

AOTEAROA LIGHT: Moments of Wonder and Realisation in New Zealand Wilderness

By Peter Laurenson, published by Bateman Books, hardback, 260 pages, RRP \$69.95. Reviewed by Andy Carruthers, NZAC

The cover image says it all – golden alpine light catching the upper reaches of a jagged peak as the sun sets. From the moment I opened *Aotearoa Light*, I was transported into the backcountry of Aotearoa through Peter Laurenson's lens and his deeply personal reflections on wilderness, light, and our role in the natural world.

I've known Peter for several years and have had the opportunity to go on a few amazing trips with him. He's an extraordinary photographer and a deep thinker – someone who loves the outdoors and also grapples with the damage being done to the environment he cares deeply about. Some of our backcountry conversations have veered into heavy territory, especially when Peter shares his concerns about those in power and their lack of action. His view might sometimes appear "glass half empty," while I tend to lean the other way. But he's also far more informed on many of the issues than I am, and I always come away from those conversations with a wider perspective.

Reading *Aotearoa Light* was no different. The first section of the book offers a well-researched and compelling overview of the climate and biodiversity challenges facing Aotearoa. It's not just opinion – Peter brings in facts, statistics, and global context. I found it extraordinarily educational and now feel better equipped to understand where New Zealand is making progress and where we're not doing as well as we should be. That section alone makes the book worth reading.

That said, there's also some criticism of politicians and policy decisions in the first chapters, which I think some readers might find a little combative. For me, it was a reminder of how passionate Peter is – and how high the stakes are. Even when I don't fully agree, I appreciate the depth of concern.

After the more reflective and analytical opening, the book shifts into a stunning series of themed photographic chapters. Each one celebrates a facet of New Zealand's wilderness: coastline, rivers and streams, lakes and tarns, forests, tussock and shrubland, rocky tops, snow and ice, and cloud and mist. It's an invitation to see our landscapes in a new way – through moments of light, contrast, and mood.

The photos are printed beautifully – rich, sharp, and atmospheric. Many had me stopping to admire not just the composition but the timing. Peter has a rare ability to be in the right place, at the right moment, with the eye to frame it perfectly. He also makes great use of panoramic stitching, which brings vast mountain landscapes into the frame without losing detail. A favourite for me was the Tussock and Shrubland chapter.

I also liked the philosophical side of the book. Peter describes what it feels like to be in the back country, experiencing those moments of wonder. It reminded me that our connection to nature isn't always about challenge and conquest – sometimes it's about stillness and letting yourself be small.

One of the most inspiring parts for me was the subtle thread of personal growth – Peter's journeys with his sons, his dear friend Shaun, his reflections on aging, and his continued desire to explore and document the wild places of Aotearoa. After finishing the book, I felt a renewed urge to plan my next trip and to keep making time to be in the backcountry with friends and family.

Overall, *Aotearoa Light* is both a visual treasure and a thoughtful commentary. It manages to educate and inspire. It's a reminder of what we're lucky to have, what we risk losing, and what's still worth fighting for.

I highly recommend *Aotearoa Light* to anyone with a love of wild places – and those who want to see them through the eyes of someone who truly cares.

In all good bookstores from 1 August, but also available to FMC members with a 20% discount (now \$56.00) when ordered online. Go to batemanbooks.co.nz/product/aotearoa-light/ and use the coupon code FMC01 at the shopping cart — freight is free within New Zealand.