Treasure from trash; collecting printed and digital ephemera in New Zealand

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Abstract:
This paper defines ephemera as collected by the Alexander Turnbull Library. It uses some examples to illustrate the value of ephemera in illuminating the history of everyday life, popular culture and graphic design in New Zealand. Vital, immediate, and evocative, ephemera are transient disposable treasures to be captured, ordered and made accessible for posterity.

The paper discusses ways in which ephemera has been collected, preserved and made available in libraries and institutions across a range of sectors throughout New Zealand, along with some of the inherent challenges.

The paper indicates some of the ways in which born-digital ephemera fits into the ephemera tradition, serving the same needs for future researchers, and some of the criteria used to select born-digital ephemera for preservation at the National Library.
Introduction

*Those are pearls that were his eyes: Nothing of him that doth fade,*

*But doth suffer a sea-change Into something rich and strange.*

(Shakespeare, *The Tempest* I,ii)

Consider, if you will, your interaction with ephemera over the past two days. Did you use tickets to get here; did you consult a timetable or calendar, study a menu, read a programme or receive an invitation? Have you noticed protest posters or posters advertising theatre events? Or have you used a carwash, punching in the numbers from the printed ticket you bought? Perhaps you used online or digital versions of this sort of information? And then after you used this material what did you do with it? Do you still have a menu in the bottom of your bag, or has it been consigned to the scrap-heap? In six months’ time, how many examples of today’s ephemera will still exist?

Such published material, issued for short-term use in large numbers, quickly becomes rare as most copies are discarded. These discarded fragments, over time will be transformed into “something rich and strange”, full of valuable information; trash will become treasure.

We can think of looking at ephemera as trawling like an archaeologist through a midden of discarded material from a previous culture. As we dig down through the years, we uncover strata from past decades, and this helps us to reconstruct the past. In fact a library’s ephemera collection is the amassment of innumerable middens dumped on the library’s doorstep. Unlike Dickens’ “golden dustman” in “Our Mutual friend”, making a fortune by selling off his piles of dust for recycling, the librarian finds value in keeping the piles, sorting and arranging the objects until all their facets are uncovered and gleam richly.

Ephemera and its uses

My presentation deals with published paper and digital ephemera, the kind of material that we keep in the Ephemera Collection at the Alexander Turnbull Library. We aim to collect and preserve the documentary history of New Zealand and New Zealanders, because we want to keep our big scrap heap for the benefit of future researchers. The ephemeral material generally does not fit the criteria required for inclusion in the Library’s book catalogue, and yet it is an invaluable source of cultural, graphic and socio-political information. It is primary source material generally issued for short-term use, immediate and unmediated, designed for impact upon its first audience using contemporary language attitudes and graphics. In this way it resembles newspapers, oral history, cartoons and manuscript correspondence; all largely unmediated formats worth keeping.

Characteristics of Ephemera

- Issued for short-term use, it is usually made with no regard for how future generations will regard it; it has been described as “raw, unedited history—the
purest kind,“ and “the other half of history: the half without guile” (Katherine Ott (1997), quoting Maurice Rickards, and the editor of AB Bookman’s weekly)  

- It lets us see the past through the eyes of our forebears. It captures the flavour of everyday life, material and popular culture  
  - It documents cultural, political and sporting events  
- It reflects attitudes, controversies, humour and prejudices. Protest, campaign and advertising pamphlets and posters are often created without editorial intervention. Their language may be dramatic, spontaneous, lively, exaggerated and even irritating!  
- It illuminates the history of material and print culture in New Zealand  
- Graphic materials and advertisements, which were meant to appeal to people at the time they were produced give us an idea of the design trends and aesthetic taste of the time

Evolving Uses of Ephemera  
As you know, the study of New Zealand’s own history has vastly increased over the last twenty or so years, with the emphasis spreading from political history to social history. Two areas of interest are:

(a) **Popular culture** has become an increasingly common area of study. Many areas of popular culture are represented in the Ephemera Collection:  
  - Popular music, folk music and related festivals  
  - Ethnic communities in NZ  
  - Cinema, Video, Television (Xena Warrior Princess, LOTR)  
  - Contentious social issues (Manapouri hydro dam, Kaimanawa horses, Foreshore and Seabed, etc)  
  - Rugby, racing, beer, and The quarter-acre paradise  
  - Modern fashion, fast cars, stylish furniture  
  - Fads, crazes (hula hoops, the Twist, body piercing, karaoke, teenage culture, punk, disk dances, hippie culture and alternative lifestyles, flares, miniskirts graffiti, tattooing, moko)  
  - Beauty contests, muscle contests  
  - Lotteries (Lotto, Keno)  
  - Advertising (Fernleaf butter ads; Telecom’s Spot, false teeth, corsets and hair restorer, Creamoata’s Dan)  
  - Games (Poleconomy), Toys, Jigsaw puzzles, Computer gaming  
  - Dining out - the history of menu contents and diet over the decades  
  - Souvenirs, Postcards, greeting cards  
  - Packaging, paper bags  
  - Junk mail, sales catalogues from Mitre 10, Woolworths, etc

(b) **Material culture, print culture and graphic design**  
In 1997, Victoria University Press published Book & Print in New Zealand: A Guide to Print Culture in Aotearoa, and this reflected an increased interest in the history of print culture in New Zealand. Ephemera items were in fact the bread and butter of many printing firms, and yet very few of them still survive. It is
imperative therefore that we attempt to keep examples of all formats and styles of ephemera so that researchers can draw accurate and meaningful conclusions from the material they have available to them. Ephemera examples are vital documents in a history that has so far been little explored. Michael Twyman, the “father of ephemeroLOGY” in a paper at a sold-out conference in America in June this year, stressed the typographical significance of ephemera, whose production led to developments in bold typeface, layout design, lithography and innovative combinations of text and image. It is an impossible dream to be comprehensive, but it would be great to make available many more examples of the work of publishers and printers such as Whitcombe & Tombs, Bock & Elliot, and C M Banks.

Added to this, in the last decade, there has been increasing interest in graphic artists and illustrators in New Zealand, such as Bernard Roundhill, Don Ramage, Leonard Cornwall Mitchell and Linwood Lipanovic. Publications by Richard Wolfe, and Hamish Thompson's book on New Zealand posters, Paste up, have added to this interest.

**How New Zealand institutions collect ephemera**

First, two principles that are implicit in the practice of collecting ephemera in New Zealand:

1. We cannot and need not collect everything
2. Regional libraries can best collect ephemera from their own region.

However the Alexander Turnbull Library with its national responsibility does attempt to collect material of national significance from regions other than Wellington

A survey of selected institutions carried out by Margaret Calder for the Alexander Turnbull Library in 1998, with some revisions by myself this year, shows that the collecting coverage in New Zealand is slightly uneven, with city areas well covered, but some gaps in collecting in certain provincial areas. The accompanying table shows the responding institutions arranged geographically roughly from north to south. The columns represent the various formats of material collected.

The most commonly collected ephemera objects appear to be political ephemera and fliers, pamphlets and programmes for events in each centre. This is a good base, and it is important that we maintain this level of collecting in the future.
RESULTS OF EPHEMERA COLLECTING SURVEY 1998 - GEOGRAPHICAL ARRANGEMENT
(Reflects all replies in which respondent indicated at least some ephemera was collected)

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<th>Alcohol, wineries</th>
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At present there are severe limitations on the time staff can spend on collecting material, aggravated by the demands of other library activities. The ephemera librarian must act strategically to make economic use of time available. This is where networking with suppliers becomes important: those suppliers being other institutions, organisations, dealers and enthusiastic individuals. Of course, this in itself is a time-consuming activity, but the use of the internet and email helps to speed up the process.

**How the Alexander Turnbull Library collects**
The Ephemera Collection receives an average of 600 items per month, by the following means:

**a) Purchase**
From overseas and New Zealand auction houses, dealers and poster galleries; Trademe; and private vendors. I keep bookmarks of dealer websites, and the email addresses of contacts who regularly sell or donate material to the collection.

**b) Legal Deposit**
Through the Legal Deposit Office of the National Library of New Zealand – eg calendars.

**c) Donation**
- From individual donors, colleagues and National Library staff members
- Wadestown Public Library (posters and fliers); Phantom Billstickers (posters); theatre programmes and posters periodically from Downstage, Circa Theatre; Theatre Museum London;
- Through email appeals to individual publishers and pressure groups
- Harvesting of websites; saving of email attachments

**Cataloguing ephemera in New Zealand**
From the collecting chart we can see that several institutions have good collection practices. The acquisition of the material is the essential activity, and the cataloguing depends upon having a collection in the first place. This cataloguing is also important, is a great challenge that New Zealand institutions are beginning to tackle.

I have recently been in touch with some of the major New Zealand collecting institutions to find out how they arrange and describe their collections. Institutions around the world differ in the way they approach this task. Articles by Samantha Duncan and Katherine Kalsbeek (2003) and by the CILIP Working Party (2003) report this diversity. Because of the varying histories, content, and cataloguing practices in ephemera, and the increasing technological search capabilities that help to overcome variety, it is not necessary to be too prescriptive. The main aim is to find a way to describe a vast amount of material without having to make individual catalogue records for each item. I believe that two principles apply in describing collections:

**a) Using standard cataloguing formats and thesauri** – use Dublin Core or EAD or some other system that can eventually be hooked into a nationwide search. The Alexander Turnbull Library uses a modified and expanded template based on Library of Congress rules for cataloguing pictures and graphic materials; and we use Library of Congress subject headings, and the *Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials. Pt 2. Genre & physical characteristics terms* to describe the format of the
object. Most institutions seem to have ephemera finding aids that are related to, or part of, their general catalogue. This means that eventually a keyword search of a nationwide portal will yield ephemera items. For pictorial material, it is a good idea to use a system that is now or in the future likely to be compatible with the Matapihi website, where several institutions are already displaying pictorial material [http://matapihi.org.nz/](http://matapihi.org.nz/)

(b) **Rich metadata** – input as much detail as practicable in the time allocated. There are three reasons for this:

a. This is one way in which trash will become treasure. Ideally, the more detail is put into access tools, the more a collection is accessible and useful. The value is very often in the minutiae, such as details of persons, organisations, dates, printing method, printers, advertisers, format (e.g., menus, silk fabric); and the presence of features such as autographs, interesting typographic features, ornate borders and lettering, portraits, or maps. It is impossible to predict exactly what slant future researchers will want on the collection, but these details will help adapt to more researcher needs.

b. **Detailed description** protects the collection by avoiding the necessity of riffling through briefly described material in the hope of finding relevant material.

c. It allows easy checking to avoid acquiring duplicates. This applies to formats such as posters and theatre programmes where duplicates are often offered to us.

However there is little hope of being able to treat all areas in such detail, and some subject areas can get by well with less detailed description.

**Cataloguing ephemera in the Alexander Turnbull Library**

The material in the Alexander Turnbull Library’s Ephemera Collection is sorted first by size, then by subject and then by date. The subject arrangement was set up in the late 1970s based on Library of Congress subject headings at that time, and has been adapted and expanded for local conditions since then. This arrangement means that even if the material is not fully catalogued online, the library staff can make a fairly good guess as to where to find relevant material.


So far there are about 8600 catalogue records possibly covering around 15% of the collection. I have used two complementary approaches:

(a) **Group records**, giving an inventory of contents to varying levels. These records may resemble archival descriptive records. Eventually we aim to have group records for the entire collection, but we have started with the most useful areas such as theatre and sports programmes.

(b) **Records for individual items**, and even pages of items. The hierarchical database allows these to be linked to their “parent” or “grandparent” group record. If we have not yet made the group record, this can be done later, and the “child” record can be linked then. In practice, group records are often made later, because there is a large reader demand for describing material at the lower end of the hierarchy. Our digitisation programme also requires descriptive records for individual images.
A similarly hierarchical approach is taken by the Australian War Memorial, using their MultiMimsy system (See E A Holcombe's article (2007))

**Cataloguing in other libraries**

**Auckland City Libraries**: This is a growing collection divided into two sequences, one according to type, the other according to subject matter, with items from 1860s to the present day. Types of ephemera in this collection include advertising flyers, cards, calendars, catalogues, invitations, menus, orders of service, posters, programmes, and tickets. Subject areas currently collected include entertainment, performing arts (especially dance and theatre), social and community issues, recreation, food and drink, fashion, war, local and general elections, sports, and the environment. The collection is about 45% catalogued, at least at folder level, with theatre ephemera given more detailed listing.

**Auckland War Memorial Museum**: Probably well over 50% of the ephemera collection has some degree of cataloguing on to a database, and about half of these records have been transferred over to the library’s online catalogue. The records are primarily based on a subject and each of the records will have hundreds of items sometimes divided by envelopes. At some point some more detailed cataloguing will be done. For the most part posters are treated as a separate collection and are looked after by the Pictorial Collections.

**Hocken Library**: The Hocken Library’s ephemera collection is extensive, but has yet to be fully described. It has grown organically by donation and purchase. Most of the posters are part of the Pictorial Collections kept according to subject but not yet catalogued individually. Some ephemera is part of the Manuscripts Collection and is described on Hakena, but the main collection is not yet described, and a decision is yet to be made as to whether to catalogue it on to the Voyager (published books) catalogue or whether to describe it on Hakena (for archival collections).

**Puke Ariki**: The records are catalogued into their museum catalogue (Vernon) and can be accessed by Title/Subject etc.

**Christchurch City Libraries** is now actively working on cataloguing and access to their Ephemera Collection, and will be cataloguing more collections, and increasing online access to finding aids and digitised ephemera. The poster collection is separate and is in the process of being sorted this year. It dates mainly from the 1970s onwards.

**Hamilton City Libraries** has an extensive subject category scheme, and their finding aid lists the ephemera collection in two ways - once by category along with scope notes, and the other listing categories by the broad subject area they cover. They are working actively on weeding and then cataloguing their collection. Posters are kept separately, but their treatment is similar to the method used for the other ephemera.

**Digital Ephemera**

As you can see from the images I have shown earlier in the presentation today, paper-based ephemera can be digitised and displayed on library websites for the benefit of researchers. And in an increasingly digital age, we need to collect born-digital ephemera as well. Somehow we need to put a freeze-frame on the seething mass of promotion, protest, and propaganda being produced. To quote Marilyn Deegan and Simon Tanner (2002), “In the past, ephemera such as playbills, advertisements, menus, etc have been conserved as vital witnesses to aspects of the past. Today, these artefacts appear on the web for a matter of days, to disappear in the twinkling of an eye, the flash of a pixel”.
In the field of ephemera, digital material includes:

(a) **Promotional material on CD-Roms.** These can be stored as is, but eventually will need migrating to new formats.

(b) **Emailed fliers and catalogues** – these can be saved in folders and files in a digital repository.

(c) **Websites** that perform the same functions as paper-based ephemera

I want to focus here on (c) and discuss the types of websites that the Alexander Turnbull Library is archiving on a once-only or periodic basis (depending on what is seen as suitable). This is separate from the function of the Te Puna Web Directory, which lists and links to current states of websites only. The archived sites are catalogued on to the National Library’s book catalogue (and thence to the National Bibliographic Database), and there is a link from the catalogue to instances of the harvested website. If the archived website is the equivalent of mail-order advertising, it will of course not be possible to make it function interactively and perform online ordering, but the site will nevertheless show the type of merchandise that was available for purchase at the time of harvest.

Listed below are some of the sites I have proposed for harvest and archiving. Not all have yet been archived. My aim is to identify sites that may be considered too insubstantial for the book selectors, but yet equate to the functions of material in the Printed Ephemera Collection. One again, we cannot hope to be exhaustive, but must attempt to archive a representative sample of material satisfying the following criteria:

(a) events-related material
(b) commercial material and online sales catalogues
(c) material reflecting trends in popular culture
(d) material from political pressure groups
(e) material that will exemplify changes in the graphic design of websites

- **Arovideo** (a Wellington video hire store) - [http://www.arovideo.co.nz/](http://www.arovideo.co.nz/) - Annual. The digital equivalent of a sales / hire catalogue
- **Menus.co.nz; where dining begins** - [http://www.menus.co.nz/](http://www.menus.co.nz/) - Menus from selected Auckland and Wellington restaurants. This supplements our collection of paper-based menus
- **Mindfuel.co.nz; online smartshop New Zealand** - [http://www.mindfuel.co.nz/](http://www.mindfuel.co.nz/) - Annual. A shopping catalogue
- **Nesport for Sports and Event Photography** - [http://www.nesport.co.nz/](http://www.nesport.co.nz/) - Annual. This is a photographers sales catalogue and incidentally captures images of recent sporting events
- **New Zealand Winegrowers** - [http://www.nzwine.com/](http://www.nzwine.com/) - The official website for the New Zealand wine and grape industry. We may also harvest the websites of individual wineries at least once each
- **Simillimum Homoeopathic Pharmacy** - [http://www.arnica.co.nz/](http://www.arnica.co.nz/) - a Wellington homeopathic clinic; remedies can be ordered online
- **Wearable Art awards** - [http://wearableart.co.nz/](http://wearableart.co.nz/) - an example of event management online
- **Westpac New Zealand** - [http://www.westpac.co.nz/](http://www.westpac.co.nz/) - Annual. To demonstrate how a bank interacts with its customers online

**Conclusion**

Ephemera is ubiquitous but fleeting in this age of commodity disposal. And ephemera is increasingly short-lived in the digital age. That is all the more reason to be vigilant in the
identification and collection of this material for the benefit of future researchers. As online searching of collections becomes the norm, we will make this material available by inputting rich metadata, digitising and judicious harvesting and archiving. We turn trash into treasure by describing it for researchers for whom it is relevant.

At present the potential of these collections is undiscovered. Extra staff resources are needed for their description, digitisation and rights management. By increasing the profile of ephemera on the library catalogue we will ensure the material receives the usage it deserves.

As we go into the future with all the exciting possibilities that the digital age and the web have to offer, we will cherish the treasure that is ephemera. And we are determined to share it with future generations.

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Bibliography and further reading


Unlike serials and sheet music, for example, there is no tradition of cataloguing ephemera. If ephemera is catalogued at all, it is on a minimal level. This article suggests following AACR2R, APPM, LC Graphic Materials Thesaurus, MARC 21, Dublin Core, and EAD. This article analyses MARC records only.


One article in a whole issue on managing and cataloguing ephemera collections


This is an excellent paper discussing many of the familiar issues faced by the Australian War Memorial, a moderate-sized ephemera collection.