

The Landfall Tauraka Review: Aotearoa New Zealand books in review

Aotearoa Light: Moments of wonder and realisation in New Zealand wilderness

By Peter Laurenson (Bateman Books, 2025), 260pp, \$70. Reviewed by David Eggleton

The passion for the environment—and for photography—is unmistakable in *Aotearoa Light: Moments of wonder and realisation in New Zealand wilderness* by Peter Laurenson. Taking us along, thanks to crisp digital photography, it progresses from riverbeds to mountain peaks, travels from seashores to lakeshores, treks across tussock lands, and tramps through forests, thus establishing, as the text declares, ‘seven distinctive natural landscapes’.

Laurenson, currently editor of the Federated Mountain Club’s *Backcountry* magazine, tells us: ‘It took me countless hours to create this book, often requiring intense periods in total focus to mesh my images, trip experiences, wider perspectives, information and chapter structure into a cohesive narrative.’ The result is undeniably extraordinary, conveying a genuine sense of immersive journeying in a manner that refreshes the terms ‘cosmic’ and ‘planetary’. This book, in a sense, idealises the landscape, but its message of conservation and the necessity to preserve the ecological harmonies of our ‘wilderness’ rings true. It’s a compendium of remote wild places that are literally precious and increasingly rare. They are also photographed in a way that makes them figuratively precious: landscape images as jewel-like collector’s pieces to savour. Partly this is a result of Laurenson’s studious but perhaps sometimes overdetermined use of Photoshop, where ever more powerful software offers increasing enhancement beyond normal human vision.

But photography itself, of course, is a kind of fabrication and always involves manipulation of the optical to varying degrees in pursuit of ways of seeing that produce trust and understanding and agreement from the viewer. Laurenson affirms the status of the photograph while also inflating the currency of the image with tweaked colouration so as to emphasise heightened emotionalism. It’s a delicate balancing act, then, between the potentially garish and the magical actuality of what it was like to be in the great outdoors, apprehending landscape as a whole-body experience.

Ultimately, the chromatic vivacity is reined in to emphasise the morphology of the land, the kinetic flow of ridges and rivers, with the overpowering radiance of bright sunlight tamed so as to make sense of terrain features otherwise in shadow. So the colour notes are not dissonant but melodious; the tinges of purple or mauve, the infernal reds of cloud-draped sunsets and the heavenly blues of clear skies at dawn are photographed to bring out what’s already there rather than serving to transfigure in pursuit of personal symbolism. One enjoys the carnivalesque shift of the seasons, the fairground rollercoaster feel of storms and winds sweeping through. Laurenson nails down the fleeting effects of the meteorological with nuanced skill.

Sure, there are some pictorialist conventions observed, but whether trudging up slopes or speedily descending them, whether photographing dawn from high vantage points in the mountains or fungi down at ankle level on the forest floor, *Aotearoa Light* conveys a genuine sense of awe on its pilgrimage through the glory and grandeur of our natural world. Laurenson—with a succession of boon companions, notably his tramping comrade, fellow author and photographer Shaun Barnett, who tragically died of a brain tumour in 2024—delivers us into the midst of things, memorably the atmosphere of the goblin forest in Tararua Forest Park, with bracing clarity and a sense of the euphoric. These are landscapes at once rugged and vulnerable but always uplifting, caught in light by turns slanting, glinting, raking, bouncing and dappling, while tiny puffball clouds spiral around the maunga Taranaki, or a waterfall cascades silkily in the Catlins.