenial and where sentiments of deep affection and aroha (love) are constantly expressed.

The letters were first transcribed and then translated. Jane McRae who worked on the translations describes the letters as:

(...) an extraordinary record of Māori life and opinion. Yes, they are principally about land, and they illustrate the diverse views that Māori had about sale or retention – and ownership of their land... But there are many letters that are personal and human... And sometimes a letter simply describes something that happened to the writer. Everyday life and events, and hopes and dreams, are subject of the letters, as well as tribal and political matters, and the good and bad between Māori and government, Māori and Māori, and Māori and Pakeha.

The letters are also reflection of the many roles that McLean played. He was a mentor and a source of many goods – of guns and food, tobacco and clothes. He is the colonial administrator, but he is also close friend; he is admired and loved, and also fiercely taken to task.

Jane McRae goes on:

The letters are full of interest linguistically. Many are plain and prosaic, while others are complex and poetic. They capture some of the traditional, oral features of the language, in the formalities of mihi to begin a letter or the quotation of whakataukī or waiata. And they use the language for all that was new, including literature – there are newly coined and transliterated words, and references to the Bible and newspapers. As a corpus, the letters are testimony to the increasing literacy of Māori over this period.

Making these letters freely available with accompanying translations gives a voice to a large body of people from New Zealand's historical past – generally unknown people or only known to their descendants today. These letters will allow the 'common Joe' or 'Josephine' a voice apart from the official government record, and provide insights that will make a remarkable contribution to the identity of all New Zealanders, especially Māori.

Impermanence is the new “rare”

The other area of significant change for the Turnbull and all libraries is in the born digital collecting arena. How do research and heritage collections respond to this challenge?

Accepted practice in the world of digital preservation suggests that the life of a digital record is between 5-10 years unless some targeted preservation or migration intervention has taken place within that time. We are at risk of losing huge amounts of unique taonga because we don't have sound digital collecting and preservation strategies in place or because we haven't allocated the resources to addressing these issues.

At the Turnbull Library we recognised that we needed to ensure that we carry out our heritage preservation mandate with the impermanent and new information not just that which is already old. Websites that change, email correspondence from authors and researchers are some of the digital material that we risk losing if we fail to recognise that rare doesn't just mean that there aren't many copies of an item.

Through the Turnbull review it was recognised that the library had a legacy staffing structure that was developed in a print only world and that this was no longer sustainable. Although the library had been collecting small amounts of born digital material since the 1980s, the pace had stepped up and the resourcing and structure needed to reflect and respond to these changes.

There were several key drivers that highlighted that the library needed to change the way it was doing things in the digital heritage collecting space. The first major driver was an amendment to the National Library of New Zealand Act in 2003. The amendment broadened the Library's mandate under legal deposit to include born digital publications. It took until 2005 to begin collecting digital documents began under an Interim Electronic Legal Deposit agreement. The full requirement to deposit electronic documents came into effect in 2006.

The second key driver was the government goal that is part of a strategy, introduced in 2010 called 'Better Public Services' and under this Result Area 10 is: “New Zealanders can complete their transactions with government easily in a digital environment”.

The Department of Internal Affairs, in which the Library sits, is the lead agency for achieving Result Area 10. Agencies are being asked to re-think the way they deliver services, particularly given the public desire to access government services digitally. Customers expect service delivery from the government that is increasingly digital, responsive and personalised.

The library sees that it can make a major contribution to achieving that goal by collecting, preserving and making available born digital material. The 2010 Turnbull restructure recognised the “need for ATL to be strongly represented in the digital environment, especially digitally born material”. To enable this strong digital representation a Digital Collection Strategy Team was established. This team pulled together the epublications librarian as well as digital archivists and established a new role of Digital Strategy Team Leader. This new team combined with new roles of Online Services Leader and Online Content Coordinator in the Research Access team has provided the resource needed to prioritise our digital collecting and service delivery.

Collecting the Born digital

Some significant work had already been done by the National Library through setting up New Zealand's National Digital Heritage Archive (NDHA) and Turnbull had been a major contributor to this work. The NDHA, established in 2004, was one of the first in the world to be comprehensively harvesting a whole country's web domain. It was established as a partnership between the National Library and vendors with the aim of developing a digital archive and preservation management system.

NDHA is a digital storehouse that ensures that websites, digital images, and other 'digitally born' and digitised items that make up the Library's growing digital heritage collections will, despite technical obsolescence, be preserved and remain accessible to researchers, students and library users now and in the future

The NDHA was formally launched, with full functionality, allowing all formats of ATL's digital heritage material to be able to be ingested and managed by NLNZ. A significant programme of business process change trained all relevant staff on new digital processes and systems. In the words of Mark Crookston, our Digital Collection Strategy team leader:

The legislative, infrastructural and administrative change implemented by ATL and NLNZ since 2003 has been a remarkable achievement. The digital information of today is the heritage of tomorrow and these changes has enabled digital collecting activities which addresses the significant changes in how societal information is created and disseminated. There are few national libraries with digital collecting and digital preservation programmes as mature as New Zealand's.

He acknowledges thought that there are still significant gaps between the size and complexity of information created by society, and ATL's ability to identify, collect, process and manage that information. We are also very aware that the amount of born digital information being collected by ATL will increase over time and we are only really just starting to understand what that will mean in terms of our collection development strategy.

If we look in particular at manuscripts we know that this collection holds the significant majority of born digital unpublished items (73%). In manuscripts, the current collecting model means that in most instances, digital records arrive at ATL as part of a larger, paper based accession from one of the following circumstances:

- The end of life or some other life changing moment of a donor (retirement, moving house etc), and there are computer files for appraisal;
- The clearance of an organisational 'backlog' of records, resulting in contact with ATL, and there are digital records for appraisal;
- Curatorial intervention which targets an organisation in order to address a gap in our collection.

Through collection development discussions over the past year we have begun to recognise and plan for more proactive and targeted collecting in order to receive digital collections earlier than we would with traditional collections.

Manuscripts are described using traditional archival approaches which place emphasis on describing at collection level, with little detail given to the individual item. This approach appears to be working well with describing large quantities and aligns with international best practice.

Our Digital Collection Strategy Team is continuing to push us to face the challenges associated with collecting digital material, in particular the use and reuse issues and the issue of managing the vast amounts of digital material. How do we determine what we should collect? Just because we could archive the whole of the New Zealand twitter account – should we?

Conclusion

The unique treasures or taonga of the Alexander Turnbull Library are in our Māori material and in particular the resources in Te Reo Māori. The collection of Māori language material is thought to be the largest collection of items in any indigenous language in the world. The Donald McLean papers and the Māori letter series is a significant part of this collection.

The other area of significance or unique taonga for Turnbull are in its born digital collections. The priority we have placed on collecting and preserving the impermanent digital will, we believe, be vital for future generations of researchers.

It may not be an easy journey and there will be challenges along the way however in the words of a well known Māori proverb “Whāia te iti kahurangi Ki te tūohu koe, me he maunga teitei” - pursue excellence – should you stumble, let it be to a lofty mountain.

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