

Book Reviews

Native plants of Aotearoa

By Carlos Lehnebach and Heidi Meudt

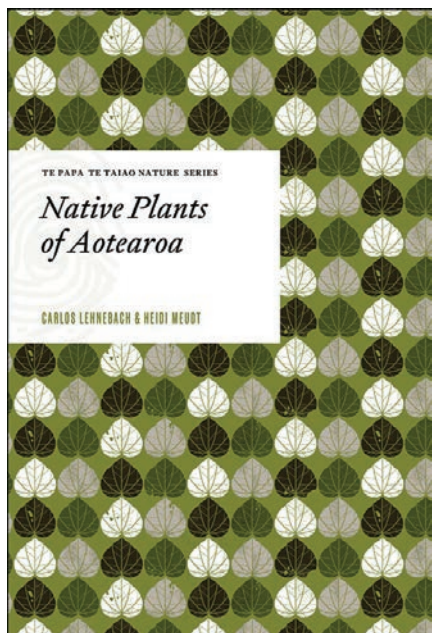
Published by Te Papa Press, October 2022

Hardback, B&W illustrations, 132 pages, 130 × 190 mm

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Reviewed by Murray Dawson



The authors of this new book, Drs Carlos Lehnebach and Heidi Meudt, are Botany Curators at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Wellington), and their taxonomic expertise is well respected by the botanical community.

It's pleasing to see that their book has a hardback cover, so it should last well. The cover design looks rather old-fashioned in my view, not that there is anything wrong with having a classic design aesthetic.

The cover tells us that it is part of a Te Papa Te Taiao Nature Series. Although we are not told within this book what others of this series are, the Te Papa website says that this is a new natural history series with *Native birds of Aotearoa* (Szabo, 2022) being a second title (and sharing the same publication date and retail price).

The introduction of *Native plants of Aotearoa* (pp. 7–11) usefully overviews various features of the New Zealand archipelago and its flora and fauna, then devotes a couple of pages to the botanical collections at Te Papa.

Some of the estimates for the size of the New Zealand flora could have been made clearer. The stated “about 2,900” introduced plant species only counts those that are naturalised – if plants also in cultivation are included, the total number of exotic species is about ten times this figure. Also somewhat unclear, given the title of the book, is stating that the daisy family (Asteraceae/Compositae) comprises almost 600 species for New Zealand, without telling the reader that this counts both indigenous and naturalised species (and again, not including exotic species found only in cultivation).

A set of bullet points in the introduction describes distinguishing features of the native flora with some examples that appear later in the book under the main species profiles. These include alpine plants that have mostly white flowers (e.g., *Celmisia gracilentia*, the mountain daisy), the relatively few deciduous trees (*Fuchsia excorticata*, kōtukutuku or tree fuchsia), dioecious species (six species profiled in the book), juvenile and adult growth forms (*Pterocarpa racemosa*, kāmahi), divarication, and megaherbs of the subantarctic islands – although no examples of divaricate plants or megaherbs are profiled in the book.

The comment that divarication in many of New Zealand's plants is believed to be a defence against browsing by moa tells only half the story; the other credible theory, not mentioned, is that divarication may be an environmental adaptation to dry, windy or frosty climates.

Following the bullet points are a couple of paragraphs on threats facing our native flora, including habitat destruction and browsing. We are told that “almost half of our vascular flora is considered to be of conservation concern” which is an important message to convey.

The section on Te Papa's botanical collections, and the history behind them, was an interesting read.

After the introduction, there are a couple of pages describing the book (pp. 12–13). We are told that fifty plant species were chosen by the authors, and arranged with ferns first (represented by one species, *Asplenium flabellifolium*), followed by

15 herbaceous species, four vines, and the remaining species are shrubs and trees.

The main section (pp. 15–115) profiles each plant species, devoting the left-hand page to an illustration and the right-hand page to text about that species. This arrangement works well.

The botanical illustrations are sourced from historic field sketches of Sydney Parkinson (drawn 1769–1770), completed by five artists following his death from malaria on his return journey to England on the *Endeavour*. These botanical illustrations provide good consistency, considerable historical interest, and is in keeping with the classic design of the book. A few of these illustrations seem to have been cropped to fit within the margins and I suspect their relatively small size of reproduction has made the finely spaced shading lines of the originals blend into one another to give a dark and smudgy appearance to some of the features illustrated (such as leaves). This is not helped by the choice of off-white paper to provide an aged look to the pages.

The text is well-written and recent research has been nicely woven into the stories of some plants. I would have liked to have seen more of these interesting stories about each species, better consistency in explaining how many other species of the genus are present in New Zealand and elsewhere, and less attention devoted to the descriptions, which, despite the authors' efforts, remain in my view too technical for a general readership. Instead of botanical descriptions of each species, notes on recognition would have been less rigid and more useful. Place names throughout are bilingual (te reo Māori followed by English) which is culturally appropriate (and politically correct nowadays) but verbose.

Botanical names are fully up to date including the recent genus level changes for kohekohe to *Didymocheton spectabilis* (was in *Dysoxylum*) and for kāmahi to *Pterophylla racemosa* (was in *Weinmannia*).

Few errors were encountered in this book. However, on p. 21 *Aciphylla squarrosa* (taramea or speargrass) is stated to occur throughout the North

and South Islands when in fact it only occurs as far north as Mt Hikurangi and south to the Marlborough Sounds or perhaps the Kaikoura Ranges. Similarly, p. 111 incorrectly states a North and South Island distribution for *Sophora tetraptera* (kōwhai). Following Peter Heenan's taxonomic revision in 2001, *S. tetraptera* was found to naturally occur only in the North Island (eastern North Island, Taupo and Waikato River). The authors could also have pointed out that the *Sophora* seed pods illustrated in the drawing (p. 110) should hang down rather than stick up.

Native plants of Aotearoa concludes with a useful Glossary (pp. 118–121), References (pp. 122–125), Image Credits (p. 126), Acknowledgements (p. 127), Index of Species (pp. 128–130), and About the Authors (p. 131).

So, who is this book for?

It is not a field guide (like, for example, John Dawson and Rob Lucas's *Field guide to New Zealand's native trees*, or Alan Mark's *Above the treeline*), as there is no particular regional, ecological, or plant group focus to the fifty species chosen for *Native plants of Aotearoa*. It's also not a book about gardening with native plants (like Fiona Eadie's *100 best native plants for New Zealand gardens*, or Lawrie Metcalf and Roy Edwards' *New Zealand native ground cover plants*).

Paraphrasing the 'About this Book' section, the authors write that their book aims to be a practical guide to plants that can be commonly encountered throughout Aotearoa New Zealand, accompanied by interesting stories about them, and beautiful botanical illustrations. I think that this book largely succeeds in these aims, and also provides a sampler to the diversity of New Zealand's native flora, to encourage those wanting to learn more.

I don't think it is intended to be a purely scientific work, although (because of the authors' research backgrounds) a lot of technical language has bled through into this book, which could be off-putting to a non-professional readership.

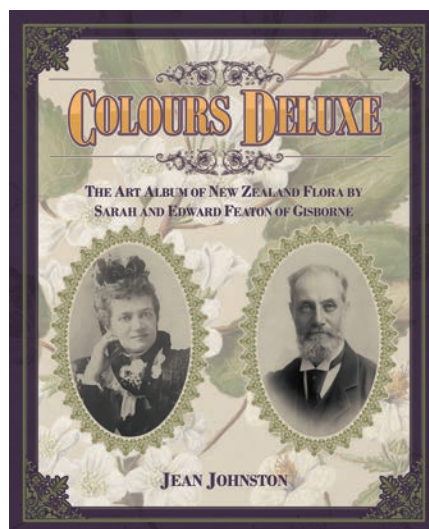
This review includes informal feedback from several of my botanical colleagues.

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Colours Deluxe: The Art Album of New Zealand Flora by Sarah and Edward Featon of Gisborne

By Jean Johnston
Published by Tairāwhiti Museum, Gisborne, 29 November 2022
Paperback, 87 pages, 258 × 212 mm
ISBN 978-0-473-65320-0
\$NZ40.00
Reviewed by Ross Ferguson



Edward and Sarah Featon's great achievement was the publication of *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora; being a systematic and popular description of the native flowering plants of New Zealand and the adjacent islands*, initially in three parts and then as one volume (1887–1889).

One contemporary reviewer wrote: "... our first sentiment was one of surprise that such an artistic, correct, and beautiful work should have been fully produced in New Zealand ... The feeling of astonishment produced at first sight of this work is succeeded by one of genuine admiration. ... The authors of this masterpiece of colonial science and art are Mr and Mrs E.H. Featon of Gisborne who are to be warmly commended upon the manner in which they have done their work ... there will be a large demand for a work that is so meritorious and which will in after years possess a unique value as being the earliest edition *de luxe* produced in New Zealand."

Observer, 18 May 1899, p. 4.

Any surprise or astonishment would be understandable. Edward and Sarah Featon did not have any botanical training and Gisborne was then one of the most isolated settlements in the colony. The town had been established only in 1870 and the settler (non-Māori) population was small: 574 in 1877, only 2737 in 1901. Access from other parts of the country was best by ship.

The Featons' isolation should not, however, be exaggerated. They corresponded with and had assistance from leading botanists such as Thomas Kirk. They were given many specimens and much encouragement by Archdeacon Leonard Williams (later Bishop of Waiapu), John Buchanan (botanist and draughtsman) and the indefatigable William Colenso FRS, down the East Coast at Napier. Every painting by Sarah was shown to Archdeacon Williams as soon as it was completed since he had such a good knowledge of native plants. William Colenso obviously respected her and named *Dracophyllum featonianum* Colenso (1890) "in honour of Mrs. E.H. Featon of Gisborne, New Zealand". Sadly, the name was subsequently treated as a synonym of *D. strictum* Hook.f. (1844).

The Featons' intention was to publish "... an illustrated reproduction of Hooker's Handbook of New Zealand Flora ...". According to their preface in *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora*, they wanted "... to accept the responsibility of putting forth a publication of a popular character based on scientific and systematic principles." Hooker was Sir Joseph

Dalton Hooker, Director of Kew and his *Handbook* had long been the standard work. Certainly the Featons followed it closely. Sarah Featon, in a letter dated 15 January 1920 to the Director of the Dominion Museum, wrote (quoted Field-Dodgson, 2003) "... I used to keep that book [Hooker's *Handbook*] open beside me when I was painting them so I think you will find them all correct".

They also had another aim. In their preface they stated, "It has been repeatedly asserted that there are no flowers in New Zealand, and by very many the statement is generally believed to be true. The authors of this work deem it to be their privilege to prove how fallacious and incorrect such beliefs are."

Edward Featon wrote a sometimes overheated text, complete with poems, Sarah Featon painted the watercolours for the 40 plates. Generally the plants are shown life size, usually one per plate. Her watercolours are very good likenesses, even if sometimes lacking in fine detail. The watercolours were reproduced by chromolithography, then a new technique. The *Art Album* was the first fully coloured art book ever to be printed in New Zealand. Newspapers of the time were very positive:

"For truth and brilliancy of colouring nothing has yet been done in the Colony to equal them. ... Mrs Featon has every reason to be satisfied with the way in which her admirable flower painting has been reproduced."

Lyttleton Times,
13 December 1887, p. 6.

More recent critics have been less enthusiastic: Janet Paul (1975) criticized the lithographs in general for having greasy surfaces, crude colours and fuzzy definition. Nancy Adams (1985) likewise considered that to modern eyes the colour plates were "rather crude". Sarah Featon herself recognised the difficulties of printing from art works but was satisfied. Jean Johnston quotes from Sarah's letter of 12 January 1888 to John Buchanan "You are aware yourself how difficult it is to get others to interpret to the full your intentions, in this case, we feel pleased with the very successful and artistic rendering of the originals, but we must bear in mind that the chromos are printed oil colours and are therefore opaque whilst watercolours are transparent.

The body of oil colour therefore gives brilliancy of colour, which as you remark is probably a fault on the right side. It has this advantage that time and exposure will not influence them but to advantage."

A very real disadvantage was that chromolithography was horribly expensive. The printing firm, Box & Cousins of Wellington, suffered financially and soon dissolved. Sarah had more than 90 other paintings prepared for further volumes, but these did not eventuate, probably because of the costs involved.

Although *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora* is well known the Featons have remained rather shadowy figures. Bruce Sampson (1985) was more interested in the scientific quality of Sarah's paintings. Bee Dawson (1999) wrote "Sarah Featon is a frustratingly elusive artist. We know of her painting, her collecting, her relationships with many of the leading botanists of the day. However, as to her actual life ... little material seems to exist." Creese and Creese (2010), seemingly very dependent on Sampson and Dawson, add little additional information.

It is therefore fortunate that Jean Johnston has been so diligent. There has always been some information on Edward Featon's career as a colonial soldier and then as a surveyor. Johnston provides extra information on Edward's involvement in civic affairs in Gisborne, and most usefully, includes several Featon family photographs. In them, both Edward and Sarah have a look of quiet determination. Even so, we learn little about their characters. However, the information on the context in which they worked and their dealings with botanists and collectors is particularly useful.

I was able to be at the opening of the exhibition, *Colours Deluxe*, and the launch of this book. The exhibition is at the Tarāwhiti Museum, Gisborne until 25 June 2023. It is a comparatively small but very elegant exhibition and includes about 20 of Sarah Featon's paintings, including one of a lovely pink rose (illustrated in the accompanying book). The exhibition also includes examples of other early flower painters such as Martha King (a better botanical artist), Emily Harris, and Georgina Hetley.

Although Edward Featon seems to have been the dominant partner in preparing *The Art Album* (Sampson, 1985), the exhibition is really focused on Sarah's work. As early as 1890, it was recognised "The magnificent illustrations are the chief feature of the work" (*Otago Daily Times*, Supplement, p. 2, 18 February 1890). Edward's text is now dated and probably seldom read, Sarah's paintings still provide great pleasure, particularly when it is possible to see her original watercolours. The Te Papa collection of her paintings has been digitised and can be viewed, together with some plates from *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora*, at <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/agent/4876> (accessed 12/12/2022). Twelve of these are illustrated much reduced, in Townsend (2020). Four, showing *Clematis paniculata*, *Clianthus puniceus*, *Corynocarpus laevigatus*, and *Pleurophyllum speciosum*, were used for the New Zealand Post, Collectables, Miniature Sheet and the First Day Cover released in 2021 (Townsend, 2020). The spider orchids (*Corybas macranthus*, syn. *Corysanthes macrantha*) on the First Day Cover are delightful.

It is appropriate that an exhibition celebrating Edward and Sarah Featon be held in the Tairāwhiti Museum. The Featons were long-time and active members of the Gisborne community. It is striking that, although Gisborne was still a very small town when *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora* was published, 50 of the 250 subscribers listed were from the Gisborne district, a convincing indication of local support.

Jean Johnston's *Colours Deluxe* also honours the Featons. It is a most attractive publication, well written and the layout is excellent. A glance at the notes shows the depth of research. The many illustrations add greatly to the text. My only reservation is that a small number of the old photographs are reproduced rather small. What I initially thought was a typo is actually an accurate rendition of a typo in the original (*Hibiscustrionum*). However, I did note that a DOI number referencing a paper was incorrect. These are very minor complaints. Edward and Sarah Featon obviously had high standards in what they expected of a book. I believe they would have been really pleased with the quality of this book honouring them.

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