

"A most entertaining little man"

Chris Szekely

Hocken: Prince of Collectors

Donald Jackson Kerr
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Dry bread and milk for breakfast. Dry bread and milk for supper. Not much chop for a boy of eight at Woodhouse Grove in 1844, but that was the Methodist way.

Thank goodness there was meat and potatoes for dinner.

Donald Kerr's biography of Thomas Morland Hocken is a feast. A chunky read at 300 pages, with nearly a hundred more pages of appendices, notes and a bibliography. It is a story expertly told, rich in detail and meticulously researched.

Kerr is well placed to write this book. He has a longstanding fascination with New Zealand's great book collectors and benefactors, in particular "the Holy Trinity" of Sir George Grey, Thomas Morland Hocken and Alexander Turnbull. In 2006, he published the excellent *Amassing Treasures for all Times, Sir George Grey, Colonial Bookman and Collector*, the first substantial study of Grey's role as an obsessive collector of rare books and artefacts. Kerr worked directly with the Sir George Grey Collection at Auckland Central Library when he was employed there as Rare Books Librarian.

His current position as Special Collections Librarian at Otago University sets him in close proximity to the Hocken Collections. A thorough study of Hocken's role as a collector was, therefore, perhaps inevitable. The resulting book, *Hocken: Prince of Collectors*, admirably follows its predecessor and doesn't disappoint. The two are fine companions.

Kerr is clear from the outset about the story he wants to tell. His approach is bio-bibliographical. That is, the account of Hocken's life is largely arranged around his approach to collecting: what types and categories of material were collected?

What was the process of collecting? What was (and is) the significance of his library? And how did his collection shape his thinking and writing? This is a book that librarians, bibliographers and bibliophiles will love, particularly those immersed in the study of colonial New Zealand.

There is just enough room left to learn something about the man himself and personal aspects of his character. It is these elements, especially, that caught my attention. Hocken was born in 1836 in the Lincolnshire town of Stamford. His father was an itinerant Methodist preacher. Kerr tells us that Methodist circuit life provided a sense of community and a strong culture of achievement: "These were earnest, simple, pious lives removed from worldly pleasures and centred on home, chapel and business, a sense of duty, hard work, foresight and thrift, moderation and self-discipline."

Morland (as he was known) entered Woodhouse Grove School at the age of eight in 1844, and stayed there for six years. Education was intense, with long hours and close attention to study, prayers and preaching. The food (described above) was "less than appetising". Not surprisingly, there were occasional transgressions:

Clandestine food cooking is recorded, particularly potatoes obtained from a nearby field over a climbable wall. There was no allowance for youthful enterprise and high-jinks. Boys caught were punished – the cane, fines or solitary confinement – and sometimes expelled.

Kerr acknowledges that to modern eyes the education system at Grove seems gruelling, and doesn't divulge whether Morland was ever naughty, caught or punished. Quite possibly he was none of these, but those boys must have been hungry. One wonders if that is why Hocken never grew. Kerr puts the adult Hocken at a mere 4'8".

Fast forward to Hocken's stint as a ship's surgeon. As a young, newly minted medical practitioner, Hocken practised his hard-earned craft on arduous voyages between England and Australia. Among the various passenger births, tragic deaths, accidents and diseases, there are memorable anecdotes. A passenger comments on Hocken's practice of offering his arm to the tallest women on the ship and promenading around the decks with full confidence. "The little doctor" is described as an angel of mercy, "excessively kind and untiringly energetic".

Hocken arrived in Dunedin in 1862. He was 26. It was revolting: asphalt and mud, and the smells of "moist, untreated and disease-producing sewerage". But the place was ripe with gold rush opportunity. Within hours of arrival, Hocken rushed a notice in the paper advertising his services as a doctor, and within days he had established a medical practice that would thrive. Within a year he was appointed to the office of district coroner.

Kerr states at the outset that his book does not deal with Hocken's medical career. Nevertheless, he does recount a couple of coroner tales. The trial of Captain Jarvey is a particularly ghastly story of incest, murder and necrophilia. In Hocken's own words, the medical work was hard, "but I was young and strong and the pay was very good".

And so to the books and the start of a tremendous library. Hocken had a genuine interest in local affairs, his local environment and New Zealand's early settlement. He actively sought out books, pamphlets and manuscripts that documented the country's colonial past, and had a keen eye for recognising the value of retaining contemporary documents as they were produced. A cloth-bound pamphlet on the Jarvey

affair is a case in point. He annotated many of these items, inscribing his name, thoughts and comments. His was a working library, actively mined as a source for his thinking and numerous lectures.

Hocken's focus was on New Zealand, in particular its prehistory and colonisation, with three "heroic polestars": Captain James Cook, Samuel Marsden and Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Botany and native flora were also notable enduring interests. Hocken's approach to collecting was personal and personable. He cultivated excellent contacts, formed extensive networks, and wrote directly to individuals politely expressing interest in their papers and those of their forefathers. His efforts yielded excellent results and his reputation grew.

So, too, did the boxfuls of "rubbish". Hocken's second wife, Bessie, was not above playfully teasing her husband with disparaging references to the "rubbish" he collected. A highly capable painter, photographer and linguist, Bessie actively assisted Hocken with translation work. At his request, she translated Abel Tasman's journal from Dutch, a feat her husband shamefully took the credit for. The relationship between the two was affectionate and companionable, and yielded a daughter.

Kerr describes Hocken as the right collector at the right time. Inevitably, his interests brought him into close contact with other collectors, most notably Sir George Grey and Alexander Turnbull. Correspondence with Grey commenced in 1880, prompted by Grey reading one of Hocken's lectures. The following year, Hocken visited Grey at his home on Kawau Island. A warm relationship formed, aided by Hocken's medical assistance in treating Grey for haemorrhoids and constipation. The pair exchanged lectures and duplicates.

Hocken visited Alexander Turnbull in Wellington in 1894. Turnbull describes him as "a most entertaining little man" who was most instructive. Their correspondence continued until Hocken's death. It consists of mutual pleas for desiderata and duplicates, imbued with gleeful one-upmanship over choice new acquisitions. Kerr reproduces several of these letters as an appendix. They are an enjoyable and interesting addition.

In 1897, Hocken announced his intention to gift his collection to the nation as a public resource in Dunedin, contingent on the construction of a suitable building. Eventually the collection was housed in a purpose-built wing of the Otago Museum. Sadly, Hocken never lived to see his library in public use. He died of cancer on 17 May 1910, just a few weeks after the building was completed, the opening of which he was too ill to attend.

Today, the Hocken name is famous as an iconic New Zealand library that has supported countless scholars in the pursuit of new knowledge. This is a legacy that Hocken would be justly proud of. Kerr's account paints a picture of a hardworking man with a sense of civic duty, intellectual curiosity and foresight: amiable, tenacious and likeable. I wish I had known him. I feel like I do.

Postscript: Eric McCormick set a high benchmark over 40 years ago when he published his exemplary biography of Alexander Turnbull. But I wonder if one might dare to consider a new examination. There are surely some morsels to Turnbull's story that are as yet unsavouried. And surely Donald Kerr would be just the right man for the job. What a hat-trick that would be!

Chris Szekely is chief librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

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