Kenneth McQueenie Driftwood Studio

There are four craft workshops in the Old Stables of Traquair House and one belongs to driftwood artist, Kenneth McQueenie. Fi Martynoga *meets the talented artist and his wonderful creations.*

Traquair House, that beautiful extended tower beside the Tweed, holds many surprises. For the last forty years, the workshops in the wooded grounds have harboured craftsmen: wood turners, leather workers, originally a potter. For seven or eight years now one of these little stone buildings has been the studio of Kenneth McQueenie, a talented Scot with an artist's eye for the comic and quirky, and curious personal history. The handmade sign announces 'Driftwood Studios' and another above the door reads 'Everything inside is an original'. It is as true of the artist as of his works.

The folding red door opens to a wonderfully unimproved bothy interior with an earth floor and a cob-webbed window. The window sill is the home of a weird creature with the head of a springbok and the body of a snowy owl, perfectly married. Although it is summer, the day is dank and chilly, so Kenneth is coaxing a woodstove made from an old gas cylinder and soon has it drawing. There is not much space in the two-roomed interior. Around us crowd the birds, whales, mythical beasts, clocks, mirrors and candle-sconces he makes from driftwood. To me the long-necked seabirds (are they ducks or gulls?), each of which gently carries a shell or feather in its bill, are instantly appealing. "Not everyone likes them" says Kenneth, "many take one look, mutter, 'Weird!' and retreat. The rest are completely fascinated."

The room beyond is given over to picture framing. "That provides my bread and butter. I took it up when I came back to the Borders after ten years in London. But now the demand is waning, so I spend some days of the week acting as a guide in Traquair House and the rest of the time making what I fancy out of the wood I pick up mainly between North Berwick and Lindisfarne." Those are the beaches Kenneth visited as a child and the ones to which he returns each spring to see what tangled and prostrate forests the sea has brought in during the winter. The pictures of him collecting his raw materials make him look like a child in a toyshop. "It's just like that", he says. "I see a half-burned log from someone's beach fire and it's a whale, an eroded baulk of some hardwood and it's the raw material for a clock. You could compare it to cloud watching – letting the imagination make what it will of the shapes that appear." Car-loads of driftwood come home with Kenneth and get stacked to dry. Most evolve into sculptures, the rest, "Well, they get chucked on the stove!"

Kenneth was brought up in Penicuik and took himself off to Middlesex Polytechnic in the late seventies to study graphic design. At least, that was his intention. Nature intervened

by making his vision distort. Referred to the Edinburgh Eye Pavilion, the 17 year-old was told, "You don't need glasses," (he was hoping for round John Lennon ones), "you have a brain tumour". Immediate surgery followed, and the next year, another major operation. Remarkably, Kenneth eventually got himself to college and graduated with a first from Middlesex, as well as the first prize in the Benson and Hedges Illustration Competition.

With these credentials and despite his slightly precarious health, he worked freelance in the competitive London market for ten years, doing everything from front covers for Penguin Books to pieces for the Radio Times. "I was always going from publisher to publisher with a portfolio, on paper of course, because this was way before you could direct people to the internet. I liked typography and printmaking and often produced mono-prints. But my artwork was always dark and heavy, so I got all the depressing subjects." The most difficult job Kenneth ever illustrated was the birth of the Social Democrat Party. He had a day or so to produce a graphic account of its unwinding and the size was limited to 1-inch by 1 ½-inch. And the most interesting job was a comic-strip version of Sophocles' King Oedipus, before this form became a popular way of producing classics.

It was epilepsy, the result of re-growth of his tumour, and the need for further brain operations that brought Kenneth back to Penicuik. His father had a barber's shop with some empty space, so the artist set up his first framing business there and kept himself occupied whilst he was recuperating. He also became involved with the local arts' centre and it was whilst hanging an exhibition there that he met another artist, Mary, now his wife and mother of their son, Fergus. That was 20 years ago, and the couple live happily together, Mary using the artist's bothy next to Kenneth's workshop on the Traquair Estate.

"It's paradise here", says Kenneth. "I'm surrounded by trees, flowers, rabbits and birds that I feed all the time. It's like Disney World but a thousand times better." The contentment feeds into his work. No longer could it be described as dark. The small faces that stare out of corners; the sporting whales; the serene birds; even the mythical beasts, one half bird, half human, the other perhaps a camel-bird with a touch of horse, are amusing, peculiar perhaps, but always fun. For people who prefer less zoological forms, there are driftwood walking sticks, light-pulls, and mirror frames, or they can have their own pictures framed with the fruits of Kenneth's beachcombing. "When you have had nine brain operations, it's the small things in life that keep you happy. I go back to the beach at Belhaven, for example, where I spent every summer as a child, and it's as if I'm a kid again. I am so lucky", he says, smiles, and repeats it, "So lucky".

Take a virtual visit (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ib-rrNrXG4) or, better still, take yourself to Traquair House and meet Kenneth in person. If you are there for the Medieval Fayre in May, or Traquair Fair in early August, you may also see him perform on guitar with the band, *Waterheads*, and percussion with the medieval band, *Cornucopia*, for Kenneth is not just an artist in wood but a musician of many talents.

Fi Martynoga *is a freelance museum researcher and writer based in the Scottish Borders. Kenneth McQueenie can be contacted on M: 07709 745026 or E: driftwoodstudio123@gmail.com*

Photos: Kenneth McQueenie.