

**SOUTHERN LIGHT – IMAGES FROM ANTARCTICA.** David Neilson. 2012. Victoria: Snowgum Press. 306 pp, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-0-78921-155-2. \$79.95 AUD.

*Southern light* by David Neilson is a monumental book in more ways than one. It measures 30 × 32 centimetres, weighs 3 kilograms and contains 230 magnificent photographs - almost half in atmospheric black and white, the rest in splendid colour.

The choice of title is explained in the *Introduction*. After describing the change in colour of an icy scenery from dark blue to rich pink as the sun rose, Neilson explains how 'the southern light of Antarctica presents the photographer with an extraordinarily diverse palette' (page 6). The result is a book that is, as Neilson aptly describes it, 'a celebration of the beauty of Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands' (page 6).

Neilson has been very fortunate in the number and variety of trips he has made to Antarctica and anyone perusing this book (one cannot say 'reading' a picture book) is fortunate to find such a selection of topics between two covers. The geographical range encompasses the Antarctic Peninsula and South Shetland Islands, East Antarctica (Victoria Land and the Amery Ice Shelf region), South Georgia, Macquarie and Campbell Islands. The subjects include scenery and wildlife, ranging from emperor penguins and wandering albatrosses to moss and lichens, and historic sites.

The large format makes for some sumptuous images. Single-page images of this size are impressive but there are double-page spreads measuring 57 by 26 centimetres and even triple-page 'gatefolds'. A picture of 20,000 king penguins at St. Andrews Bay, South Georgia spread across 85 centimetres is amazing. And it is sharp enough to find an uncovered egg in the middle distance!

In their book *The crossing of Antarctica* by Sir Vivian Fuchs and Sir Edmund Hillary (Fuchs and Hillary 1958), a note about the colour illustrations points out that colours in Antarctica 'may be both varied and vivid' (page x). It was published

in 1958 for a readership that would not have been familiar with colour photos of Antarctica. *Southern light* reinforces this point and emphasises the range of colours that tint the white continent. The dominant colour is blue in a range of shades but the scenes that remain clearest in my memory of Antarctica and which are invoked by this book are the soft yellows and pinks when the sun is low but shining through the clear atmosphere. There is no scenery that compares with mountains and ice set in a mirror-calm sea. It is difficult to catch atmosphere with a camera but Neilson manages it.

The text is brief. There is a short account of Neilson's six visits to the region and essays on climate change and protection of the Antarctic environment. I suspect photographers would have liked more information on photographic technicalities and techniques than a short list of cameras, lenses and film. Many books are let down by their maps, apparently because publishers are unwilling to spend money on cartography. This book has five well-produced and clear maps to aid navigation through its pages.

*Southern light* amply fulfils the *Wikipedia* definition of a coffee table book as 'a hardcover book that is intended to sit on a coffee table or similar surface in an area where guests sit and are entertained, thus inspiring conversation or alleviating boredom. They tend to be oversized and of heavy construction, since there is no pressing need for portability' (*Wikipedia*). I suggest an additional use is for the owners to turn the pages, while savouring the nightcap of their choice, to help them recall memories of their own visits to Antarctica and remind themselves why the seventh continent is more wonderful than the other six. (Robert Burton, 63 Common Lane, Hemingford Abbots, Huntingdon PE28 9AW. U.K. (rwburton@ntlworld.com)).

### References

- Fuchs, V. and E. Hillary. 1958. *The crossing of Antarctica*. London: Cassell  
Wikipedia. Coffee Table Book. URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coffee\\_table\\_book](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coffee_table_book)