

The Hill of Memory

Peter Attwell

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Peter Attwell's novel *The Hill of Memory* is a fine example of New Zealand historical fiction. This genre has gained momentum over the past couple of decades and the novel can proudly sit on the bookshelf alongside the works of Edmund Bohdan and Ray Grover. It is important to also note that *The Hill of Memory* spans the Young Adult and Adult fiction genres — its four main characters are all on the cusp of adulthood.

The novel begins as a memoir, with the protagonist Johnnie Hargreaves taking the reader back to 1913 and a very different (colonial) Wellington City from today. Johnnie's narration is skilfully rendered by Attwell. The author wears his research lightly, Attwell deftly evokes a time and place and successfully sets it within the context of working-class life. Wellington in 1913 is a city adjusting to immigration and political change. There's even a whiff of revolution in the air — maybe not that different from today after all.

As befitting a harbour city, a maritime motif runs throughout the novel. In no time the passions and loyalties of the Wellington Harbour Board and the Wellington Watersider's Union collide. Johnnie and his best mate Joe Halifax feel this growing tension on the street as they jump onto the coat-tails of the Watersiders' protest marches.

Tensions escalate, protests turn into waterfront lock-outs, and so the 1913 Great Strike begins. Then into the story comes Joe's socialist brother Ned, and Hettie, Johnnie's sister. As Ned and Hettie's romance blossoms so do their commitments to the watersider's cause and also the suffragette movement which Hettie supports.

While the national drama plays out, a parallel domestic drama involving the four main characters; Johnnie, Joe, Ned and Hettie runs

Books Reviews

counter to the political turmoil. One of the book's joys is Attwell's attention to the distinctive voice and dialogue of each protagonist. Descriptions of local characters coupled with the choice and tone of language also lend the book a historical nuance that successfully transports the reader back in time.

Attwell also has a strong grasp of local and national history. Throughout the narrative, we get a full description of the political players, the national identities and the role of the state in the affairs of commerce. There are riots between unionised and non-unionised labour, the government brings in farmers as special constables (the infamous 'Massey's Cossacks') to help break the strike. Protesters are charged by the mounted cavalry, workers are batoned, shots are fired and wharfies and unionists arrested.

The historical validation is achieved through the author's tight and thorough attention to the historical record and its detail. At one point in the narrative 1000 special constables arrive on the waterfront:

“This was a display of force meant to impress. But although we didn't know it then, they had been under verbal and physical attack all the way on their ride down from the barracks to the wharf, where they were to ensure the safe loading of thirty racehorses heading south on the Maunganui.”

The racehorses Attwell refers to here were thoroughbreds travelling to Christchurch for the New Zealand Cup — run yearly in November. In 1913 it was the biggest horse race in New Zealand. The author also records that the strikers and the specials conducted a truce to allow a further contingent of horses to be loaded onto a ship. This speaks to the importance of horseracing. At this point in New Zealand's history, even a national strike could not get in the way of getting horses to a horse race!

As the turmoil draws to a close in early 1914 the story continues with Johnnie, his family and friends now living with the ongoing ramifications of the 1913 Great Strike.

The Hill of Memory is recommended for anyone with a love of New Zealand history, a passion for Wellington, or simply enjoys a

thrilling personal and political drama.

I look forward to Attwell's next novel. As one momentous period of New Zealand's history ends, another one looms. The shadow of the First World War will cross everyone's future...

Reviewed by Seán JD McMahon