

Larnach's Camp

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He was born in Australia, but he will always be remembered by all New Zealander's for the building of his castle, and perhaps by some for the shocking manner of his death.

In the sweeping fertile Hunter Valley just out of Sydney, in what is now one of the best known wine growing regions of the world, William James Mudie Larnach was born 27 January 1833. He was the grandson of one of the regions most well known farmers James Mudie, infamous for his harsh treatment of both his workers and his family. A military man who was used to discipline, he was fond of heavy flogging for even the slightest misdemeanor. Still William's mother Emily and father John might have sheltered him from the worst excesses of his grandfather.

William was born in a time of prosperity for this new class of Australia entrepreneurs, that had often landed with nothing, but in the climate of southern adventure could make their fortune. And even when James Mudie was involved in a scandal involving the brutality he had inflicted on his workers, and left the country branded an outcast, William's parents went on farming in the area.

However when William had grown up, he decided that it was not for him. Instead he followed his uncle Donald Larnach into the banking industry. After initially working as a bank office setting up new branches in the goldfields, a dangerous and uncomfortable job, William returned to Melbourne and married the young heiress Eliza Jane Guise. The family legend was that the Guises were descended from the ancient rulers of France. Eliza and William were often separated as he continued his work as bank manager in the giddy whirl of gold rush, but it was during a holiday back in Britain with William's uncle Donald, that the opportunity arose of working in New Zealand. Donald has grandiose plans of building an estate in this new land, and he passed this onto his nephew.

William was offered the job of chief colonial manager of the Bank of Otago, and while Eliza stayed in Melbourne with their four young children, he set off for Dunedin. It was a time of prosperity, and the banking business was riding on the gold fever that had taken over Otago. Soon he became established enough to bring over his family, including Eliza's half sister Mary Alleyne.

William had soon begun investing in land in the area, setting out the town of Portobello on the Dunedin Peninsula, starting his own home there, and the Big Mill in the Catlin area which turned Owaka into a thriving mill town. Larnach was however taking some criticism of his management of the Bank, and when it was merged with the National Bank in 1873, Larnach after some heated words with the managers in London resigned his office, saying it was so he could pursue his own business ventures. This might not have been the whole story, but it did mean he could do his own thing; founding the National Insurance Company and the Colonial Bank.

But it is of course for his home, that the locals dubbed Larnach's Castle that became his greatest legacy. On a walk one day around the Otago Peninsula, young nine year old Donald Larnach,

excitedly showed his father the breath taking view of both the Pacific and the harbor of Dunedin offered from the hilltop. William was hooked, and shortly bought the land. Beautiful it may have been, but it was also rocky and bush covered, and yet this was where Larnach would have the stately home he had imagined in England with his uncle.

Moving his now family of five to a cottage, fondly name 'the Camp', Larnach set to work, even labouring on his farm himself. The castle's plans although drawn up in England were modified by local architect RA Lawson. It was to be in the fashionable gothic style, complete with crenellations. No money was spared, the house would not be large by English standards, but it would be unique; double hung double glazed windows, ventilate the house, and impressive chandeliers throughout were run by a methane gas generator originating in the outhouse- an idea years ahead of its time (admittedly it was only the servants that ran the lights this way.) Larnach was exacting and saw to every small detail. He bought in Italian marble, fire bricks from Glasgow, and thousands of multi coloured Roman tiles for his home.

The whole thing was a mammoth task, as everything had to be floated in and then pulled by bullock team up the steep hill, and teams of stone masons worked in local stone as well as the soft and pale Oamaru stone to finish the exterior. Meanwhile inside Italian plasters laboured on and off for twelve years to finish the intricate plaster work ceilings. Inside Louis John Godfrey carved flowers, birds and butterflies into the beautiful wood paneling in the rooms, while on the stairs leading up to the main door he carved huge stone lions with bared teeth, imperial eagles, griffins and the wide eyed owl above the door. All in all the castle was a display of beauty and power, containing all the most precious woods that the world could offer. Stepping into the foyer, Larnach had a mosaics placed, one held by two cats, dubs the place 'The Camp' while the other is a grumpy looking wildcat with the motto 'sans peur'. From this you travel upstairs to on the impressive hanging staircase made of oak, mahogany and kauri.

With its completion in 1874 , Larnach must have felt enormous pride, he was now a true country gentleman, well known for his fine horses and beautiful gardens, but it was not long until Larnach needed new challenges, and when these lead him beyond the Otago Peninsula they also bought him fame and tragedy. Next month the conclusion to the tale of William Larnach.

If you would like to see Larnach castle today try their [official website](#).