

Hocken: Prince of Collectors

DONALD JACKSON KERR

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I have to declare a potential conflict of interest. Since 1976, when Gordon Parsonson introduced me to the delights of the Hocken Library (then located up the Otago Museum stairs past the stuffed moa, and featuring those classic professorial chairs), I have been a Hocken chap.

Regular users have long known the debt we owe to pioneering collectors, such as Thomas Morland Hocken, Alexander Turnbull, Sir George Grey and others, but happily scholars have now turned their attention to our pioneer collectors themselves as we devote more thought to the people, events and institutions that have shaped the creation of our sense of identity/ies. Donald Kerr is an apt choice for a biography of Hocken. He is Special Collections Librarian at the University of Otago and co-director of the university's Centre for the Book. His authoritative study, *Amassing Treasures for All Times: Sir George Grey, Colonial Bookman and Collector*, was one of the delights of my 2006 reading year.

Prince of Collectors is not the first study of Hocken – Eric McCormick and then A. G. Hocken published on him decades ago – but it is by far the most extensive, amounting to 424 pages, over 100 of them back-matter, the notes alone likely to provide a happy hunting ground for future researchers. Hocken Librarian Sharon Dell's foreword assures readers that Kerr has examined all the volumes in the library's original collection, but the book also shows evidence of extensive research in both hemispheres. It has clearly been compiled by a scholar who knows the value of following the collecting trail, judiciously balancing his word limits with assessments of Hocken as well as of the collection itself. Sometimes, I suspect, a general reader may skip some of the latter, but I read it for pleasure – while simultaneously noting points and sources to follow up!

The twenty chapters follow a broadly chronological structure. The first examines his family background, his birth in in England in 1836, his training and his early career as a ship's surgeon. These people were not always highly regarded, but Hocken did his job well, making three voyages to Australia in the celebrated steam ship *Great Britain*. It was at the end of one of these contracts that he decided to chance his luck in New Zealand. As so often in his life, Hocken was lucky in his timing. The Dunedin where he landed in early 1862 was just beginning to enjoy

the early benefits of the gold rushes. He set up a medical practice and the following year became a coroner, a position he would hold for more than two decades.

Kerr reminds us that Hocken was very much a man of his city. For much of his time there, Dunedin was the colony's biggest and wealthiest city, and Hocken was a prominent citizen. He ran his medical business and built a fairly substantial home, Atahapara, in Moray Place. He was involved in civic affairs and contributed to public life, holding senior positions in medical and intellectual institutions. No wonder that so many Dunedinites turned out to his funeral in 1910. And that reminds us that Hocken made a wider contribution to New Zealand's culture than the institution that bears his name. Although Hocken always appreciated good binding and typography he 'was not a connoisseur collector'. Instead, Kerr notes, 'he was more concerned with the content of a book, squeezing out the best and most promising facts and figures for his talks and publications.' He was famous for his lectures and he was often called on to provide advice for events such as exhibitions. His pamphlets, books, and above all his 1909 bibliography of New Zealand literature continue to influence New Zealand scholarship.

The book also shows that, while Hocken relied on correspondence and on catalogues, he travelled widely as well. In New Zealand, besides visiting local collectors, scholars and booksellers, he visited the sites of early colonial history, making him one of the first colonists to appreciate the importance of place to the history of these islands. In London he even asked the shipping line Shaw Savill & Albion to search its records about a derelict ship lying in Fiordland. But his greatest coup in Britain was to bring back many of the records relating to the New Zealand mission and the New Zealand Company; without them our literature would be much the poorer.

Having said all that, you cannot separate the collector from his collecting, so *Prince of Collectors* contains a great deal of biographical information. As the photographs show, he was a very short man (Kerr quips in one place that 'the small-man syndrome comes to mind'). He had two marriages and grew increasingly wealthy over time. Although widely praised for his amiability and for his generosity, the good doctor was not always completely lovable. Kerr notes that he 'could be extremely judgmental, especially if he did not recognise someone as a kindred spirit.' He liked being in the public eye, and those little letters FLS [Fellow of the Linnaean Society] so much so that he laboriously inked them on earlier book plates. 'Hocken was never shy about self-promotion, and

recognised that such actions aid immortality'. In the earlier part of his marriage to his second wife, Elizabeth (Bessie), he did not always fully acknowledge the contributions that she made to his work.

Space precludes summarising everything, but three chapters stood out for me. Chapter 5, 'A Fondness for Anything New Zealand' makes particularly fascinating reading. As Kerr says, Hocken 'had his own heroic polestars and he fortuitously discovered these collecting fields relatively easily'. He was particularly interested in James Cook, Samuel Marsden and the Wakefields. Although, like many early colonists, he was initially more fascinated by New Zealand's natural history, his interests quickly widened to include the ethnography of the colony and of the wider Pacific; his gifts included artefacts as well as printed materials. Chapters 19 and 20 deal with the lengthy process of gifting Hocken's collections and then reflect on his legacy and its later growth.

In 2007 Otago University Press published the sumptuous Ka Taoka Hākena: Treasures from the Hocken Collections. Once again, the Press's production values match the scholarly values of the text. *Prince of Collectors* is a handsome hard-back, printed on good quality paper, well typeset (admittedly in a small font). It features three sections of colour and black and white images, and even comes complete with a ribbon. Like its contents, the physical book should stand the test of time.

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