First of all, I want to thank the Polynesian Society for this opportunity to be here at the University of Auckland to participate in this launch of the new edition of the two splendid catalogues of the Oldman Collection.

To begin, it is appropriate to summarise the significance of the Oldman Collection in a few sentences. The Collection was formed in England during the late 19th century and the first four decades of the 20th century, and was purchased by the New Zealand Government in 1948. It was one of the great English private collections of Pacific artefacts and at the time of its purchase was said to rival the collection of the British Museum. Other significant collections of the time included the collections of Harry Beasley, Alfred Fuller, James Hooper and Kenneth Webster, but these collections did not have such a significant number of outstanding objects, and most of them have now been widely dispersed. With the exception of the Fuller Collection, which is now held by the Field Museum in Chicago, only the Oldman Collection can be said to still constitute a “collection” in the sense that it is all owned by one entity, the New Zealand Government.

The Collection was formed by William O. Oldman, originally of Lincolnshire, England. He never visited the Pacific and earned his living as a dealer in artefacts from Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific. Apparently, his favourite objects came from the Pacific, especially Polynesia, and he kept these as his own personal collection at his home in Clapham Park, London. The house with its Collection survived the Second World War, although houses on both sides of the Oldman residence were bombed.

The catalogues that are being launched today are splendid new and enlarged editions of two earlier catalogues of Māori artefacts and Polynesian artefacts. The origin of these catalogues has a long association with New Zealand and the Polynesian Society. The two original Memoirs of the Polynesian Society, numbers 14 and 15, were compilations of earlier small installments of photographic plates of groups of Oldman artefacts along with Oldman’s descriptions of them, which had previously been published in the Journal of the Polynesian Society. C.H.R. Taylor, in his introductory note to Memoir 14, noted that the Council of the Society had set out to record these groups of artefacts “in a way that has not been done so well before...as the best examples” of Māori and Polynesian materials. And this was long before the Collection was purchased.

The original Memoirs 14 (Māori 1938, reprinted 1946) and 15 (Polynesian 1943, reprinted 1953) gathered together these short installments of photographs and descriptions, and they were subsequently reprinted.
The second editions of these Memoirs being launched today, however, are much more comprehensive. They include an excellent introduction by Roger Neich and Janet Davidson. This introduction includes a biography of William Oldman, information on the importance of his Collection and how he acquired it, who studied the Collection in London, the long saga of trying to persuade the New Zealand Government to purchase it—which finally happened in 1948—its packing and travels to New Zealand, and the negotiations of its distribution, primarily to the four large museums in Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, and Dunedin.

The new volumes also include lists of which objects are in which museums today. This is a very important new addition and will be a great aid to researchers. Previously it was nearly impossible to guess where a specific object might be, and any guess was usually wrong. For example, I was recently doing research on Rapa Nui/Easter Island wooden figures. From previous research, I knew that the Rapa Nui artefacts were part of the Oldman materials that went to Canterbury, so I wrote to the Museum in Christchurch. The Rapa Nui figure that I was interested in was not there and the curator did not know where it was. It was then necessary to write to the other three museums to see if they had it. Eventually it was found in Te Papa, but apparently, there is no list of which Oldman artefacts are in Te Papa. Fortunately, as I know Janet Davidson personally, she went looking and found it for me. I suspect that numerous difficult requests from people like me—as well as difficulties in their own research—provoked Janet and Roger to compile this useful list. It will be a great time saver for researchers and curators alike.

Turning to the Collection itself, Oldman acquired numerous examples of the same types of artefacts, which makes this Collection especially important for research. Oldman called these his “typological series”, and he requested that all examples in his various typological series should go to one museum so they could be researched together and compared. Unfortunately for researchers, this was not done. When the materials arrived in New Zealand, their ultimate destinations were decided by representatives from the four metropolitan museums and a representative for the regional museums. For this allocation, the Collection was divided into 12 regional divisions, plus the Māori collection, which went to the Dominion Museum in Wellington (as it was then called). The curators from Wellington, Auckland, Canterbury and Otago chose regions from which they would have first choice of the individual objects. This would give each museum the chance to specialise in researching and displaying materials from specific Pacific areas. However, after each curator’s initial choice from his selected area, and if there was more than three of an artefact type, the so-called “duplicates” would then go into a pool from which representatives of the other three museums could choose. Anything left could be taken by the regional museums. I hope everyone now realises that this was a big mistake. Not only are there no such things as “duplicates”, but distributing some of the pieces to other museums deprives researchers of the possibility of examining a group of similar artefacts in one place. It is, of course, possible to travel to the four (or more) cities to examine all of the examples of an artefact type or all the materials from a specific area; however, unless the objects are physically together in one place a real examination is impossible. For example, of the 14 human and lizard figures from Rapa Nui, only
12 are in the Canterbury Museum, which had the first choice of Rapa Nui artefacts. The other two are in Wellington and Otago. The Otago piece is in addition to the four Rapa Nui figures that H.D. Skinner bought from Oldman in 1920 and are also at that Museum. Of the other 15 Rapa Nui objects, seven are in Canterbury, four are in Wellington, three are in Auckland and one is in Otago, thus making it necessary to travel to all four major museums to examine the Rapa Nui collection. This is exactly what Oldman wanted to avoid.

Another important feature of the Collection is the categories of materials that Oldman collected. Like his contemporary collectors, the emphasis was on sculptures and weapons. Collectors looked for the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. They wanted one (or more) of each important category of object. For Rapa Nui objects, for example, one strived to have at least one moai kavakava ‘male figure with carved ribs’, one moai tangata ‘ordinary male figure’, one female figure, one lizard figure and one ceremonial/dance paddle. But Oldman had collected several examples of each. Indeed, having two exquisite female figures in one collection is quite unusual! Oldman expanded each category of artefact that interested him and that he considered worthy of close examination into a “typological series” for purposes of research. He was very proud these “series”. But Oldman was not so fond of the ordinary. Although he collected a number of fishhooks, there are only a few unhafted adzes and other tools, and certainly no “typological series” of them. There are only a few textiles and no baskets. There are fans but they have sculptured handles. Also, there are only three mats in the Polynesian catalogue—two makaloa mats from Hawai‘i and one Tongan dressmat (that is attributed to Tahiti). In the Māori collection, although there are hundreds of objects, there are only six cloaks (and no other textile materials). Except for the cloak with dogskin, which has an intriguing attribution (159, Plate 47), the others just seem to be afterthoughts and notable only for their decorative tāniko borders. There are a few pieces of barkcloth attributed to Hawai‘i (one of them is Tahitian), but where is the barkcloth from other areas, which surely must have been on the market? Textile arts were apparently not important.

Among the extraordinary, there are a number of unique pieces, such as the long multi-legged neckrest from Tonga and the slitgong in human shape from the Cook Islands. But most important to Oldman was that the object be authentic—that is “old.” Some of his entries are great examples of this notion, such as, 470 (Plate 41) “an extremely old specimen” and 533 (Plate 48) “very old and much worn”. Age, however, is difficult to ascertain without documentation and these attributions are simply Oldman’s opinions. Likewise, the aesthetic qualities of objects that he chose for his collection are Oldman’s rather than those of their indigenous makers.

One of the stated reasons for acquiring the Oldman Collection was that New Zealand would become, in Roger Duff’s words, “the centre for the study of the culture of the whole area of islands from which the Maoris emigrated, and we would even outweigh [sic] Honolulu as a research centre”. Duff went on to write, “I often wonder how many real achievements N.Z. can claim in the arena of the world… perhaps only Rugby. But in the field of Pacific research and the culture history of the Maoris and Polynesians she might easily lead the world”, and further “a collection like Oldman’s… would absolutely complete and round off our museums’ collections.
in Pacific ethnography, making them the world’s best” (quoted in Neich and Davidson essay in Oldman volumes, p.xv). I might add that for several categories of artefacts, such as Tongan sculptures, Māori carvings, Central Polynesian whisk and fan handles, pole-spears and hafted adzes with carved handles, this is probably true. After the Collection arrived, H.D. Skinner noted that “research on Polynesian and Maori materials will now be centred here” in New Zealand (ibid.:xxv).

So, has this prediction of New Zealand as a centre for research on Polynesian material culture been borne out? No actually, but why not? Well, for most New Zealand (and other) researchers, material culture is not important, of only secondary interest, if any. But, the main reason the Oldman Collection has not become central to Pacific material culture studies is that the Collection has poor documentation. The Collection is of outstanding aesthetic quality, but the documentation to time and place of collection is inadequate and has not yet been researched. In some cases Oldman noted from whom he acquired the objects and for some pieces there is even reference to a reputed collector. But for people like me, researchers who need exact, detailed information, this is not good enough—we want a paper trail. For example, a statement that an object was “reputed to have been collected by Captain Cook”, with no documentation of this “reputedness”, is almost meaningless, especially when applied to an object, such as a Hawaiian ivory and hair necklace that is of known mid-19th century style (289j). What can be done about this poor documentation? Quite a bit, actually! Detective work is great fun and academically rewarding, but it takes time and commitment. Who will do this detective work? For students it is perhaps too risky unless there are established leads.

I would think that every study with a historical element should take material culture into account. How can we understand society without looking at its material expressions? How can we understand Māori and Polynesian religion without analysing the material representations of the gods? How did these material expressions change over time? What are the inter-cultural dialogues that they embody? On a more specific level, documentation can facilitate making connections between an earlier owner and a tribal group. Māori people are less likely to be interested in objects for their own sake, but rather more interested in to whom they belonged and their genealogies. The Oldman descriptions do not include enough provenance information, but that does not mean it is not possible to obtain some history of individual objects. Detective work is necessary. Why has this not been done before? One reason is that we did not have our own copies of the Oldman catalogues—they reposed only in reference collections and could not be taken home. I do such research at home in the evening or on a plane, making notes in the margins, applying different colored post-its, finding patterns and repeated attributions. Indeed, if I had had my own copy of the Oldman catalogues when I was doing my research on Cook voyage collections, I would have followed up on at least one Māori object and a few Polynesian ones.

Perusing the catalogues during the past few days, I note that there are a number of objects attributed to George Bennet from 1823 and formerly in the Duke of Leeds Collection. We know who George Bennet was, but who was the Duke of Leeds, and how and why did he acquire these pieces? Surely there are ways to follow this up and thus make use of these material manifestations of Polynesian religion.
For most of the second half of the 20th century, material culture studies were not in fashion. They are now! And with “heritage studies” rising in academia and ethnic communities, historical material culture studies will surely become more important. We need to study the social life of objects not only from the time they left their Pacific contexts. We do not yet have good studies of the social life of objects within their Pacific contexts or adequate studies of the material expressions and art from many Polynesian areas.

Although Duff’s prediction of the visits of a significant number of international researchers to study the Oldman Collection, thus contributing to New Zealand as a centre for Polynesian research, has not yet materialised, one of the attractions for overseas researchers is, indeed, the Oldman Collection. But, is it not equally (or more) important that New Zealanders should use the Collection as a central focus for research? I would have thought that the New Zealand academic community and its students would have used this marvellous Collection much more than it has. The Collection is known overseas, but how many New Zealanders have knowledge of it? Is this because museum displays have not featured the Oldman Collection and the difficulty of access because of inadequate storage facilities? Oldman pieces have simply been incorporated into existing collections and when objects from the Collection are published they are often not noted as Oldman pieces because this has not been emphasised by the Collection’s keepers. The New Zealand community, as well as museum workers, needs to be educated about the importance of the Oldman Collection and the importance of museums as keepers of cultural heritage.

To rectify this situation, I would like to suggest an Oldman exhibition. Not all in one place, but in the four major museums. Each museum could display the three regional sections for which that museum had first choice—with the so-called “duplicates” being sent to that museum for special comprehensive exhibits. Indeed, Te Papa could borrow back the Māori materials that have gone to the other New Zealand museums to form a spectacular Māori exhibit of Oldman’s “typological series”. Thus, by going to the four museums, a researcher or interested person could actually see the whole Collection without overburdening one museum. Such an exhibit should be on display for at least a year, so that overseas researchers could plan to come for the exhibit and people from the islands could spend some time at the venue where they are represented. Such exhibits would finally fulfil Oldman’s requirement that his typological series go to one place.

Now, with the availability of the catalogues, New Zealanders and overseas researchers will no doubt place higher value on visits to New Zealand museums, and come especially to see the Oldman Collection.