

Turners, Timbers & Terrain Down Under

By Robin Goodman



New Zealand is as far as one can go around the globe, but clocks stay the same, GMT + 12 hrs, so jet lag is a maximum. In late October I joined my son for a 2 week trip, driving nearly 2,000 miles from the south of South Island up to Auckland on North Island. We visited many of the most scenic areas, including some of those used in films such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Last Samurai* and *The Hobbit* trilogy.



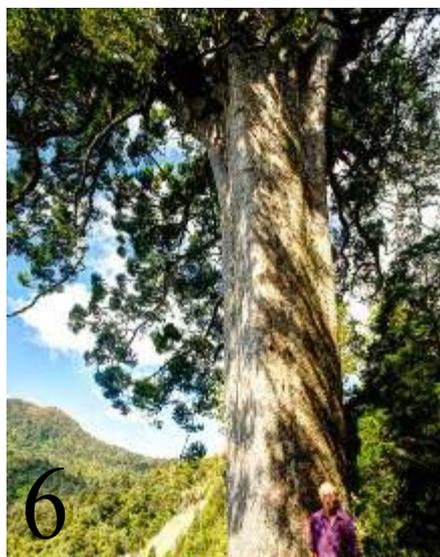
South Island has many of the top scenic spots. The best known fiords of Doubtful and Milford Sound, **photo 1**, were most impressive. A long mountain range dominates the west coast, with Mt Cook the highest peak at 12,300ft. Many towns such as Queenstown, **photo 2**, Wanaka and Taupo lie on the edge of large beautiful lakes and there is excellent walking in many areas (they use the word 'tramping' instead of hiking/walking). The best known walks such as the Milford Track take several days and most river crossings are on long narrow suspension bridges that they call 'swing bridges' with good reason! There are plenty of signs of volcanic activity to be seen, including geysers and bubbling water, **photo 3**. The powerful 2011 earthquake that flattened much of the centre of Christchurch is a reminder of the threat. Nature's more gentle activity formed the famous Cathedral Cove, **photo 4**, and Split



Apple rock, **photo 5**.

Having a land area the same as UK but a population of only just over 4 million people - nearly a third of whom live in Auckland - much of the country is almost empty of people and cars. Driving becomes a pleasure again; they even drive on the left, just a pity that they have low speed limits plus unmarked police cars with speed cameras! Having 10 times as many sheep as people, you can guess which dominate the landscape. However dairy products are the main export.

New Zealand is one of the best places to visit for extreme and adventure sports. However, being of a certain age this was not my priority and I did not need the adrenalin fix of bungee jumping or sky diving, but I did enjoy a jet boat ride down the spectacular Shotover river canyon near Queenstown and a zip wire crossing of the Buller gorge further north.



The silver fern, **see above**, is a national symbol of New Zealand and its use is widespread, including by the All Blacks. It is based on the frond of the Ponga or tree fern that can grow to a height of over 10 metres.

When Captain Cook discovered New Zealand nearly 250 years ago, 80% of the land was covered by forest. After a vast amount of felling the current figure is only 24%, but further felling is now severely restricted and the additional 5% of planted forest provides nearly all the timber for consumption and export.

Most of the native trees used by woodturners are unfamiliar to those of us from Europe. Kauri is probably New Zealand's most famous tree and can grow up to 50m, but most have been felled and the majority of the remaining ones are now protected. One large specimen I visited, called the 'Square Kauri' on account of its unusual cross-section, is 9 metres in circumference and is believed to be 1200 years old, **photo 6**. The wood has



a beautiful grain, **photo 7**, and is sought after by turners, who often have to rely on re-cycled wood or swamp Kauri as old as 50,000 years that has been dug up from underground. Felling of Rimu is also severely restricted, but the wood is liked by woodturners for its texture, colour and spectacular hues and it takes a good finish.

The dark swirling figure of some Puriri wood, also known

as New Zealand mahogany, is another popular turning wood, but difficult to obtain. The Totara tree was used for Maori canoes and carvings, but is now most sought after for its wonderful burrs. Black Marie has spectacular grain and is very hard, but turns well. It is also vulnerable to attack by larvae which bore holes in it, but many think these provide an enhancement to their platters and bowls! Pohutukawa and Matai are other native trees used by turners.



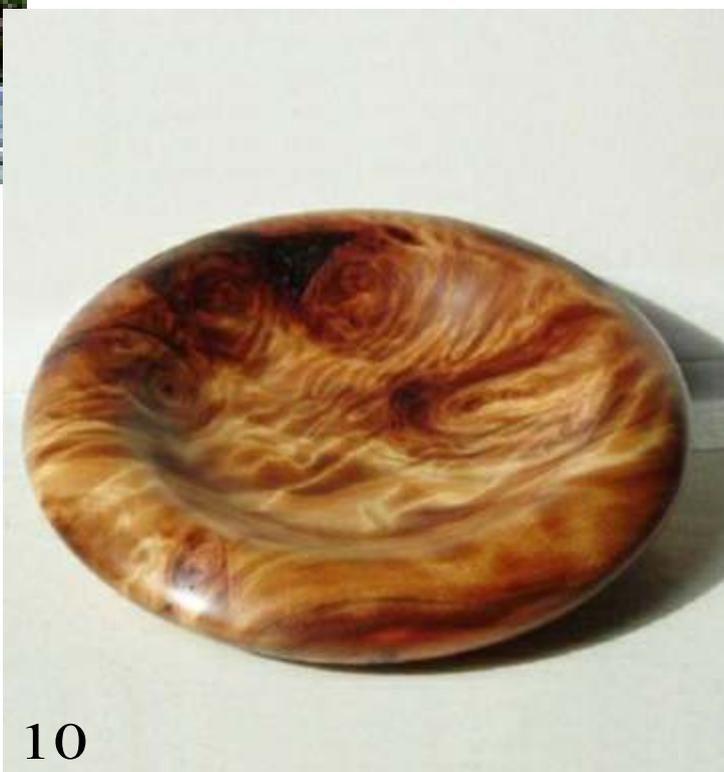
More familiar woods such as ash, sycamore and oak are also available to turners. Some native trees such as the Cabbage tree, **photo 8**, look slightly more exotic.

Woodturning is very popular in the country. There



are nearly as many woodturning clubs in New Zealand as the UK, which has a population 15 times greater and some of their turners such as **Rolly Munro, Terry Scott and Graeme Priddle** are known internationally.

We managed to call on several local woodturners without deviating from our planned driving route. **Bob and Ann Phillips, photo 9**, are both woodturners with a studio and house overlooking the beautiful Ruby Coast in the north of South Island. They have been successful professional turners for many years and Bob has visited Europe several times and had turning books published by GMC publications during the 1990's. Some of his books were published locally and he kindly gave me a copy of his interesting book "Mastering the Craft Business". Bob made his main lathe many years ago, when there was nothing suitable on the market. Much of the couple's output and best sellers are bowls and platters made from native woods, **photos 7 & 10**.



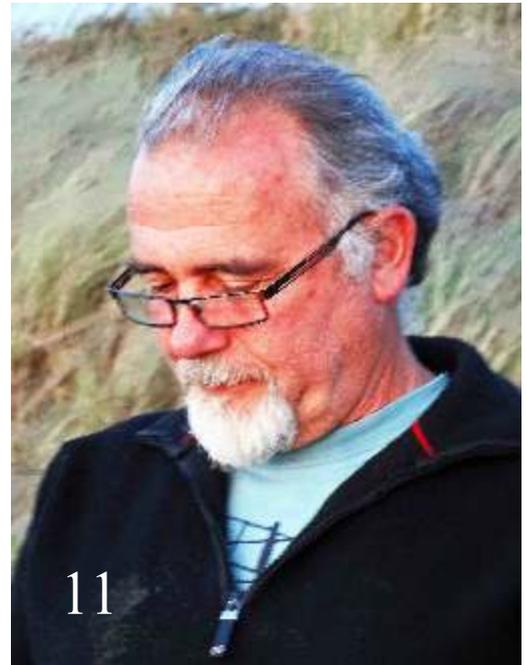
Rolly Munro, photo 11, lives an hour north of the capital Wellington. He and his wife Leigh kindly put us up for the night. He is lucky to live near the sea and the sunset near his house was memorable! The name Rolly Munro is probably best known overseas for his hollowing tools, which he has successfully marketed around the world for over 20 years, in spite of competition from many other suppliers. He continues to develop such tools and the large corrugated barn on his property has more space taken up with metal-



13

working equipment than the small inner sanctum that he uses solely for woodturning and carving. Originally he made his own lathe, but subsequently bought a very early version of the New Zealand made Nova DVR, which he has been very

pleased with and continues to use as his main lathe.



11



15

For his turned pieces he is probably best known for his textured/enhanced hollow forms, for example **photo 13**, sometimes using inspiration from local Maori designs such as the Maori twist symbol or Pikorua, **photo 14**.

His range of skills is reflected in an intriguing 1998 piece I saw on his shelving titled 'Refit in Lilliput', **photo 15**, made with many different woods and materials. Another interesting newer piece

is shown in **photo 16**. His mastery is confirmed by the many pieces held in galleries and collections around the world. He has carried out demos worldwide, including the UK, which he will be visiting again in 2014 – see below for advance notice of his day workshop at the Mill.

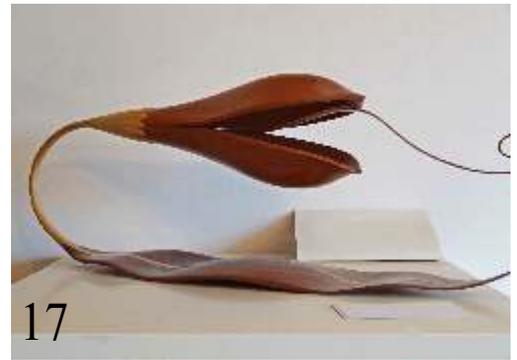


14



16

Robbie Graham has his studio on North Island near the beautiful Lake Taupo and has been making a living from turning for many years and carries out demos locally. He uses mainly local timbers and especially likes the pink/red coloured Pohutukawa. In the absence of a suitable sturdy lathe, he made his own from scratch with massive bed bars. Surprisingly he is happy to keep to its 5 speeds and not convert it to variable speed. He produces a wide variety of pieces to suit the market, which he says is still in a downturn. Examples of his work are shown in **photos 17 & 18**. He also works in metal and is currently starting work on an enormous 4m long 900mm diameter steel tube of thickness 12mm that needs a crane to lift! His wife Sue is an accomplished painter and works in the same studio.



17



18



19

In Auckland I did not have time to visit **Terry Scott**, **photo 19**, who has been winning many awards in his country and is becoming increasingly well known in the UK, which he visited in 2011, when he did some demos. His works include innovative texturing, carving

and colouring and recently he has produced 2 DVD's showing how to make his Manta Ray, **photo 20**, and Midas signature vessels.



20

Graeme Priddle has been turning for over 20 years and has had work exhibited worldwide. He is best known for his sculptural turnings/carvings, many reflecting his life and environment in New Zealand, **photo 21**. Some members will have attended his demo at the Mill 3 years ago.

The woodturning scene in New Zealand therefore seems vibrant and they are lucky to have so many excellent native woods.



21