

Shelter from the Storm: The story of New Zealand's backcountry huts

By Shaun Barnett, Rob Brown & Geoff Spearpoint, Potton & Burton, October 2024, hardcover, 380 pages, \$79.99. Reviewed by David Barnes, Otago Tramping & Mountaineering Club and Hutt Valley Tramping Club.

This is a revised, updated and slightly larger edition of the successful (and sold out) 2012 comprehensive tale of New Zealand's unique network of backcountry huts.

That it is such an impressive tome should come as no surprise to most FMC members, who will be familiar with the three authors' impressive back catalogues and their tireless advocacy for our hills and for the huts that are the anchor stones of so many outdoor experiences. Those huts, which help to define the New Zealand backcountry experience, are the focus of *Shelter from the Storm*.

A 16-page introductory essay by the late Shaun Barnett sets the scene. Barnett's lyrical description of arriving at a hut for the first time, the surroundings new yet so familiar, will resonate with most trampers. From there the book is divided into an examination of huts built for different purposes: pastoralism and mining, tourism and club huts, those built by the different government agencies that have managed aspects of what is now the public conservation estate, scientific huts and huts built as memorials. The three authors take turns at this task and include research of considerable depth and extensive references. Much of the book consists of the profiles of over 80 huts. Most focus on one hut or a succession of huts, such as the four Mueller Huts; and perhaps where it was too difficult to pick just one, some explore a group of huts, such as the George Lyon-built huts in Nelson Lakes National Park, or myriad Forest Service six-bunkers on the West Coast. A map usefully locates each profile.

The photography is impressive too. The authors have contributed many high-quality shots taken over decades of wandering the hills. Rob Brown's image of Chancellor Hut stands out, and Geoff Spearpoint's image of my own club's fondly-remembered Green (Peak) Hut (1923-88) is my sentimental favourite. The historical photos make perhaps a more important contribution to the book, however. As well as the usual sources such as the Hocken Collection, the Alexander Turnbull Library and Canterbury Museum, images were sourced from club archives and from many people who worked



or played in the hills, particularly in the heyday of hut construction between the 1940s and 1970s. Longstanding ranger Bruce Postill contributes images of the first and last days of several huts, including McCormack Hut as it was about to be engulfed by the advancing Fox Glacier.

Many trampers will have a copy of the first edition, so what's new? Mataketake Hut in South Westland and Moonlight Tops Hut on the Paparoa Track are new huts profiled, with a stunning image of the former on the cover. Freeman Hut on the shores of Lake Manapōuri, which has had a major restoration job in recent years, also makes the cut. Other information has been updated where appropriate, including the extensive rebuild of Aspiring Hut.

Most importantly, the book concludes with an essay by Rob Brown entitled 'Back to the Future – the mahi of the volunteer community'. This details the efforts of a growing network of groups stepping up to work on our backcountry huts, led and championed by the Backcountry Trust (which Brown manages). It notes a shift in mindset, from the expectation that government agencies and taxpayer funding will provide and maintain a fully formed hut network, to a growing sense of ownership from volunteers and their wider circles. The trust's model, where funding is used to source many times its value by leveraging volunteer effort, has been successful and must surely gladden the heart of even the most economically dry politician, who should be able to see a remarkable amount of bang for the buck. Had the book been published a few months later, FMC's Love Our Huts campaign would have been a necessary inclusion in this chapter. What is unspoken is how, since its first edition, this book has helped raise the profile of huts and the importance of keeping them.

