

# 2017 Ronald Flook Award: Helen Elizabeth Lowe



I am very happy to present this year's Ronald Flook Award, which recognises outstanding service to the care and protection of trees in New Zealand, to Helen Elizabeth Lowe of Christchurch.

By awarding this to Helen, we recognise the tremendous effort she made last year to save approximately 1,500 heritage and notable Christchurch trees by ensuring they remain protected on the Christchurch Replacement District Plan. This involved a huge personal sacrifice and comprised:

- Leading a small team of experts.
- Negotiating with other parties including securing a mediated agreement with the Christchurch City Council and an independent agreement with the Crown.
- Preparing planning evidence for the hearing and appearing twice before the Independent Hearing Panel in Christchurch to give evidence.
- Playing a lead role in liaising with other submitters, experts, the legal team, media and the public over this time.

- Playing an active part in fundraising to meet the significant financial costs of the quasi-judicial, Independent Hearing process.

Helen's achievement is regarded as significant, not only because of the importance of Christchurch's most notable trees to both the city – and New Zealand's – natural and cultural heritage, but because of the importance of retaining their physical presence and cultural legacy in Christchurch's post-earthquake "geography of loss."<sup>1</sup>

The importance of Helen's contribution was also recognised by the Independent Hearing Panel itself, which in reaching their decision on the Trees section of the Christchurch Replacement District Plan noted that:

*"... we acknowledge her expertise as a planner from her previous experience and accept without question the very competent and professional way in which she gave her evidence ... and accordingly attach significant weight to it."*<sup>2</sup>

## A Little of Helen's background

Her qualifications include a Bachelor of Arts (Geography) from the University of Waikato and a postgraduate Diploma in Social Science (Urban and Regional Planning) from the University of Stockholm.

Her Stockholm qualification was focused in the field of community-based planning, including community revitalisation, and the assessment of effects on social and cultural values.

She practiced as a planner for eighteen years and was a full member of the New Zealand Planning Institute (NZPI). She was also a member of the New Zealand Association for Impact Assessment.

She undertook a wide range of planning and resource management work within both the public and private sectors, including:

- Working with amenity character and notable tree provisions for Manukau

City Council (1985–1987) and the former One Tree Hill Borough Council (1987–1989).

- Regional Manager of the NZ Historic Places Trust in Otago and Southland from 1997–1999.
- Regional Manager for Transit New Zealand: Canterbury/West Coast from 2001–2003.

Whilst Helen worked professionally as a planner and environmental manager for many years she is now primarily known for her writing. She is a highly acclaimed novelist and poet having received many awards for her writing including the international Gemmill Morningstar Award and being a four time recipient of Sir Julius Vogel Awards – three times for her writing and in the fourth instance for service to the genre in New Zealand. Significantly, given Helen's involvement in the Christchurch Replacement District Plan process with respect to heritage and notable trees, the significance of naturalness and the natural world, has been noted as a theme in her writing, in reviews from as far afield as India.

The NZ Arboricultural Association considers Helen to be a well-deserving recipient of this award which acknowledges her outstanding contribution to tree protection in New Zealand. It also acknowledges the gratitude of the Christchurch Civic Trust, the people of Christchurch and the wider community to the role she played in ensuring that the city's heritage trees remain a significant component of the garden city.

Ladies and Gentlemen: unfortunately Helen cannot be with us to accept this award tonight in person so I would like to invite Brad Cadwallader, to come forward to receive the 2017 Ronald Flook Award and a \$500 cheque kindly donated by Cindy Flook on her behalf.

**Citation prepared by Seth Thompson, President NZ Arb, and presented 28th October 2017, at the NZ Arb Conference in Tauranga**

<sup>1</sup> Helen used this specific phrase in her submission and evidence to the Independent Hearing Panel, based on her training and experience in social and cultural impact assessment.

<sup>2</sup> Christchurch Independent Hearing Panel, Decision 44, paragraph 60, 30 September 2016.

## 2017 Ronald Flook Award: Helen Lowe's acceptance words

When I was very young, one of my uncles was awarded the OBE and when I asked what it was for, he assured me that the acronym stood for "Other Buggers' Efforts." Although humorous, the incident still left a lasting impression, to the effect that the recipient of an award is often only the visible tip of an iceberg comprising significant team effort. I believe this to be the case in terms of the Christchurch Replacement District Plan and the endeavour to maintain recognition and protection of the city's most significant trees. So while thrilled and delighted to be receiving the Ron Flook Award tonight, I first and foremost wish to acknowledge the team: the submitters, the expert professionals and community witnesses, the publicity spokespersons, the video makers and fundraisers, and the many individual and group donors.

Nonetheless, teams must be coordinated, and once having made a submission I was fortunate – or cursed, depending on one's perspective – to have the professional

background that enabled me to understand how the Independent Hearing process operated and what was required to participate effectively. My background also included considerable experience of coordinating teams to undertake projects in high pressure timeframes, which the Christchurch Replacement District Plan process undoubtedly was. Yet even so, without each and every one of the individual people and groups I have mentioned, the significant body of work undertaken for Christchurch's trees would not have been possible.

I am aware that the rationale for giving up a year of one's life for trees may seem self-evident to those gathered here, but I would still like to briefly touch on some of my reasons in the Christchurch case. I know I have no need to enumerate the environmental benefits of trees to a NZ Arb conference. Those of you who have been to Christchurch will probably agree, too, that the city's urban character is in large part defined by its trees. Both research and my own impact assessment experience also suggest that trees can play a really significant part in defining a community's sense of place and belonging. So in the aftermath

of the Christchurch earthquakes, within a geography defined by loss, I believed – and still feel – that retaining and celebrating trees and their contribution is a really important part of the earthquake recovery process. Yet the focus of the plan seemed directed toward driving more losses which, because of the nature of trees and landscapes, risked extending far beyond the five year life of the plan and becoming generational.

These conclusions led to the process that has been addressed in the citation. Turning to which, I can only say that some of the best things in life come to us out of the proverbial blue, and so it was when notified I was to receive the Ron Flook Award. I was so surprised it took me several seconds to process the email and what it all meant. Once I did, I felt greatly honoured but also moved that I should be regarded as worthy of so prestigious an accolade. I would like to reiterate those feelings tonight and to thank the NZ Arboricultural Association (NZ Arb), most sincerely, for honouring me with the award. I would have loved to accept in person but am very grateful to Brad Cadwallader for doing the honours on my behalf.

**Helen Lowe**

