

Book Reviews

The Great Sacred Forest of Tane: Te Wao Tapu Nui a Tane. A natural pre-history of Aotearoa New Zealand

By Alan Clarke

Published by Reed Books

Hardback, 520 pages, 210 x

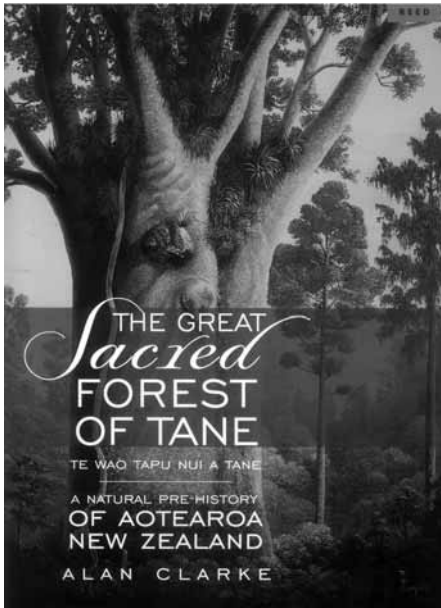
280mm, B&W photos; B&W

illustrations, 2007, New Zealand

ISBN 9780790011530

\$NZ95.00

Reviewed by Sue Scheele



I was excited to hear of the publication of a new book on traditional uses of native plants by early Māori that promised extensive coverage on all aspects. The best references currently available are Andrew Crowe's book on native edible plants and Murdoch Riley's huge resource on medicinal plants. There is certainly room for another reference that reflects in detail the use and value of plants to the survival and subsistence of Māori before the arrival of Europeans.

The publishers' notes refer to a 30 year labour of love and that is evident. Clarke has read and researched widely and the book contains an extensive bibliography, with all important statements referenced, and topics indexed. As someone who has also delved into the early literature on the subject, I fully appreciate the complexities of the task Clarke has taken on.

But I was left feeling frustrated. This massive work which is sound

at heart is let down by seemingly non-existent editing. Was there a rush to finally get it into print? It is as if sections have been drafted over the years (as you'd expect), but then cobbled together without checking, reviewing, redrafting, and integrating into a satisfactory whole. There is too much repetition of material, too many mistakes, and too many convoluted sentences that make the going harder than it ought.

There is an introduction, plus four introductory chapters before the compendium of plant uses that Clarke states is the aim of the book (p. 12). It is valuable to set the scene, explain the nature of the early New Zealand landscape, and describe how the first arrivals dealt with their new environment. But a lot of information gets repeated in these first chapters (150 pages) and it gets rather confusing to follow. Too often Clarke loses his focus. For instance, in a book that aims to concentrate on plants, there is unnecessary detail on birds such as kiwi and moa (Chapter 1). It's hard to avoid the thought that Clarke is telling us what he has discovered about New Zealand's prehistory (which is a lot), rather than keeping a clear focus on the stated intention of the book.

There is a sense that Clarke is not quite on top of his material, especially in his descriptions of the botany and ecology of early New Zealand. A close reading though, suggests that Clarke does 'know the answer' – but because of poor review and editing, statements creep through that are inconsistent, inaccurate or just somewhat off the point.

The chapters on medicinal plants, though full of interesting information, are not well defined. It's hard to know what to find where, with confusing headings such as 'Post-contact Māori medicinal plant usage' and 'Later post-contact Māori medicine'. For instance, Chapter 14 is entitled 'Botanists' records of medicinal plant uses'. Yet the information in it comes from a variety of sources – including

early missionaries, surveyors, naturalists and doctors. The whole section on rongoa (traditional healing focused on the preparation and use of plants) could have been much better laid out, with some of the chapters combined.

I would question some of Clarke's more general assertions, though in fairness, much can still be debated. For instance, I would not support the "hit and miss" theory of finding out how to process foods to make them palatable, or remove toxins. As Helen Leach has pointed out, Māori brought a myriad of food processing techniques with them from their Polynesian homeland. So I suggest few people need have died eating karaka kernels, before steaming and soaking methods were adopted to detoxify them, as with some acrid yam and taro species.

A strength of the book is Clarke's understanding of te reo Māori and Māori culture. He is authoritative and comfortable when it comes to the important sections on mythology and the spiritual relationship of Māori to the natural world. In the concluding chapter, he makes a valid contribution to the ongoing debate on tino rangatiratanga, and Māori control and access to natural resources.

The type face is pleasant, and the black and white drawings are attractive, though the placing of them has not been well checked. For example, in the section on forest crops, we see an image of 'Māori weapons' (p. 163), and the image of 'Māori and cloak' on p. 158 would surely be better placed in the chapter on fibre-yielding plants. Is it a worthwhile buy? Guardedly, yes. There is a lot of good stuff in this handsome volume, a lot of detail, and being so well referenced, there is opportunity for a reader to follow up on any area of interest. It is just a shame that the publishers have let the author down with less than rigorous editing.

Available from Touchwood books and Manaaki Whenua Press