

## Obituary

**DAVID COLQUHOUN: archivist, historian, aesthete, sportsman, 'leftie', designer, carpenter, LHP member.**



David speaks at the launch of his Lovelock book at the National Library 2008

David Colquhoun, Curator of Manuscripts and Archives at the Alexander Turnbull Library for 25 years, and friend and help-mate to many, died suddenly in Masterton on 18 March 2018, aged 66.

It was deeply ironic that he passed away just days before the first cricket test between New Zealand and England began, whereupon Boult and Southee skittled the English batsmen for just 58 in the first hours. He would have been grinning from ear to ear. About test cricket he was passionate; one day cricket, less so, while the 20-over game was an aberration. Many an afternoon was spent on the bank at his beloved Basin Reserve, sometimes in the company of this writer, acutely reading the nuances of Ish Sodhi's leg spin bowling or delighting in the swish of the bat as Kane Williamson played the most glorious cover drive.

David Colquhoun was born in Wellington on 30 August 1951, the first of three children to Joy and John Colquhoun but spent most of his early life in Auckland. John was a dentist, a vigorous anti-fluoridation campaigner and political activist, being a member of the New Zealand

Communist Party in his young days, the editor of the journal Socialist Action afterwards and a leading light in the Auckland branch of the Committee of Vietnam during the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. Along with his sister Sara, David inherited these political beliefs. He was a member of the Labour Party, New Labour and the Alliance at various times in his life.

Educated at Kelston Primary School and Glen Eden Intermediate, his time at Lynfield College was problematic at times, refusing to be caned for not having his socks up as his father had told him he was not to suffer corporal punishment at school. One of his major achievements at school was his establishment of the magazine *Blues News* while he was in the sixth form. Initially founded with Alastair Riddell, who later fronted the rock group Space Waltz, he soon took over the process of writing, gathering and collating material, editing, drawing illustrations (his favourite school subject), organising photographs and distributing the magazine himself. It was not always plain sailing. When he stayed home from school one day to envelope and post it the headmaster threatened him with expulsion. *Blues News* was a phenomenon in its time. David was very committed to the 'purity' of the blues and later with John Davidson and Steve Roth assisting, it survived for some years after school, with an ever-growing distribution and contributions from aficionados in the United States and Great Britain.

From sixth form, he spent some time at Waikato University but became disillusioned and over the following three years spent time working on the rubbish carts in Auckland (he was obsessed with physical fitness) with, among others, Graham Brazier of *Hello Sailor* fame and at least two years scrub cutting on Phillip Ward's farm on the Coromandel Peninsula. Living in a little house in Fletchers Bay he worked hard and played hard indulging in his down time with his fellow workers in excess alcohol and drugs.

David referred to these as his 'wasted years'. He was an enthusiastic reader and thereafter enrolled at Auckland University to study history. Seven years later he graduated with a first-class honours degree completing a thesis on Frederick Maning, a prominent 19th century writer and judge of the Native Land Court. Chris Szekely, chief librarian at the Turnbull, and David's boss, was a student of David's when he was studying history at Auckland. David was a tutor in the department and Chris remembers him as quietly spoken, a good facilitator who set high standards; 'getting an A grade from David meant you did a very good job and earned it'.

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It was during this time, both of us post-graduate history students that I first met David. We connected over football among much else. Briefly, we played alongside each other in the University HART team until he became just too angry with the captain's overt directions and left to form another team among history students. In more recent years, he and I were among a number of devotees sitting in the stand at the Cake Tin, hoping, often forlornly, that the Phoenix's performance would be better than that of the previous week.

Following his graduation, and pursuing an ever-increasing interest in archival research, he secured a job as Arrangement and Description Archivist at Archives New Zealand in Auckland. Thereafter he spent a year, 1988-89, at the Waitangi Tribunal. His most significant work there was on the Te Roroa hearings. A local farmer, Alan Titford, had been bulldozing pou (ceremonial carved landmarks) on Te Roroa wahi tapu at Maunganui Bluff, on the coast just north of Dargaville. This was an area of contention between Titford and the local Māori claimants. David's research showed that some of the area should have been reserved for Te Roroa in the 1876 Maunganui Crown purchase. As a result, Titford was particularly antagonistic towards David leading up to the first July 1989 hearing. David stood his ground and subsequently the One New Zealand Foundation, to whom Titford belonged, continued to berate him with hostile emails over his Maunganui Bluff research. Te Roroa supported David's findings as did the Tribunal in its 1993 report. For his part, Titford is now serving a 24-year prison sentence for arson – burning a house on his property and then blaming iwi – and decades of domestic abuse.

In 1990, David was appointed Curator of Manuscripts and Archives at the Alexander Turnbull Library. He was lucky; he had found his dream job. His tasks included developing acquisition policies, appraising and valuing collections, assisting with preservation plans, managing staff in the reading room services for researchers and curating collection-based exhibitions.

Over his 25 years in the role he developed expertise in all of these roles. As curator David was always a welcoming, friendly and knowledgeable presence in the Turnbull's reading room. Charlotte Macdonald, for example, mentioned that when she and Frances Porter were researching their book *My Hand Will Write What My Heart Dictates* he was more than co-operative in learning new uses of existing collections and new places to where they might extend.

Some of the acquisitions were remarkable. For example, it was

because of David's extensive, patient and positive correspondence with representatives of the John Middleton Murry family that the library was able to acquire a large tranche of Katherine Mansfield material in 2012.

Another collection highlight was his pursuance and delight in the purchase of the Greg Chappell press statement relating to the 'underarm incident' when Australia played New Zealand in a one-dayer in 1981 when he instructed his brother Trevor to bowl underarm to deny New Zealand a possible tie on the last ball of the game. In it Chappell said, 'I regret the decision. It is something that I will not do again' It was a grubby piece of paper signed by Chappell's own hand.

In 2007 the Turnbull – thanks to David – acquired a number of letters written by Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales in 1920 to his lover Freda Dudley Ward. The letters were an account of the Prince's tour of New Zealand in 1920 and were, in David's words 'detailed, lively and very frank'. He quickly displayed the letters to considerable public interest and later published an excellent piece in the Turnbull Library Record recording the besotted Prince's story with wit and insight. For some time before his death he had been preparing a book of the Prince's visit to New Zealand.

Other notable accessions under his watch included Maurice Gee's literary papers, Bert Roth's lifetime collection of labour history records, the journals of timber gatherer Thomas Laslett from the 1830s and 1840s and the unexpected find of the 1819-20 Antarctic diary of Charles Poynter which may have just recorded the very first sighting of the Antarctic continent. Just as satisfying, he commented more than once, was receiving diaries or bundles of letters from little-known New Zealanders caught in interesting times.

David was also intrigued with the concept of sport as a spectacle New Zealand in the 19th century. In another Library Record David wrote a playful and respectful piece on the unlikely story of the remarkable Mrs Catherine Wiltshire (along with her husband Joseph), who, in her time (1876), was billed as the 'greatest female pedestrienne in the world'.

The late 19th-early 20th century sportsman George W. Smith also fits into this milieu. David regarded Smith as New Zealand's 'greatest ever all-round sportsman before World War One'. He was a champion jockey, sprinter and hurdler, one of the stars of the 1905 All Black Originals in their tour of Great Britain in 1905 and was vice-captain of New Zealand's first rugby league tour of that country in 1907-08; the 'Old Golds'. He later played league as a professional for the Oldham Club near Manchester in England.

David was more halfway through a life and times biography of Smith when his final illness frustratingly precluded him from completing it. This included a number of trips to Oldham where he researched and spoke about Smith. The tragedy is that this book is unlikely to be finished.

In 2000, pursuing his passion for distance running, David curated an exhibition on New Zealand athlete Jack Lovelock who won gold for New Zealand in the 1500 metres at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936. This was followed in 2008 with the launch of his handsome book based on Lovelock's journals – which the library had acquired – titled *As If Running On Air*. It was a glittering occasion. A torch burned outside the library, the rector of Timaru Boys' High School, Lovelock's alma mater, startlingly pulled Lovelock's 1936 gold medal out of his pocket, and footage of the 1936 race was on display.

Retired academic and prominent distance runner Roger Robinson launched the book, enthusing about its contents. 'This is one of the great books of world running literature,' he said. 'Never have the private writings of such a great athlete been presented via such expert scholarship. Its more than an excellent editing job. David Colquhoun's introductions to each sections of the journals provide the most accurate and revealing biography ever done of Lovelock the runner. Thoughtfully and quietly he has rescued the real Lovelock from the sensationalism of some fictitious versions.'

In 2013 he was contracted to write the Athletics entry for *Te Ara: The Online Encyclopedia*. Employing his characteristic enthusiasm and accuracy, and spending long hours on this project, Jock Phillips, general editor of Te Ara regarded David's completed version among the top 20 of the more than 1,000 contributions amongst all of the encyclopedia's entries. 'His total commitment to get things just right in every aspect was very impressive,' Jock commented.

In 2010, he instigated the digitisation of the Donald McLean papers with Elliot Young. It was an ambitious project: the biggest single 19th century collection, being put not just into a digital format but also into a vehicle with potential for considerable expansion and multiple reach.

From 2010 to 2015 he wrote a column about Wellington; 200-300 words accompanied by an image from the Turnbull's collections. They began in the weekly *Wellingtonian*, then in *Capital Times* and more recently in *Fishhead* magazine. A number of the earlier articles were reworked for his second published book, *Wellingtonians: From the Turnbull Library Collections*, published in 2011.

In Logs to Blogs, in an exhibition David curated for the Turnbull

Gallery in 2013, he explored 250 years of diary keeping. In 2015 he curated a major exhibition at the New Zealand Portrait Gallery. Capital Characters marked the 150th anniversary of Wellington as the nation's capital by taking a look at the city's history through portraiture.

His last major written contribution was the essay he wrote also in 2013 on the National Library's blog titled *It's Just Hell Here Now*, intertwining the library's digitising of World War One soldier diaries with personal accounts of their experiences-in their own voices. This essay remains by far the most read piece of the hundreds of essays published in the blog's history. After his retirement from the library he made a move to the other side of the reading room as the library's Adjunct Scholar to work on his own writing projects and do some freelance curatorial work. On a website he established, he blogged on various historical issues of interest to him, and the work that he was doing.

David was a staunch supporter of the archives and records profession whether presenting papers at an ARANZ conference, publishing articles in the ARANZ journal *Archifacts*, or lobbying on behalf of the archives and records profession generally. Not a lover of red-tape bureaucracy, he was not afraid to clash heads with management when he felt passionate about an issue that was doing a disservice to staff, or the profession in general.

For the last 30 years of his life until recently, distance running was his passion. He was a familiar sight to workmates at the library arriving and leaving in his running gear. Once when pounding the pavement along Evan's Bay Parade he passed Chris Szekely attempting a brisk early morning walk. 'Good lad,' he muttered approvingly as he breezed on by.

The sport largely dominated his spare time in Wellington. Early on he joined the Scottish Harriers Athletic Club and Wellington Marathon Clinic. On the road David was always motivated to get the best out of himself. John Barrington recalls that during the 1996 Nelson half-marathon they found themselves running together and despite not knowing each other, made a pact that they would ruthlessly push each other to the finishing line. This they did, with each of them finishing first in their respective age-divisions; it cemented a friendship for life. Like the rest of his activities, David employed structured training and meticulous planning for all of his races. Over the years he was a consistent medallist in individual and road relay races – which he often captained – for his club. Running trips to smaller towns with mates often resulted in a visit to a bookshop or a country museum.

David also gave back to the sport by establishing the Scottish

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Harriers' 'Three Peaks Challenge' in 2000. This was an annual series of three events, each of which was over three Wellington Hills. As event organiser he took delight in exploring Wellington's hilly terrain in order to introduce 'new peaks' into the series. Through this he developed a love of mountain running. With Des Young he trained hard for the 2006 New Zealand mountain running championships in Marlborough. It paid off for David when he was placed second in the Men's 55-59 age grade. That year he also contested the World Masters Mountain running championships in Slovenia. He finished a very creditable 15th out of 61 finishers in his age group.

David was gentle, honest, determined, meticulous, thorough, singular-minded, trustworthy and a great friend. Former partner, Jo Newman to whom he remained close, recalled his great love of art (a massive Bob Kerr painting hung on his Carterton house wall), his love of tramping, visiting new places, watching movies, listening to blues music, developing with her a love of opera and his designing and building of furniture for the house in Mount Victoria, and later in Carterton.

In 2012-3 when his running times were fading slowly beyond that which would have been considered normal, he came to understand that something might be physically wrong with his body. Doctors diagnosed that he had a form of multi-system neurological atrophy, a condition that was terminal. Characteristically, David eschewed a funeral and speeches after his passing in favour of a party for family and friends at his wee house in Carterton on 8 April, and a commemoration to his life and work in the Turnbull Library four days later.

*Wellington-based historian David Grant has been a friend of David Colquhoun for more than 40 years. He thanks John Barrington, Richard Brent, Gordon Clarke, Sara Colquhoun, John Davidson, Joan McCracken, Charlotte Macdonald, Sean McMahon, Joanna Newman, Jock Phillips, Barry Rigby, Roger Robinson, Lynette Shum, Chris Szekely and Des Young for their willing contributions to this story.*