



## Wild, free, gorgeous

BY STEVE BRAUNIAS

**WILDFLOWER CITY**, Alan Knowles and Colin Webb (Manuka Press, \$39).

THIS BOOK IS A RARE LOVELINESS, A minor miracle, exquisite and quiet and kind-hearted – really, it is a work of art. Sometime around 1995, photographer Alan Knowles began clambering around the hills and dunes of Wellington, and alongside its motorways and its back streets; what we have now is *Wildflower City*, his record of wildflowers blooming all over the shop. What vision this took, what an act of poetic will; as such, this is a beautiful little coffee-table book, but it is also a beautiful little book of poetry.

A clump of ivy-leaved toadflax growing out of the pavement on Vivian St. Broom and purple linaria beside the railway tracks at Khandallah. The sunburst of bone-seed at the Miramar peninsula, the open faces of Mexican daisies in the

Northland tunnel, the blush of lilac oxalis on Onslow Rd ... Knowles has also hoofed it to Karori (brush wattle, hebe), Point Halswell (tree mallow), Karaka Bay (pig's ear), Eastbourne beach (hare's tail) and the Eastern Hutt hills looking towards Wainuiomata (ragwort, hawksbeard). Colour, shape, freedom: surely, you rejoice, this man loves his his weeds, his exotics, his illegal immigrants. The more, the merrier.

No. "If anyone uses this book to justify the protection or spread of wildflowers," he writes, "I will be most displeased." Oh, bother. Drearily, Knowles would rather see Wellington covered in native plants. But native plants are so often so completely boring, so much of a charmless muchness. In last week's issue of the *Listener*, Jane Clifton covered this subject in her story about official efforts to rid New Zealand of exotic "pest plants". It made for angry

reading. Do not, we are told under the Biosecurity Act, grow or allow jasmine, daises, gunnera, banana passionfruit, cathedral bells, heather and other wildly attractive specimens.

The law is an ass. Leave the exotics alone.

I am more than happy to provoke Knowles's displeasure on this score. It's his own fault: he has brought it upon his head with this gorgeous celebration of nature going about its rampant and rapacious business. Bravo, then, Mr Knowles; congratulations, too, to Colin Webb for his informative essay and botanical notes, and to the publishers, Manuka Press of Christchurch (who worked in association with the Caxton Press) for the good paper, the simple and elegant design, the bright reproduction of so much marvellous, untamed colour. ■