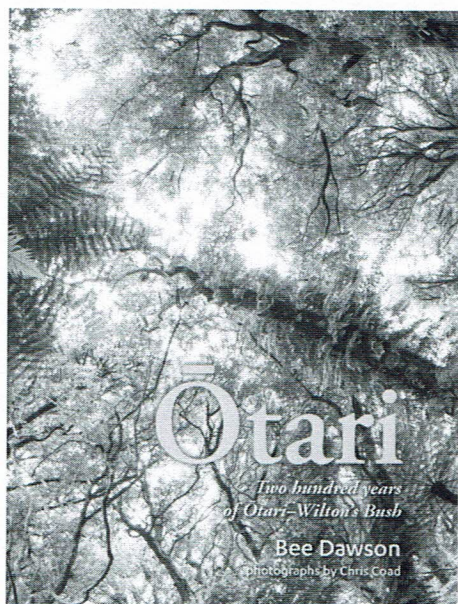


Reviewed by Bec Stanley.



This is the story of Aotearoa's only botanic garden dedicated solely to native plants, told chronologically starting with Ngati Tama and the first European owners up to the present public facility managed by Wellington City Council as part of the Wellington Gardens network. Dawson is the author of the *History of Gardening in New Zealand* so is an appropriate choice by the Ōtari-Wilton's Bush Trust who commissioned this book.

Each chapter outlines the management and development of Ōtari through layering stories of the history, plants and people in an easy and entertaining read. The book is illustrated throughout by beautiful photos from the present by Chris Coad and embellished by many small Nancy Adams watercolours and historic photos. It's a book you can dip in and out of, with plenty of sidebar vignettes such as biographies and memories as well as additional information such as historic lists, reports and plans. One example is a stocklist from 1948, it is surprisingly familiar and most tools listed will be found today in a public gardens tool-shed. This is a popular history aimed at

a wide audience but will appeal to botanists and plant lovers who will appreciate the separate botanical index of scientific and common names.

The book starts as Wellington city was being developed. I can imagine Ōtari as a sanctuary from muddy streets and poor sewerage systems and many day trips and picnics are illustrated from the early days. I enjoyed the chapter on "the first collections" including a wonderful photo of the handwritten accession book where Andy McKay (the custodian of the reserve at the time) had documented 606 alpine plants acquired for the garden. A garden isn't technically a botanic garden unless it has a documented register of its plants, today in the form of an electronic database. Plant labels are also expected in a botanic garden and I felt a connection back in time to those gardeners, as a former botanic garden curator, to read of visitors stealing and removing plant labels – clearly that is not a new phenomenon!

So, while the book starts out showing the important role Ōtari plays through time starting with picnics and leisure (and this remains a critical role for public gardens and reserves) it was interesting to read the conservation role is not so recent. It was the original mission of John Gretton (JG) MacKenzie and Leonard Cockayne to show the flora "at a glance" in the one place, display plants in their ecological communities, show how native plants could be used in home garden and restore the existing forest. The book details how over the past century this conservation role has burgeoned to volunteer led pest and weed control, collections of threatened plants, to seed banking and propagation research in the relatively new Lion's Plant Conservation lab.

Stories of the present day particularly resonated with me, giving a behind the scenes tour that articulates what modern Botanic Gardens are – centres of conservation excellence – a role often overlooked by scientists and unseen by the general public. I enjoyed reading about the horticulturalists, who usually like to stay 'behind the scenes', profiled and celebrated for their knowledge, skills and contribution to a city's environment. Old Mac was the gardener when the area was private land in the early 1900's, who walked to town using a garden fork as a walking stick, and up to the present gardeners who work at Ōtari today.

The book ends with lively stories of the most recent work at Ōtari, including a chapter on revegetation, highlighting the numerous volunteers integral to the garden and particularly their involvement in pest and weed control. On my last trip to Ōtari, while walking along the treetops walkway, a flock of kereru exploded out from the trees as a karearea flew into their sights. It is a credit to all committed to restoration of Ōtari (and the wider Wellington city) that visitors can experience this. I am sure all the curators and gardeners through time would have been very satisfied with where Ōtari is and where it's going. This book is a credit to the Ōtari-Wilton's Bush Trust ensuring the history of Ōtari is recorded and I hope it inspires other public gardens in New Zealand to share their stories.