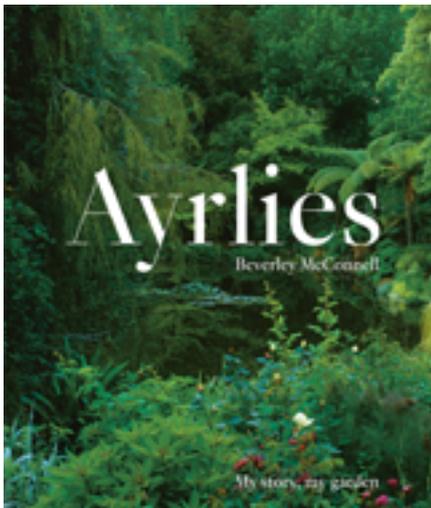


Book Reviews

Ayrlies: My story, my garden

By Beverley McConnell
Published by Ayrlies Gardens and Wetlands Trust, New Zealand, 2012
Hardback, colour and black & white illustrations, 280 pages, 245 × 205 mm
ISBN 978-0-473-21451-7
\$NZ70.00–80.00
Reviewed by Abbie Jury



The subtitle of this book is “My story, my garden” and that pretty much captures the flavour. These are Bev McConnell’s memoirs and as both the author and her garden reach maturity, the timing seems entirely appropriate. Her garden, Ayrlies, is located at Whitford, south east of Auckland and over the past 40 years, both the garden and the gardener have earned a leading position. This is a book about a garden, not a gardening book as such. The author writes about her own experiences and while there is wisdom and advice contained in the text, it is not a manual or a reference book.

I have not read anything written by Bev McConnell before, so it was a pleasant discovery to find that she has an easy and very readable style. She is disarmingly frank, almost alarmingly so at times. Given that this substantial and beautifully presented hardback extends to 280 pages, it is just as well the text is engaging. The many photos cover from her early family life in Wairoa (including a wonderful photo of her standing on her tricycle seat as a little dot aged around 3 or 4), through the stages of her adult family life and the

development of a bare patch of dirt into the large and handsome garden that is now known as Ayrlies.

In the New Zealand garden scene, Ayrlies is unusual in that it has had skilled labour employed almost from the start while the owner has kept complete control of the design, the planting and the management and has been an active participant at all stages. It is more common in this country for the major private gardens to have been established on the smell of an oily rag without any permanent staff at all, or, in more recent times for a wealthy owner to have handed over the whole project to a landscaper and crew. Bev McConnell has as much dirt beneath her finger nails as any of the staff she has employed over the years, but she has been able to realise her visions with extra input.

It is an enviable position to which she has responded by taking an active role in encouraging others to lift their own standards of gardening. Her own garden is as much about interesting plants and good combinations as it is about design. She has kept her focus on the beguiling complexities of good planting, demonstrated so ably by Beth Chatto in England whom she acknowledges as a major inspiration.

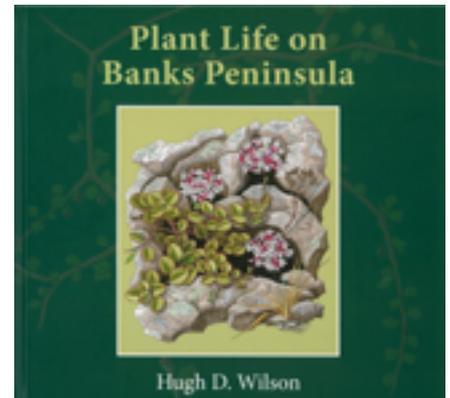
The chapter on her huge wetlands project is particularly interesting and it may be that this will prove to be one of her great legacies over the coming decades.

Available from the Ayrlies Garden website (www.ayrlies.co.nz) and Touchwood Books. This review is posted at www.jury.co.nz and was previously published by the *Waikato Times*.

***Ayrlies: My story, my garden* is reminiscent of two other titles – *The Garden at Larnach Castle: A New Zealand story* by Margaret Barker¹ and *The Subtropical Garden at Landsend – a plant collector’s dream* by Dick Endt. All three books recount remarkable journeys of the authors who document the development of their unique gardens over many decades.**

Plant life on Banks Peninsula

By Hugh Wilson
Published by Manuka Press, Cromwell, New Zealand, 2013
Hardback, colour photos and drawings, 412 pages, 265 × 245 mm
ISBN 978-0-9583299-6-5
\$NZ90.00
Reviewed by Murray Dawson



The legendary Hugh Wilson needs little introduction to botanists, conservationists, ecologists and readers of his field guides. For more than 30 years, Hugh has been managing Hinewai Reserve on Banks Peninsula, Canterbury. Hinewai is a 1230 hectare reserve of regenerating native bush that is privately-owned and open to the public.

Following his precursory work, *Natural history of Banks Peninsula* (Wilson, 2009¹), Hugh is uniquely qualified to write this more extensive offering, *Plant life on Banks Peninsula*, which focusses on plants rather than over-viewing the flora and fauna in his earlier title.

As these books tell us, Banks Peninsula is a volcanic landform jutting into the Pacific on the doorstep of the South Island’s largest city, Christchurch. Once forested, Banks Peninsula was stripped of nearly all its trees and much of its original wildlife by two consecutive waves of human colonisation, Polynesian and European. However, the Peninsula remains a unique, biodiverse landscape.

Publisher Manuka Press have a long association with Hugh Wilson. They have previously produced his popular field guides: *Small-leaved shrubs of New Zealand* (1993), *Field guide: Stewart Island plants* (1994), and *Wild*

¹ Reviewed in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2007, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 28.

¹ Reviewed in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2009, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 29–30.

plants of Mount Cook National Park (1996). As stated on their website, Manuka Press is a small publishing company producing books primarily with a botanical theme from a home office in their spare time. In my view, the high production values and lack of typographic errors in this latest offering puts the proofreading of some larger New Zealand natural history publishing companies to shame.

The layout of *Plant life on Banks Peninsula* really is superb and the author and publishers have opted for a larger format (dare I say coffee-table style book?) than Hugh's portable field guides. This was a great decision; each page is laid out mainly in two columns, with text on the left and drawings on the right, but with enough flexibility to display Hugh's fantastic artwork at their best. Richard Broadhead and Colin Webb of Manuka Press should be thoroughly congratulated for translating Hugh's clear (originally handwritten!) text and drawings into a near flawless work.

As opposed to a photographic account of a local flora, such as those displayed so nicely in *Plants of Pukeiti Forest* (MacKay, 2011²), Hugh has prepared his own botanical drawings. Some black and white line drawings have been recycled from his earlier field guides, but the majority of his colour drawings are new. There are apparently more than 500 botanical drawings, of which more than 160 are in colour. To my admittedly untrained eye, the quality of Hugh's artwork seems at least as good as Audrey Eagle's (e.g., Eagle, 2006, 2013). Hugh displays a rare talent as an artist and botanical writer – it is an amazing achievement to have produced so much original artwork especially for this book, and to have written an extensive text for it, while also being fully committed to the management of Hinewai Reserve. More than 60 photographs are also included, taken by Hugh and those contributing images to the book.

I recognise some of the introductory chapters from *Natural history of Banks Peninsula*, expanded for this current work and entirely appropriate as a similar story needs to be told – the eyewitness accounts of fires and chronological figures (3.1–3.5) of deforestation are particularly sobering. Likewise, species distribution maps and checklists have

been adapted from the earlier title and located towards the rear of *Plant life on Banks Peninsula*. The addition of ticks in these checklists shows which species are illustrated compared to a total vascular flora of >1100 species, more or less equally divided between native and naturalised, to be found on Banks Peninsula.

After the first 47 introductory pages covering natural history (e.g., Banks Peninsula past and present, human influences, altitude, climate, rainfall and soils), the main body of the book profiles species groups arranged by chapter (pp. 48–338). This arrangement works well; there are the usual groupings you would expect (e.g., trees, shrubs, climbers, ferns, grasses, rushes and sedges, native orchids), and also some less orthodox groupings that nevertheless make sense for Banks Peninsula (e.g., chapters entitled “Gaudy succulents from Mediterranean climates”, “Plants on rock outcrops – bastions of biodiversity”, “Nowhere else – endemic to Banks Peninsula”). Cryptogams, the non-vascular plants including mosses, liverworts, lichens and fungi, are not overlooked and have a chapter dedicated to them.

It's great to see inclusion (in a chapter entitled “Rare, going, gone”) the rediscovery in February 2012 of *Pittosporum obcordatum* on Banks Peninsula, after a gap of 170 years (p. 314). *Piptochaetium depressum* (Chilean rice grass), a new grass weed for New Zealand found at Camp Bay on Banks Peninsula, is also listed (p. 372). Discoveries and rediscoveries such as these on Banks Peninsula are documented by Hugh Wilson in a recent *New Zealand Botanical Society Newsletter* article (June 2013, No. 112, pp. 18–20).

Text at the beginning of each chapter makes for fascinating, and at times entertaining, introductions to the species entries that follow. Species are numbered according to their order of appearance, with naturalised species prefixed by asterisks. Species are followed by their family name in brackets. Meanings of the binomials are usefully provided underneath, first for the genus, and on the next line down for the species (and indented to line up with the species epithet). Common and Māori names are right justified. Underneath these names

are concise botanical descriptions followed by a paragraph (in smaller font) on habitat and distribution notes of each species found on Banks Peninsula. This is much the same style as Hugh's field guides (Wilson, 1994, 1996).

Some botanical names used follow a conservative taxonomic approach (e.g., *Hebe* instead of *Veronica*, and some older genus names for the orchids), and the alternative names are provided in brackets.

I have always considered that descriptions are notoriously difficult to present in a popular work – they need to be technical enough to accurately describe a species, but simple enough to be understood by the majority of readers. Hugh achieves this balance brilliantly and seemingly effortlessly. Hugh's descriptions are never dry and his clear and easy writing style always presents the information needed.

Differences between similar species are explained clearly and concisely throughout and demonstrate Hugh's remarkable knowledge of the local (and wider) flora. For example, I took a recent photograph of a poroporo in flower at Hinewai. Hugh's book explains that two very similar species occur on Banks Peninsula – *Solanum aviculare* and *S. laciniatum*. He clearly explains and illustrates the floral differences that distinguish them – *Solanum aviculare* has smaller flowers that are a paler blue, and star shaped, with pointed petals, whereas *S. laciniatum* has bright purple blue flowers that appear frilled and are notched at the top of each petal (p. 91).

Similarly, I photographed a *Parsonsia* (a native jasmine) growing at Orton Bradley Park on Banks Peninsula. Due to leaf variability and lack of flowers, I was not confident to assign it to a species. Hugh's book confirms that both *P. capsularis* and *P. heterophylla* grow on Banks Peninsula, and “Although highly variable in leaf shape nationwide” he reassures that “*Parsonsia capsularis* differs from *P. heterophylla* on Banks Peninsula in the very narrow ... wavy-edged adult foliage...”. He then clearly illustrates these differences by colour drawings (p. 105).

² Reviewed in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2011, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 24–25 and the *New Zealand Botanical Society Newsletter*, March 2012, No. 107, pp. 23–24.

Concluding chapters present plant distribution patterns and maps (pp. 339–348), checklists of plants (native and naturalised vascular plants, and hybrids; pp. 349–380), a reference list focussed on Banks Peninsula literature (pp. 381–382), glossary (pp. 383–388), and an index of botanical, Māori, and common names (pp. 389–411).

Hugh's previous field guides to Stewart Island and Mount Cook are regularly used by people identifying native and naturalised plants from other regions in New Zealand, because the majority of species treated are not confined to the regions in the guides. The same is true for the Banks Peninsula flora, so this new book has wider utility.

This excellent book is a rare fusion of science, art, clear writing style, and flawless layout. Moreover, *Plant life on Banks Peninsula* provides an indispensable guide for appreciating

the special plants of the peninsula adjacent to the “car infested swamp” of Christchurch that “invades the lower spurs of the Port Hills” – to use Hugh's sentiments – and the flora beyond.

References

- Eagle, A. (2006). *Eagle's complete trees and shrubs of New Zealand*. Te Papa Press, Wellington. 500 p.
- Eagle, A. (2013). *The essential Audrey Eagle: Botanical art of New Zealand*. Te Papa Press, Wellington. 160 p.
- Mackay, M. (2011). *Plants of Pukeiti Forest*. Fantails Publishing, Manawatu. 585 p.
- Wilson, H.D. (1994). *Field guide: Stewart Island plants*. Manuka Press, Christchurch. 528 p.
- Wilson, H.D. (1996). *Wild plants of Mount Cook National Park*. Manuka Press, Christchurch. 380 p.

Wilson, H.D. (2009). *Natural history of Banks Peninsula*. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch. 144 p.

Wilson, H.D. and Galloway, T. (1993). *Small-leaved shrubs of New Zealand*. Manuka Press, Christchurch. 305 p.

Available from Manuka Press.

Book review archive

Our entire archive of book reviews (from the *Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 1981, under its various names), together with book reviews from the *Weekend Gardener* magazine (from Issue 86, November 2001) are available on our website at www.rnzih.org.nz.



Solanum laciniatum (poroporo), photographed from Hinewai Reserve. Photo: Murray Dawson.