

Book Review

by Nalayini Davies, 25 May 2017

Matariki: The Star of the Year

Dr. Rangi Matamua

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Huia Publishers, Wellington, New Zealand

Paperback: 92 pages; ISBN: 978-1-77550-325-5, NZ\$35 from all established bookshops



This book is hot off the press, timed for the annual mid-winter (usually June) occurrence of Matariki, the pre-dawn rising of the star cluster Pleiades. This signals the start of the Maori New Year and various accompanying cultural observations and celebrations aimed at the coming together of the community. This year, Matariki will begin on 25 June (as per the Ministry for Culture and Education). In Auckland, Matariki observations and celebrations are expected to span the period 10 June to 2 July.

Dr Rangi Matamua, the author, is an associate professor at the University of Waikato with research interests in Maori astronomy. He has written this book documenting his extensive research on Matariki covering both academic material and interviews on the subject. He addresses the questions of what it is, why it is observed by the Maori, how it was traditionally celebrated and concludes with when and how it should be celebrated in current times. Dr Matamua's interest in the topic was triggered and his research informed by an unpublished 400-page manuscript compiled by his great-great-great grandfather, Te Kokau, from 1898. This was completed in 1933 by his son, Rawiri Te Kokau, to which the author became the custodian in 1995. Given the oral tradition of the Maori, documented Maori history and culture is relatively limited. This well researched book is an important addition to documenting an essential aspect of Maori traditional practices and Maori astronomy, which have had a resurgence in recent years, whilst also challenging some of the myths. The author confirms that the number of seasons, months and lunar phases differed depending on region and tribe and that to some, the rising of Puanga/Rigel marks the Maori new year. Based on his research, the author has calculated the dates for the "traditionally determined" rising of and the period of Matariki from 2017 (17-20 July and 17-22 July respectively) to 2050.

Maori astronomic knowledge and customs and the associated astronomical concepts are well explained in the book with suitable illustrations. The author studies the traditional beliefs and practices and then examines how they fit into the current modern concepts of astronomy and social practices. This is the best discussion and explanation of Matariki that I have come across, and this can be attributed to Dr Matamua's singular focus on the topic undertaken with access to the extensive, unpublished ancestral manuscript as well as the academic rigour of his profession. The book is easy to read and comprehend with about 60 pages of text, 25+ pages of images and illustrations and further pages of maps and charts. There is a final section on Matariki proverbs and

an extensive section of end notes containing the research references, followed by a bibliography and an index section.

Although I found the book astronomically light, with its single focus on Matariki, its coverage of Maori astronomic practices, customs and traditions (including those relating to weather, food and navigation) and proverbs more than compensated for that. These are both interesting and knowledge enhancing in regard to Matariki which has evolved into an important symbol of culture and national identity and a significant event on the astronomical calendar of New Zealand.