

## Articles

### **The Botanical Art of Robert Donn** FSA, Scot. - *Mary Anne Miller*

The watercolours reproduced opposite are from a portfolio of 76 paintings entitled *Plants of New Zealand* by Robert Donn, who presented them to the Department of Botany, University of Otago, on his retirement.

As works of botanical art they are almost unknown, although brief reference is made to them in David Bell's "Art In Education" (2000), and since being in the Department of Botany they have received little attention. However, two are presently on display in the foyer and it is now known that three framed watercolours in the Botany tea-room are part of the series. They were produced from 1921 to 1940 in locations corresponding to Donn's teaching appointments.

Robert Donn was a leader in art education, especially in the period 1920-32, when his enthusiasm for art and efforts to have it recognised as a means of self-expression, particularly for children, made him a pioneer on the New Zealand art scene. The range of his talents was broad. Besides drawing and painting he was proficient at illustrative design, calligraphy and printmaking. Donn's elegant and carefully executed designs were inspired by both Celtic and Maori influences. His *Maori Fire Myth* (an oil on canvas) can be viewed outside the Principal's office at the Dunedin College of Education. He was, however, more widely known as a landscape water-colourist. The Hocken Library has three examples in its collection.

Donn was born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1878. He studied at the School of Arts in Dundee and Glasgow before being appointed Senior Lecturer in Art at Dunedin Training College in 1921. He worked closely with the La Trobe painters of the Dunedin School of Art to successfully raise the standard of art instruction. Artists to flourish under this tutelage included Harry Vye Miller, Myra Kirkpatrick, Alexander Hare McLintock and Stuart Bell MacLennan. When the College closed in 1932 during the depression, Donn continued his teaching at Auckland Training College. He later retired to Blenheim, although he did some part-time teaching and exhibited locally.

Donn's relative obscurity results from the fact that few of his works were deposited in public collections. However, at a time when New Zealand painters, if not the whole of Antipodean society, were experiencing a period of change, Donn characterised the move from utilitarianism towards the 'fine arts' in the years following World War I when writers and artists alike grappled with the notion of national identity. He died in Dunedin in 1966.

#### **References:**

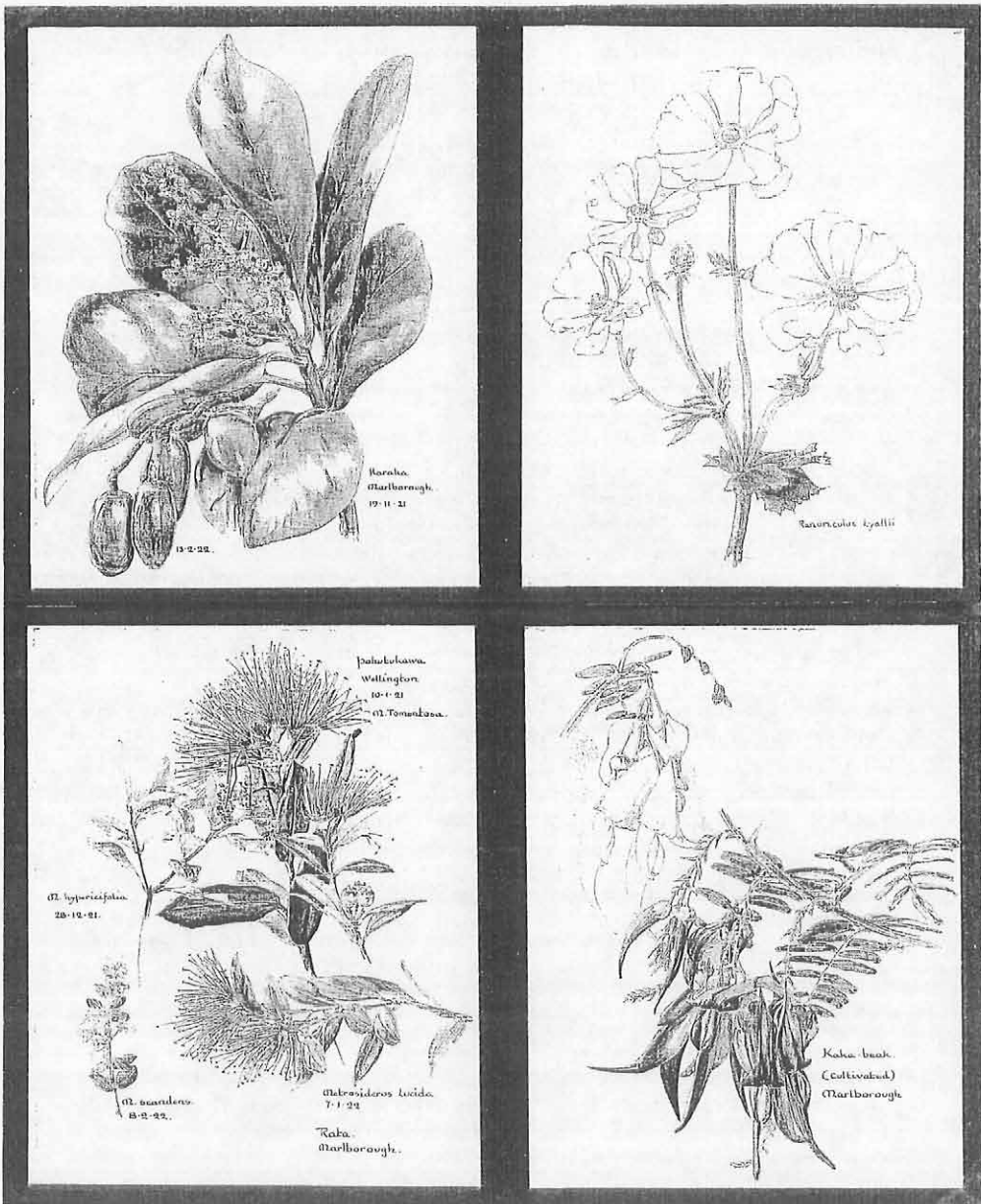
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Microcopies of four paintings by Robert Donn. His 1921 names, clockwise from top left, are: Karaka, *Ranunculus lyallii*; Pohutukawa, *Metrosideros tomentosa*, and three species of Rata, *Metrosideros hypericifolia*, *M lucida*, *M scandens*; and Kakabeak.