

# Robert Terence Fenton

## 21 December 1930 to 28 November 2013

Prepared by Rowland Burdon and John Kininmonth

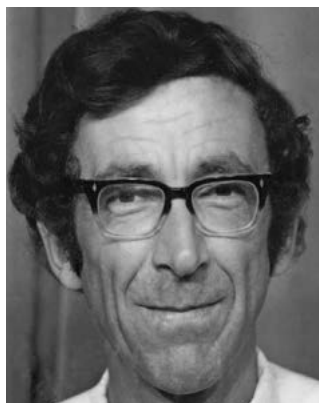
Known as either Bob, or just Fenton, he was one of the most colourful and influential figures in New Zealand forestry. His passing certainly warrants an extended tribute.

He grew up in northwest London and experienced the wartime blitz. In 1947, straight after his secondary schooling at Harrow Grammar School, he came with his parents to New Zealand. We have never found what prompted it, but he made the giant step from post-war London to applying to join the Forest Service at the age of 16. John K. vividly remembers meeting this long, lanky individual when they were both waiting to be interviewed in Wellington. Bob was accepted and was one of the celebrated 1948 intake of junior technical trainees that included some returned servicemen as well as school leavers. He was one of the youngest.

At that time trainees spent a year in the field, after which they would be sent to either Ranger School or university. He was sent to Victoria University College as a part-time student based in head office. His long vacations were mostly spent on the legendary National Forest Survey, which took him into some very tough country in the hills of north Taranaki and the swamps of south Westland. On it he worked with various individuals who were to distinguish themselves in other fields, including Dr Fred Hollows.

As a student at Victoria he soon gained a reputation for some unconventional behaviour and a flair for mimicry. His academic career there was a bit patchy, but revealed enough of his brilliance to get him sent to Oxford for his forestry degree. After an intervening stint at the Waipa Mill, he set off to Oxford with his bride Pauline. There he gained 1st class honours in 1956, impressing the Forestry School as one of their most brilliant students ever.

Much less successful was his return to New Zealand as forester at Karioi, although it was relieved by his having as a trainee Wink Sutton, who was to become his right-hand man and successor. In early 1958, he moved to be technical officer at Conical Mill in the Tapanui district. There he engaged alongside Alan Familton in sawing studies – not something for the faint-hearted – and became closely acquainted with the pruning and thinning work on radiata pine by the forester Charlie Brown. That instilled in him the crucial importance of timely pruning and the futility of belated tending



of stands. After a move to Waipa Mill he continued with further sawmill studies, which emphasised the unprofitability of sawing thinnings.

In 1961, Dennis Richardson, the recently appointed Director of Research, engaged Fenton to work at FRI on the economics of silviculture, which entailed more sawing studies and various silvicultural trials. Also Fenton did a major land-use study alongside Lincoln College, comparing the economics of forestry versus development of land for pastoral farming, which showed forestry to be competitive. With New Zealand's narrow farm product export base, and the prospect of Britain joining the European Common Market, that was of much interest and featured strongly in the National Development Conference of 1969.

While competitiveness of forestry was demonstrated, it was based on accepted practice, leaving the question of how and to what degree silvicultural practice could be improved. That was studied with Fenton leading a team and enjoying the backing of Harry Bunn after Richardson's departure. Two years working in Canberra on his PhD during 1966-1968, and work at Rotorua on some other topics, did little to interrupt progress. Thus the main silvicultural findings were publicised in the Second FRI Pruning and Thinning Symposium in 1970 and in a flurry of substantial journal articles. By then his decisive contribution to New Zealand forestry was sealed.

The findings were indeed radical. In most situations in New Zealand, harvesting of thinnings was uneconomic. Even if a profit could be made at the time, the practice of commercial thinning could severely compromise the economics of the final crop and thence of the crop as a whole. This led to the Direct sawlog regime based on heavy intervention during the first 10 years of a stand, with much reduced stockings and aggressive early pruning, no commercial thinning, and a shortened rotation. It meant a heavy emphasis on producing clearwood and accepting appreciable sacrifice in total volume production. The proposal initially drew much scepticism, and even hostility, but he had the figures. Moreover there were those who covertly followed and read his work avidly, notably Tom Rogers who later became a leading forest manager. Thus the Direct regime was to become standard practice for most of the country's plantation forest estate.

While it had an enormous practical impact and set a new framework for industrial forestry, developing the Direct regime was only a beginning. Others were to build on the platform of his work, soon having much more powerful computing hardware to use than he ever did. One follow-up development was work on agroforestry, in which pasture could provide intermediate yields in lieu of commercial thinning. It was less successful than hoped, but it has been implemented over substantial areas. Other follow-up work was the development of formal software for modelling stand growth and out-turns in relation to site and tending regimes. Begun by the Mensuration Project Team led by Dave Elliott and developed by the Radiata Pine Task Force under Wink Sutton, it has undergone ongoing elaboration and refinement as planning and decision aids for forest managers.

From 1971, Fenton no longer had a managerial role and became deployed or released for consultancies, mainly overseas, something that had begun in 1969. The agencies concerned included the New Zealand Government External Aid Division, the FAO, the Asian Development Bank and many others. The consultancies involved an increasing focus on the marketing of forest products. He eventually worked in 20 different countries, and he generally enjoyed the foreign environments and cultures but was incensed by corruption and bloated bureaucracies. Two notable consultancies were in Chile in 1978, where he met his second wife María Eugenia, and as Commercial Attaché in the New Zealand embassy in Tokyo, which led to his book *Forestry in Japan*.

In 1980, he was charged with setting up a small Strategic Studies Unit at FRI to do market research. His market research plan was a masterpiece for clarity of thought and the range of value-chain issues covered, locally and internationally. As such, it set a comprehensive and enduring framework for the unit's research.

In 1987, he took enhanced early retirement upon the break-up of the Forest Service and moved to Tauranga. From there he operated as an independent consultant, albeit in a tie-up with Zobel Forestry Associates. Over the years, though, available consultancies tended to be in less attractive places. After a move to Auckland he spent a few years in Thailand before declining health took him back to Tauranga. There María Eugenia eventually took effective charge of his welfare.

We cannot sidestep the topic of Fenton's larger-than-life personality. His game-changing contribution to New Zealand forestry was characterised by his capacity for intense bursts of work and his unflinching pursuit of an argument to its logical conclusion. This intensity, and his sheer talent, were surely the keys to what he achieved.

Make no mistake, he was decidedly eccentric, like the figure that he cut. He could behave outrageously, and sometimes did. But he was a very complex character, with facets that were not widely recognised. His conversation was usually a stream of consciousness, frequently in

manic counterpoint of several subjects at once. Often hugely stimulating and entertaining, it could be a totally bewildering experience at a first meeting. At listening however he was seldom nearly so good. Attending formal presentations could be a challenge for the audience when his mind got racing ahead.

He did not suffer fools gladly. He could explode over a seemingly innocuous statement that had strained his patience to breaking point. Yet he would shrink from foreseeable confrontations. He would often rant, but in between he could be stunningly objective as well as perceptive.

Behind the apparent stridency of his silvicultural doctrine he was much more open-minded than most recognised. To the suggestion that the final-crop stockings he recommended were too low his private reaction was, 'If one needs to retain more stems, so be it.' He knew well that in developing his prescriptions he had to make some big assumptions. When a preliminary report emerged that an important assumption did not hold, it enraged him that the report was not followed up quickly into thorough analysis and documentation. At least some of the excesses following his work stemmed from over-enthusiastic followers becoming more extreme than he ever was, partly through their not sharing his awareness of the uncertainties and the significance of local conditions and changing times.

For his juniors he was charismatic. Mindful of the impersonal experience he often had of Forest Service bosses while he was a trainee, he made a great point of coaching and mentoring trainees. His lectures to students, while far from tightly structured, were greatly appreciated. Matching the adulation among his juniors was generally a great affection for them. At the untimely funeral of an ex junior colleague, when he was delivering a eulogy, welling tears made a disastrous combination with his spidery handwriting.

For his superiors he was something of a problem and he could certainly be fractious. Yet his vehement pronouncements, while easily perceived as cynical or disloyal, actually reflected a passionate concern for the forestry sector. Moreover he was someone in whom a cardinal distinction existed between grumbling happily and griping seriously. After 1971 the authorities, not knowing quite how to use him, were happy to let him go into secondments and international consultancies. What did not seem to be duly appreciated was that Fenton, if given an explicit brief and a deadline, would follow the brief precisely and work prodigious hours to meet a brutal deadline. Those attributes stood him in very good stead for his numerous international consultancies.

A related feature of his work was ruthless checking of official statistics and he delighted in finding a slew of errors and inconsistencies. That seldom made friends, but it was warmly acknowledged by a reviewer of his book *Forestry in Japan*. Another minor obsession of his was the *Araucariaceae* family, which had him berating the taxonomists.

The intensity he brought to his work did not preclude leisure activities. He was a passionate vegetable gardener. He was also a fan of classical music, with his tastes gravitating towards the 18th century. Sleeping very little, he read widely and voraciously, becoming a serious military history buff.

Fenton's legacy has certainly been enormous, in terms of both implementation and the foundation for further research. Behind the practical impacts lie the long list of publications that not only illustrate the dedicated and painstaking research on which his precepts were based, but also acknowledge the contributions of his

many associated researchers. Of late, there has been some rekindling of dissent over the adopted practices. Actually the time has probably come for a thorough evaluation of the legacy, with due regard for his broader and more nuanced understanding of the interplay among site, genetics, silviculture and markets in the economics of growing radiata pine. This however is a separate task.

In him we farewell a truly unforgettable figure who retained the affection of his many friends despite the shocks and exasperation he often caused. He is survived by his second wife, four daughters, a son and four grandchildren.



## REPORT FOR YEAR TO 31 MARCH 2013

The NZ Institute of Forestry Foundation was established by the NZ Institute of Forestry (NZIF) in December 2011. It is a registered charity and has been approved by Inland Revenue as a donee organisation.

The purpose of the Foundation is to raise funds to encourage and support forestry related research, education and training through the provision of grants, scholarships and prizes. For the purpose of evaluating applications to the Foundation, 'forestry' includes all those activities involved in the management and use of forests and their products, the objects of which are the production of wood or other forest benefits and the maintenance of the environment in its most beneficial form.

The Trustees are appointed by the NZIF Council. In the year to 31 March 2013 they were:

- Andrew McEwen (Chair)
- David Evison
- James Treadwell.

## Statement of Financial Performance for Year Ended 31 March 2013

	2013	2012
<b>Revenue</b>		
Donations	113,496	100
Other	55	0
Interest	2,986	0
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>116,538</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Expenses</b>		
Awards	5,500	0
Bank charges	0	21
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>5,500</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Net Surplus /(Deficit)</b>	<b>111,038</b>	<b>79</b>

During the year the Foundation received donations totalling \$113,496, which included an \$85,000 donation from the NZIF. The Board is very appreciative of all those who by making generous donations at this early stage in the life of the Foundation have ensured that it could meet the initial demands of awards during the year.

The Foundation made the following awards at the NZIF Conference Dinner in Christchurch on 2 July 2012:

- **Mary Sutherland Scholarship** of \$1,000 to Larissa Anderson, a National Diploma in Forest Management student at Waiariki Institute of Technology
- **University Undergraduate Scholarship** of \$1,000 to Andree Callaghan, a Bachelor of Forestry Science Student at the University of Canterbury
- **Chavasse Travel Award** of \$3,500 to Dr Stephanie Rotarangi to assist her to travel to Ireland to attend an IUFRO conference.

The Trustees thank the NZIF for providing administrative services at no cost to the Foundation.

## Statement of Financial Position at 31 March 2013

	2013	2012
<b>Assets</b>		
Bank accounts	13,378	79
Term deposit	95,000	0
Accrued interest	2,969	0
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>111,347</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Liabilities</b>	230	0
<b>Net Assets</b>	<b>111,117</b>	<b>79</b>

(The full report of the Foundation is at [www.nzif.org.nz](http://www.nzif.org.nz))

The Foundation depends on generous support from donors in order to fulfil its purpose. Donations may qualify for tax rebates. For more information contact [foundation@nzif.org.nz](mailto:foundation@nzif.org.nz).