



The Larnachs by Owen Marshall. Auckland: Random House/Vintage (2011). RRP \$39.99. Pb, 280pp. ISBN: 9781869794972. Reviewed by RM Peck.

In his first historical novel, *The Larnachs*, Owen

Marshall depicts the Larnach family of Otago through the eyes of William Larnach's wife, Constance, and Douglas, his second son. Larnach built a massive mansion referred to in the novel as the Camp and now known as Larnach Castle. He was a colourful character, well known in the wider colony of New Zealand as an entrepreneur and politician, a Member of Parliament in Richard Seddon's government and a close friend and confidant of Seddon.

The novel opens with a report of Larnach's wedding to Constance de Bathe Brandon on the 27th January 1891. This was his third wedding, he lost his two previous wives to illness, and Constance's first. Constance found in Larnach good company, intellectual discourse and a supporter for her interests in music, society and politics. Larnach found in Constance a woman intent on involving herself in and with all aspects of his life. In the novel, contrary to the time, it appears that he enjoys being challenged by Constance, and he does appear to take her counsel.

Marshall writes to involve the reader by introducing Douglas and Connie, whose friendship develops into a love affair during a time when politics, the death of Larnach's first daughter,

Kate, and the diminishing of his personal fortune involve and demand his notice. Connie speaks of this, saying "William and I have reached the tolerated and baffled partnership that has always appalled me when I recognise it in others." She carries on later in the same observation, "William seldom comes to my bed and though I have rarely refused him, I am glad of that," perhaps because, as she also notes, William does not relax and enjoy the results of his endeavours but has become an old man who is suddenly aware of it and resentful of this season of life.

Douglas, for his part, wants to confront his father with their affair and laments Connie's reluctance to hurt William. He also laments the need to use his father's reputation and creditworthiness to fund his lifestyle, even though, working around the Camp and its livestock and farming ventures, he is possibly the best employed of the Larnach offspring.

While Marshall's intention is to explore the love affair, he neglects William Larnach, whose emotions, thoughts and actions are communicated only through Douglass and Connie. While Marshall uses their actions, prejudices and beliefs to add the necessary life to the overall story, William's own voice would have added another fascinating dimension to what is an excellent novel that portrays the period's customs, traditions and details of day to day life.

The novel is well researched. Marshall gives both primary and secondary sources and integrates these seamlessly throughout his story. His writing is easily read, holds the readers' attention, and will appeal to those already familiar with his writing and those with an abiding interest in New Zealand colonial fiction.