

# Books as social currency: Robert Coupland Harding and the field of book collecting in New Zealand 1880-1920

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## Abstract:

"Here, indeed, lies the whole miracle of collecting," Jean Baudrillard asserted, "it is invariably oneself that one collects" ("Systems of Collecting" 12). If Baudrillard's premise that a collection is itself a representation of the collector, then how can we read a person through his/her private library? There have been several large and important studies produced on the three preeminent figures in New Zealand book collecting: Sir George Grey, Dr Thomas Hocken and Alexander Turnbull. However, to understand book collecting as a whole during the highly active period at the turn of the twentieth century, it is vital that we investigate 'minor' book collectors alongside our esteemed 'major three'.

This thesis explores the private library of Robert Coupland Harding (1849-1916), an internationally recognised expert on printing and typography, whose trade journal *Typo: A Monthly Newspaper and Literary Review* (1887-1897) was celebrated as a remarkable achievement. Very little documentation of Harding's life exists. However, one tantalising artefact discovered in a Wellington antiquarian bookshop is the basis for this research: the auction catalogue of Harding's extensive private library. Focusing on the New Zealand-related section of the catalogue, this thesis examines the book collecting field in New Zealand 1880-1920. Applying Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus and the field of cultural production, the thesis examines the social practice of book collecting during this period. Three case studies from Harding's library illustrate some key trends in the book collecting market, and help to build a picture of Harding's social networks and the influence this had on his collecting habits. The thesis also describes the collecting identity of Robert Coupland Harding, placing him in his circle of fellow book collectors. Describing a model of book collecting practise and presenting a method for categorising book collectors, this thesis argues for the recognition of lesser known book collectors and the contribution that they made to the field of New Zealand book collecting.

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