

Reader the first priority, Otago Daily Times, 25 May 2019

- JOHN GIBB

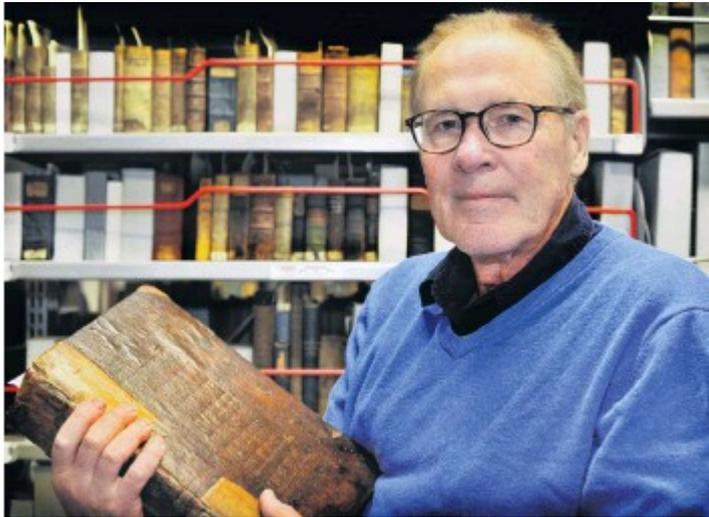


PHOTO: CHRISTINE O'CONNOR

Special book . . . University of Otago special collections librarian Dr Donald Kerr holds his favourite book in the special collections — a 1481 Venetian printing of Nicholas de Lyra's commentary on the Bible. It is bound in a 1484 Rood and Hunt Oxford binding, one of 26 in the world and the oldest English binding in New Zealand.

Name: Donald Kerr

Occupation: Special collections librarian,

University of Otago Q Could you outline your early life, and later studies?

Born in Taumarunui, I shifted to Te Atatu with my family in the late '50s, attending Rutherford High (now College) and gaining a BA at Auckland University.

Later tertiary study included a MA thesis at Victoria University of Wellington, and a PhD at Auckland University.

Q

What jobs did you do before this one?

After completing the graduate library programme at Victoria University, I later became rare books librarian at the Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland City Library, working there for 14 years.

Q

Why did you choose this job?

I like reading, I enjoy history and, being an educator at heart, I like imparting my enthusiasms for these two to others. At one stage I had my own hand press and understood the mechanics of printing old style.

Q

How did you get into it and when?

In 2002, somewhat tired of Auckland, and having just completed a PhD on Sir George Grey as a book collector, a break was needed. Fortuitously, the ad for special collections librarian, Otago University Library, appeared. I applied and got it, having no real knowledge of Dunedin as a city except for a student visit back in 1972. As you know, Dunedin is Paradise.

Q

What qualifications and training did you need?

A first degree and the graduate library studies (now master of information studies) from Victoria University of Wellington were essential.

Q

What personal skills do you need?

An aesthetic appreciation, self motivation, perseverance, accuracy, a sense of order, a willingness to listen and learn, and an ability to get on with a wide variety of readers, young and old.

Q

Any physical requirements?

No real physical requirements are required, although moving books from shelf to shelf (good housekeeping) can be demanding, especially if they are large fat folios.

Q

What do you do on a daily basis?

My first priority is the reader. Fulfilling their requests for books or manuscripts, or handling a reference inquiry comes first. As security and care is paramount in rare books, monitoring use is an important part of the job.

Q

What about the exhibitions?

Special collections does four exhibitions per year. This involves determining the exhibition theme, and includes researching and writing the captions for each item on display. Since 2002 until early this year I have done 62.

The aim, as always, is to promote the collection and make people aware of what we have. Importantly, we put them all online so people in Oslo, Tallahassee, and Boston can view them free. It is not only an excellent resource, but also a great flag waver for the university, and Dunedin.

Q

Can you tell us something about big donors, particularly to the Otago University Library, and your books about some of them?

Many of our larger libraries have been started by generous donors, individuals who have amassed important book and manuscript collections and then placed them in the public domain, for all to use and benefit from.

These individuals have included the Rev William Arderne Shoults, Dr Thomas Morland Hocken, Charles Brasch, and Esmond de Beer and his John Locke Collection.

Sir George Grey (1812-1898), governor of New Zealand, South Australia and the Cape Colony, was probably the most outstanding British colonial statesman in the 19th century. He was also a collector, amassing two libraries in his lifetime: Cape Town (5000 items); Auckland (15,000), and giving these collections away.

Two books have resulted: *Amassing Treasures for All Times: Sir George Grey, colonial bookman and collector* (Oak Knoll; Otago University Press, 2006), and *Hocken. Prince of Collectors* (Otago University Press, 2016).

Dr Hocken (1836–1910) arrived in Dunedin in 1862, aged 26. Throughout his busy life as a medical practitioner he amassed books, manuscripts, sketches, maps and photographs of early New Zealand, some 5200 items, which he gifted to Otago University in 1910.

I am working on the library collection of the Rev Shoults (1839–1887), who amassed 4200 books and manuscripts, which are housed at special collections.

In the pipeline is a book on 12 selected New Zealand books collectors, tentatively entitled *A Band of Patriots*.

Q

What is the university's Centre for the Book?

The centre was established in 2012, and I am co-director with Dr. Shef Rogers (English and linguistics). We promote bookish events, including a World Book Day Lecture and dinner, an annual symposium, on some aspect of the book, and visiting guest speakers.

Q

What's the strangest thing you've had to do?

Standing on a tarmac with six medieval manuscripts on vellum packed up for an exhibition in Melbourne. Beside me was an entrepreneur shipping off goat eggs in hermetically sealed canisters.

Q

What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?

Promoting the collection is very rewarding, and the local, national, and international networks formed over the years help this activity. And of course they (the Grey, and special collections) have given me enormous personal growth and satisfaction.

Q

What is the salary?

For a senior rare books librarian, from \$63,000 to about \$81,000.

Q

Where will you be 10 years from now?

Retired, but on the other side of the desk, pestering librarians for information on my further book projects.