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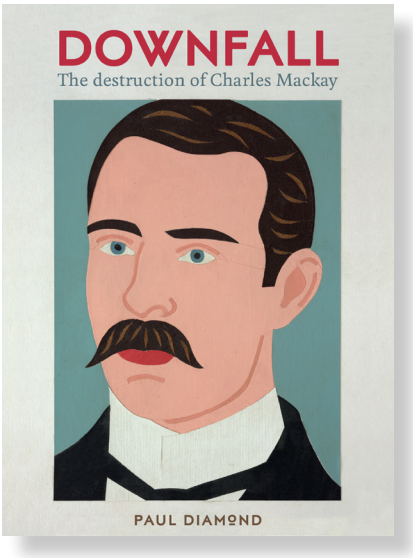
# Downfall

## *The Destruction of Charles Mackay*

PAUL DIAMOND

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## AN IMPORTANT NEW HISTORY THROUGH A QUEER LENS

1920 New Zealanders were shocked by the news that the brilliant, well-connected mayor of genteel Whanganui had shot a young gay poet, D'Arcy Cresswell, who he thought was blackmailing him. They were then riveted by the trial that followed.

Mackay was sentenced to hard labour and later left the country, only to be shot by a police sniper during street unrest in Berlin during the rise of the Nazis.

Mackay had married into Whanganui high society, and the story has long been the town's dark secret. The outcome of years of digging by historian Paul Diamond, *Downfall: The destruction of Charles Mackay* shines a clear light on the vengeful impulses behind the blackmail and Mackay's ruination.

The cast of this tale includes the Prince of Wales, the president of the RSA, Sir Robert Stout, Blanche Baughan . . . even Lady Ottoline Morrell. But it is much more than an extraordinary story of scandal. At its heart, the Mackay affair reveals the perilous existence of homosexual men and how society conspired to control and punish them.

This important new history is a careful examination of an important and little understood moment in our past. It is unique for the queer lens through which it views the complex lives and motivations of key figures in late-Edwardian New Zealand and the systems within which they operated.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Paul Diamond** (Ngāti Hauā, Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi) is Curator Māori at the Alexander Turnbull Library. He is the author of *A Fire in Your Belly* (Huia, 2003), *Makereti: Taking Māori to the world* (Random House, 2007) and *Savaged to Suit: Māori and cartooning in New Zealand* (Fraser Books, 2018), and has also worked as an oral historian and broadcaster. In 2017 he was awarded the Creative New Zealand Berlin Writer's Residency.

## SALES POINTS

- An important new history
- An impressive contribution to New Zealand's growing acknowledgement of its queer history
- Well written and engaging

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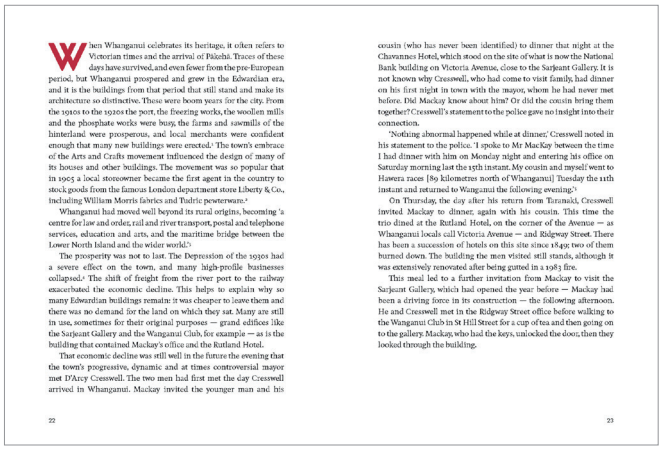

When Whanganui celebrates its heritage, it often refers to Victorian times and the arrival of Pākehā. Traces of these days have survived, and even fewer from the pre-European period, but Whanganui prospered and grew in the Edwardian era, and it is the buildings from that period that still stand and make its architecture so distinctive. These were boom years for the city. From the 1910s to the 1930s the port, the freezing works, the woollen mills and the phosphate works were busy, the farms and sawmills of the hinterland were prosperous, and local merchants were confident enough that many new buildings were erected.[1] The town's embrace of the Arts and Crafts movement influenced the design of many of its houses and other buildings. The movement was so popular that in 1905 a local storeowner became the first agent in the country to stock goods from the famous London department store Liberty & Co., including William Morris fabrics and Tudric pewterware.[2]

Whanganui had moved well beyond its rural origins, becoming 'a centre for law and order, rail and river transport, postal and telephone services, education and arts, and the maritime bridge between the Lower North Island and the wider world.'[3]

The prosperity was not to last. The Depression of the 1930s had a severe effect on the town, and many high-profile businesses collapsed.[4] The shift of freight from the river port to the railway exacerbated the economic decline. This helps to explain why so many Edwardian buildings remain: it was cheaper to leave them and there was no demand for the land on which they sat. Many are still in use, sometimes for their original purposes — grand edifices like the Sarjeant Gallery and the Whanganui Club, for example — as is the building that contained Mackay's office and the Rutland Hotel.

That economic decline was still well in the future the evening that the town's progressive, dynamic and at times controversial mayor met D'Arcy Cresswell. The two men had first met the day Cresswell arrived in Whanganui. Mackay invited the younger man and his cousin (who has never been identified) to dinner that night at the Chavannes Hotel, which stood on the site of what is now the National Bank building on Victoria Avenue, close to the Sarjeant Gallery. It is not known why Cresswell, who had come to visit family, had dinner on his first night in town with the mayor, whom he had never met before. Did Mackay know about him? Or did the cousin bring them together? Cresswell's statement to the police gave no insight into their connection.

'Nothing abnormal happened while at dinner,' Cresswell noted in his statement to the police. 'I spoke to Mr MacKay between the time I had dinner with him on Monday night and entering his office on Saturday morning last the 15th instant. My cousin and myself went to Hawera races [89 kilometres north of Whanganui] Thursday the 11th instant and returned to Wanganui the following evening.'[5]

On Thursday, the day after his return from Taranaki, Cresswell invited Mackay to dinner, again with his cousin. This time the trio dined at the Rutland Hotel, on the corner of the Avenue — as Whanganui locals call Victoria Avenue — and Ridgway Street. There has been a succession of hotels on this site since 1849; two of them burned down. The building the men visited still stands, although it was extensively renovated after being gutted in a 1983 fire.

This meal led to a further invitation from Mackay to visit the Sarjeant Gallery, which had opened the year before — Mackay had been a driving force in its construction — the following afternoon. He and Cresswell met in the Ridgway Street office before walking to the Wanganui Club in St Hill Street for a cup of tea and then going on to the gallery. Mackay, who had the keys, unlocked the door, then they looked through the building.

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Whanganui's main canal ward, Victoria Avenue, in the early 1920s. Alexander Turnbull Library, PAColl-7142-046210-G

# 3. THE TRIAL

# 8. LONDON

On Thursday 3 June 1926, exactly one month after welcoming the Prince of Wales to Whanganui, Charles Mackay arrived at Mount Eden Prison in Auckland. The photograph taken the next day shows him wearing an undershirt and a worn jacket. His formerly well-kept walrus moustache has been shaved off, his face is covered in stubble and his once close-cropped hair is longer and unkempt.[1] At first glance, the image may seem to show a broken man, as in many ways he was, but in his gaze it is possible to read other emotions. There is determination there — he is not defeated by his change in fortune — and there is also, surely, some relief.

He was coming to a very tough place. As a controller-general of prisons wrote in 1926, 'The smell, Godstrewth, I can remember it to this day! Of human bodies, it was dreadful. Stink of unwashed sweat and all that sort of damn thing . . . you go into a cell, find a little window looking up to the sky and a concrete floor. You'd just think you were in your tomb. It was dreadful.'[2]

For any inmate in a New Zealand prison in these years, letters were a lifeline. Mackay, with his educated background and family support, used them to reach people, and bring the world — in the form of magazines, books and newspapers — to his cell. In 1920, a hard labour prisoner could receive and send two letters within one week from the date of their conviction, and then one letter every eight weeks — provided their conduct and industry had been good in the preceding month.[3] Shortly after he arrived at Mount Eden, the restriction on the number of letters Mackay could send and receive via his mother and siblings was removed. This let him get letters to others he was not allowed to correspond with: his family (mostly his main correspondent, his sister Jean) would pass these on and act on his requests. Once the rules were changed in 1925, Mackay was permitted five letters a month.

Prison regulations also governed the content of letters, all of which went through the hands of the gaoler or controlling officer. Prisoners

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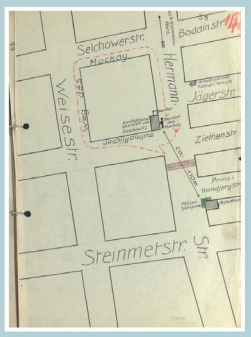
Charles Mackay's prison photograph, taken on his arrival at Mount Eden and showing how far he had fallen, from mayor to convict. Archives New Zealand, J, Acc W2636, 1920/31121




A map drawn as part of the police investigation into Mackay's death. The words 'Standort des Mackay' show where he was shot. The arrow shows the location of the sniper. Geheimes Staatsarchiva PK, I. HA Rep. 219 Prowian State Criminal Police Office, Nr. 53

killed by a Japanese sniper's bullet in Shanghai, as he stood on the platform of a Chinese water tower, peering out over the Japanese lines. Like Mackay before him, Phillip Stephens was killed doing his duty as a newsman, trying to find out whether there was anything new to report.'[1]

Even before Delmer's first story about Mackay's death appeared in the *Express*, he was taking action to put pressure on the Berlin police. At 1 p.m. in London, just over 12 hours after Mackay had been shot, Delmer, or another representative of the paper, contacted the Foreign Office. A note from a diplomat in the file gives an idea of the tenor of the call: 'It was clear that the Sunday Express would make a "headline story" of this [Mackay's death] and would accuse us of apathy if we had no comment.'[2] Within the hour, the Foreign Office sent a telegram to the British ambassador in Berlin, Sir Horace Rumbold: 'Daily *Express* inform us that C. E. Mackay, one of their correspondents, was shot today in street riot. Please report facts.'[3]

The embassy confirmed the story, adding that 'the police state that Mackay had already received warning to leave the scene of the disorders'.[4] This was a reference to a statement circulated by the police to German newspapers that Mackay was shot dead at 9.30 p.m. Unfortunately for the police, this could not be true, as Delmer told his readers the next day in the front-page story in the *Sunday Express*: 'At 9.10 p.m. Mackay was having a bite of supper — the last he was ever to take — at my flat in the Victoriastrasse, twenty minutes by motor-car from the Neuköln [sic] area . . . Mackay had no intention of entering the danger zone. If he did enter it it was by an accident.'[5]

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Kotaripiko, the Duncan family homestead, was located across the river from the town centre in what is now Whanganui East. This photograph was taken in 1911. *Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection, Josephine Duncan collection, 2008.60.345*

Isabel and Charles Mackay's son Duncan Mackay, photographed not long before he died of diphtheria, aged two years and eight months. *Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection, Josephine Duncan collection, 2008.60.309*

The bridesmaids at Isabel Duncan and Charles Mackay's wedding on 20 January 1904, wearing bonnets decorated with ostrich feathers. From left, cousins Muriel Addenbrook, Winifred Montgomerie and Beryl Addenbrook. Photograph by F. J. Denton, 1904. *Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection, 2011.52*

Isabel Duncan, photographed in 1903, a year before her marriage to Charles Mackay. *Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection, Josephine Duncan collection, 2008.60.310*

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