

BOOK REVIEW

New Zealand Alpine Plants. A.F. Mark and Nancy Adams. A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington. Price (soft cover) \$13.50, (hard cover) \$19.50.

My first reaction after admiring the magnificent black and gold cover of *New Zealand Alpine Plants* was "what shall I do with it?". The book is 27cm deep and my bookshelves the standard 22cm. It could go on the coffee table, of course, but it looks a bit stunted there beside *Rembrandt* and *Orchids of Australia*.

The next most striking thing is that it is obviously a book aimed at the amateur rather than the professional. This is firstly obvious in the content of the text — for example the key which introduces the snow-grasses. This succeeds in keying out 14 *Chionochloa* species unambiguously in 26 steps without using a single word of botanese; but technical terms are not totally absent, and there is a glossary of 67 to prove it. This includes "crown" and "runner" but excludes others like "tuber", "globose" and "stolon" which are also used in the text. However, the attempt to avoid using technical terms throughout the text is admirable and generally successful.

Unfortunately keys seem to be the exception rather than the rule in dealing with the larger and more complex genera and there are some inconsistencies here. The four *Ourisia* species come with a key but the eight *Coprosmas* do not. Not surprisingly there is no key for *Hebe* or even the *Celmisia* species. These irregularities have obviously been forced, at least in some places, by the demands of the layout. Text alternates with illustrations page for page, the paintings being on the facing pages, and with few exceptions (such as where the *Chionochloa* key puts the system out of phase) each illustrated species is opposite its description. There is no flip-flopping to find your way around this book.

The illustrations themselves are beyond praise. They have all the authority Keeble Martin showed in *The concise British flora* and they are also uncrowded and most pages are well composed. Yet they all demonstrate their first purpose well,

to provide information and assist identification, and nowhere is this better seen than on the page of bidibids. Difference in habit, flowers, colouring of stems and leaves and the shapes, arrangements and surfaces of the leaflets all come through strongly. They encourage even the rankest amateur to try and separate the species even when they are not flowering — something previously reserved for the most avid follower of the "Flora".

The illustrations also convey far more than just the bare facts of the case. The almost transparent blue quality of the fruits of *Coprosma brunnea* comes to life on the page, and the Spaniards really do have dangerously sharp leaves. There are very few disappointments in the illustrations. Perhaps *Ranunculus lyalli* does not quite convey just how magnificent the plant really is, and the eidleweiss may be a bit anaemic, but these are ungracious criticisms of a great achievement.

No review would be complete without a jab or two at what the editor missed. Sometimes plate references in the text do not eventuate (as with *Chionochloa pungens*) and there are other small mistakes and irregularities, but this type of criticism is also unworthy of the book. It was clearly meant to lead the non-professional person to take an active interest in our large and beautiful alpine flora, and this it certainly will do. Conservation is impossible without the interest of the general public and it is an important part of botany or zoology or any other "-logy" to go out and *sell* the subject to the community as a whole.

When a scientist does this he often lowers himself in the sight of his colleagues for oversimplifying some matter or other, leaving one species out but including another without any apparent consistency and even for "misinterpretation of the facts". I am comforted by the fact that this type of criticism usually seems to come from the ones who are so inward-looking as to continue busily studying the tree while the forest is felled around them.

Those who can see the whole as more than just the sum of the parts must often skip detail and

make omissions for the sake of preserving some of the wonder and fascination which are the unknown functions in this equation. The endless chase for 100 percent accuracy and full qualification of every detail is as subject to the law of diminishing returns as top-dressing with superphosphate; and it can make a bore out of the most brilliant of scientists. Somewhere there is a compromise and I think the scientific community would benefit from trying to judge the merits of an effort to find the compromise in the same terms as those in which it was created rather than condemn it on matters of details missed and mistaken and inevitable differences of opinion.

However, my feelings about *New Zealand Alpine plants* are not quite as unreserved as the reader might think. It is a compromise of another sort that has left doubts in my mind. The book will certainly encourage people to go out into the field and learn more about alpine plants by identifying and giving names to them, but you cannot take it with you. The result is that the

plants must come to the book to be identified. This is a practice that has certainly contributed to the rarity of some species in more populous countries, such as some of the orchids and Arctic alpines in Britain, and I do not believe this sort of collecting should be encouraged here. Indirectly this book does do so. It is almost as if the publishers were torn between the needs of the real user and the affluent man's coffee table collection and, like the old man and the donkey, has ended up by really pleasing neither.

This could be corrected, and the publisher should do so. There is no doubt this book will be as commercially successful as *Wild animals of New Zealand*. It should be followed as soon as possible by a "field guide" version, and, if the publisher really has got the courage of his convictions that the tentative first edition suggests, then by all means really go to town and produce the greatest "tourist" book on a natural history subject ever to come out of New Zealand.

IGC