

DOWNFALL

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The destruction of Charles Mackay

PAUL DIAMOND



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FOREWORD

harles Mackay, the man who defined what it meant to be homosexual for New Zealand's newspaper readers during the 1920s, has been an underappreciated figure in our history until now. Paul Diamond's *Downfall* drags him out of the shadows and puts him firmly under the spotlight.

In multi-layered and intricate detail, *Downfall* recounts the high drama of a shooting, revelations of blackmail, and debates about forbidden sexuality. Diamond reveals Mackay, one time mayor of Whanganui, to be a complex character whose life was profoundly shaped by local politics and rivalries, familial dissolution and disgrace.

In 1914 he sought a cure for his homosexuality and quietly consulted a taxi-driver-turned-metaphysician, who offered his patients autosuggestive therapies and a bit of hypnotism. In prison, after his conviction for shooting the returned soldier D'Arcy Cresswell, Mackay taught Esperanto to his fellow inmates and helped them with their writing — but he was an imperfect prisoner with a pugilistic streak. He hid contraband in the library where he worked, threatened a warden, and fought with another prisoner in the yard during parade.

Mackay left the country after his release and followed in the footsteps of others who escaped the confines of their homeland. Europe was a far cry from provincial New Zealand. Mackay slowly

recovered his equilibrium among London's social occasions, galleries and ballets, and he knew all about the men cruising in St James's Park and Trafalgar Square. He even found a Buckingham Palace guardsman of his own — a 'bit of scarlet', in the argot of the time.

The bustling queer world of Berlin, a city with an active homosexual rights movement, must have seemed astonishing to Mackay. He lived in the homosexual district, where rent boys hung out in the cabarets and bars, cadged cigarettes and arranged assignations. Even though his life in Berlin came to a sudden, shocking end, Mackay's move to the city had allowed him to stretch his wings.

Charles Mackay's story speaks to the present as well as the past. He steps out of the public record like an Oscar Wilde figure of the 1920s, persecuted by polite society, exposed by the press and locked away in jail. But when he sought out a cure for his 'homo-sexual obsessions', he took part in an early version of the conversion therapies banned in New Zealand as recently as 2022.

And Mackay's determination to build a new life for himself, travelling and seeking out fresh opportunities, is a path yet trodden by a great many queer people. Charles Mackay lived his life in a very different time to our own, but his odyssey has considerable significance in the twenty-first century.

Chris Brickell
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INTRODUCTION

In German, a ‘Spurensuche’ is a search for traces, usually of forensic evidence at a crime scene, but also for traces in history. This book is my story of the search for signs of what, in 1920, was dubbed the ‘Wanganui Sensation’ — when Charles Mackay, the mayor of Whanganui, shot soldier-poet Walter D’Arcy Cresswell.

I first read about the shooting in a 1997 anthology of gay writing,¹ and in 2004 started work with a colleague on a radio documentary that became this book. I retraced the steps of Mackay and Cresswell, starting in ‘Pretty, Prosperous, Progressive’ Whanganui, the elegant river town where the two men met. I followed Mackay to New Plymouth, site of a prison then set aside for homosexual men. I also travelled to London, where both Cresswell and Mackay lived, and visited the sites where they met other men.

Finally, I went to Berlin, to the street corner where Mackay was fatally shot in the infamous Blutmai (Bloody May) fighting in 1929. Along with newspapers and books about the 1920s, I have pored over the archival traces of both men and their families — papers, letters, photos and newspapers — in libraries and archives. I have met people whose memories stretched back to the 1920s and listened to oral history interviews.

Along the way I have found evidence left behind by Mackay and Cresswell, what Peter Wells described as the ‘dropped hairpins’ in between the cracks.² Just as the ‘Spuren’ or forensic samples found

in a German crime scene are used to solve a crime, these fragments of homosexual lives, which escaped self-censorship and purges by others, tell us about same-sex love at a time when it was outlawed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Whanganui is used for contemporary references but in 1920 the town was known as Wanganui, and this form features in quoted historical sources.

Terms describing homosexuality have also changed. 'Homosexual' was in the 1920s used only by the medical profession. In the years before decriminalisation, the word had a different meaning from today, and was sometimes conflated with 'pervert' or 'pederast'. 'Gay' did not mean homosexual until later in the twentieth century and is used only when referring to this period. 'Queer', employed to describe homosexuals and homosexuality in the 1920s, has been reclaimed by gay people, and also appears in this book.

PROLOGUE: DEATH IN BERLIN

About 20 minutes before midnight, a taxi makes its way down Neukölln's long main street, Hermannstraße, heading into a section of Berlin cordoned off because of fighting between police and communist protesters. Except for a few permitted people, no traffic, not even bicycles, is allowed on the normally busy street, which is eerily quiet, apart from the recurring sound of gunshots. The streetlights have been shot out during the fighting, so unless a police searchlight illuminates a building it is also darker than usual. Barricades made up of cobblestones, broken concrete, wood and other debris mark the battle lines between police and protesters.

When it can go no further along Hermannstraße because of the barricades, the taxi turns into a side street, Herrfurthstraße, stopping just before a set of police barricades. A man gets out. He is tall, in his early fifties, with greying hair and a prominent nose. He is wearing spectacles with dark horn rims, a soft grey hat and a small angular wristwatch with a narrow strap. He carries a large-format foreign newspaper. The man doffs his hat and introduces himself to the police, who tell him to go away. When the taxi driver gets out of the car to demand payment, he, too, is ordered to leave.

After his requests to go beyond the barricades are rebuffed, the man continues along Herrfurthstraße and walks around the block, re-

emerging on Hermannstraße. By now he has been joined by several other people. Suddenly, police posted in doorways start yelling: 'Clear the streets! Go into the houses! Go around the corner!' Others surrounding the man move into a doorway, but he stands in front of the windows of the Hirschowitz clothing shop on the corner, just before the barricade.

Even as shooting starts in the street, the man remains immobile. A shot goes into the glass behind him, followed by several others that hit other windows. He continues to stand there. A shot from a police sniper on the opposite corner, about 110 metres away, hits him. He lurches forward, then convulses and falls back.¹

After a few minutes the shooting ends and a police medical officer rushes to the man, who is lying on his back, his head towards Hermannstraße. At first no external wounds are obvious, but when the officer turns him onto his stomach and draws his coat and waistcoat over his head, he sees a large patch of blood on the man's back. His pupils are glassy and there is no pulse. He is dead.

Other police summon a taxi driver, who has also seen what happened. With difficulty, they put the man into the car, but as it is about to drive off an ambulance arrives and the body is put on a stretcher and taken to the mortuary at Buckow Hospital.

At this stage, all the police know is that the man is a journalist and that his name is Charles Mackay. They do not know that he is the former mayor of a town in New Zealand called Whanganui, and a distinguished lawyer, and that he lost his family, his career and his reputation because of another shooting nearly a decade before.

Ridgeway Street, Whanganui, looking south towards Cooks Gardens, photographed around 1915. Charles Mackay's legal office was in Norfolk Chambers (the building in the middle of the block on left). He shot D'Arcy Cresswell in a different office, on the same side of the street but behind where the photographer would have stood to take this shot. *Auckland Libraries Heritage Collection, 35-R1684*



RIDGEWAY ST. WHANGAUI F.G.R. 4780

1. RIDGWAY ST



It is five minutes to one on a Saturday afternoon in May 1920 in the town centre of Whanganui.¹ Engineer Colin Cameron is standing on the back of a lorry when he hears shots being fired from the first floor of a two-storey wooden building on Ridgway Street, the town's main commercial thoroughfare, which runs parallel to the Whanganui River.

A chair then crashes through a window and lands on the pavement, scattering glass. Cameron looks up at the window, where a man appears. This is Walter D'Arcy Cresswell, a 24-year-old returned soldier who lives in the South Island town of Timaru but is in Whanganui visiting relatives. Cameron and his father George, standing nearby, hear Cresswell shout, 'Help! I have been shot!', and see him struggling with an older man. This is 44-year-old barrister Charles Mackay, the mayor of Whanganui. The pair disappear from view and a further four or five shots are heard.

Colin Cameron enters the building and runs up the stairs with Sydney Sykes, a labourer. The stairs open onto a landing. To the right is an open corridor with a wooden balustrade. There is a door near the landing and another off the corridor, from which Cresswell emerges, holding a revolver. Sykes takes it from him.

'Mr Mackay has shot me,' Cresswell tells Cameron and Sykes. 'Get a car and take me to a doctor.'

Mackay appears behind Cresswell. 'I accidentally shot him while I was demonstrating an automatic revolver,' he says.

With Mackay and Sykes following, Colin Cameron helps Cresswell halfway down the stairs. He and his father then get Cresswell to the bottom of the stairs, which open directly onto the street. There they lay him down on the footpath, Sykes and Colin Cameron supporting his head. George Cameron, who has a notebook, is trying to copy down what Cresswell is saying. Mackay remains on the stairs about a yard away, between Sykes and George Cameron.

'I am dying,' Cresswell tells Cameron. 'I feel I am going. Give my love to my mother.'

‘If you think you are dying you had better tell us all you know,’ says Sykes.

‘I discovered a scandal and Mr Mackay shot me,’ Cresswell replies.

‘I accidentally shot him while showing him the revolver,’ says Mackay.

‘It was not an accident. I was shot,’ Cresswell replies, and then lapses into unconsciousness.

When police constables John McMullin and David Wilson arrive, Mackay tells them the shooting was an accident and gives himself up. After handing the gun to McMullin, Wilson goes upstairs to Mackay’s office to phone for a doctor. An ambulance arrives and takes Cresswell away. Sykes also heads upstairs to Mackay’s office, where he finds the mayor putting papers into a safe and turning the key. Sykes leaves the office and McMullin goes upstairs, where he meets Mackay on the landing.

The pair go back into the office, which is in a state of disarray. Mackay’s high-backed chair is lying on the floor, the window behind his table, which faces onto the street, is broken, and there is shattered glass on the floor. Mackay explains that he was showing Cresswell his revolver when it went off by mistake. The young man then fell against the window and broke the glass, he says. When McMullin asks, ‘How did the chair get outside?’, Mackay replies, ‘What chair?’

McMullin instructs Mackay to lock up his office, then hands him, and the revolver, over to another police officer, Sergeant James Reid, who takes Mackay to the police station, around the corner from Ridgway Street.

At the station, Mackay again insists, this time to Senior Sergeant Thomas Bourke, that the shooting was an accident, and says he fears for Cresswell’s life: ‘Sergeant, I shot a young man through the chest. I believe he will die.’ Bourke tells him the Camerons reported hearing the disturbance in the office before the shots were fired, and then seeing the chair falling from the window onto the street.

Soon after this, Bourke goes to Mackay's office, where he finds five photographs of naked women in a locked drawer of the office table. He searches unsuccessfully for the resignation letter Mackay told him he had written. He finds four revolver bullets: two in Mackay's chair, one at the back of some books and a bookcase on a wall and one at the back of the roll-top desk. One bullet has gone through the wall into the next room and the other into some books.

Back at the station Bourke charges Mackay with the attempted murder of Walter D'Arcy Cresswell.

'I understand, Sergeant,' is Mackay's reply.

In Whanganui, the first report of the shooting appeared two days afterwards:

A PAINFUL SENSATION.

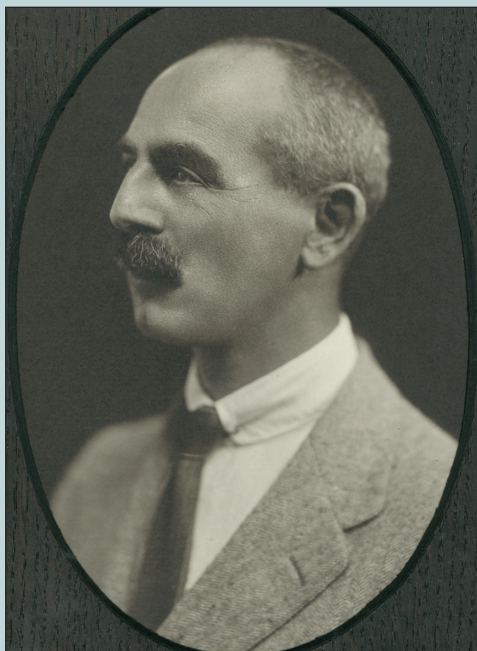
YOUNG MAN SERIOUSLY WOUNDED.

MR C. E. MACKAY UNDER ARREST.

A painful sensation was caused on Saturday afternoon when it became known that a returned soldier, Walter D'Arcy Cresswell, aged 24 years, had been admitted to Wanganui Hospital suffering from a bullet in the right breast and Mackay, the Mayor, was implicated in the affair.²

The brief *Wanganui Chronicle* article summarised the eyewitness accounts of the shooting and Mackay's arrest and remand in custody. It also noted that Cresswell's parents had arrived from Tīmaru the previous day, and that their son was progressing satisfactorily in Wanganui Hospital. The bullet, believed to be in his lung, had not been located and an operation would probably be necessary. Updates about Cresswell's condition — steadily improving — were the only

RIGHT
Charles Mackay,
photographed in
1919. Whanganui
Regional Museum,
1986.51.11



LEFT
Walter D'Arcy
Cresswell,
photographed in
1921, a year after the
shooting. Alexander
Turnbull Library,
PAColl-5543-05

news reported about the case, as both Whanganui newspapers were observing a suppression request from Mackay's lawyers.

Newspapers elsewhere, such as the *Te Puke Times*, were more forthcoming:

A WANGANUI SENSATION
MAYOR OF TOWN ARRESTED
RETURNED SOLDIER WOUNDED
Wanganui, May 15

The greatest and most painful sensation Wanganui has experienced for some considerable time, was the shooting affray in Ridgway Street this afternoon, when Mr C. E. Mackay, solicitor and Mayor of the borough, shot and badly wounded a returned soldier named Darcy Cresswell who hails from Timaru. The police are very reticent over the affair, but it is stated that an altercation took place in Mr Mackay's office, and the crashing of a chair through a window preceded the report of a gun.³

Although the facts of the case were 'shrouded in mystery', reported the tabloid *N.Z. Truth*, it was 'known that Mackay entertained the wounded man at dinner at a local hotel' the week before the shooting, and that the pair had had a big fight before the shot was fired.⁴ The paper also mentioned Mackay's row with the Returned Soldiers' Association (RSA) over the visit of the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, 12 days earlier, on 3 May, and noted that the mayor had been in poor health since an accident the previous year.

Cresswell had arrived at Wanganui Hospital with a small bullet wound in the right side of his chest, about level with his heart. Although his condition was pronounced serious, he improved rapidly, according to Medical Superintendent Dr Herbert Hutson.⁵ Cresswell

was unable to appear in court to give evidence, but was well enough to give the police a statement.⁶

Exhibit B in the eventual case *Police v. C. E. Mackay* is a three-page typed document, recording Cresswell's account of events from when he arrived in Whanganui on Monday 10 May until the shooting a few days later. Cresswell apparently dictated the statement from his hospital bed but did not, as was normal police practice when there was a risk of a witness not surviving, sign or date it. Had he been physically unable to do so, there would normally have been a signed note from an inspector or a 'professional' person explaining the absence of a signature. Cresswell was also able to draw a sketch plan of Mackay's office.

On 26 May, the day before the trial, Mackay asked to see Whanganui police inspector Charles William Hendry, who, arriving at the gaol, found Mackay with his lawyer, William Treadwell, the Whanganui borough solicitor.⁷ Hendry handed Treadwell Cresswell's statement for Mackay to read. After speaking with Treadwell in private, Mackay returned 20 minutes later, having, at the inspector's suggestion, initialled each page and added this endorsement: 'I have read the above statement and as far as it relates to my own acts & deeds I admit the statement to be substantially true.'⁸


The next day — 12 days after the shooting — Inspector Hendry read Cresswell's statement at Mackay's trial for attempted murder.

The Rutland Hotel, on the corner of Victoria Avenue and Ridgway Street, where Charles Mackay, D'Arcy Cresswell and Cresswell's cousin had dinner two days before the shooting. Alexander Turnbull Library, 1/1-07742-G



2. BLACKMAIL



hen 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 1920s 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 Wanganui 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] Tuesday the 11th instant and returned to Wanganui the following evening.'⁵

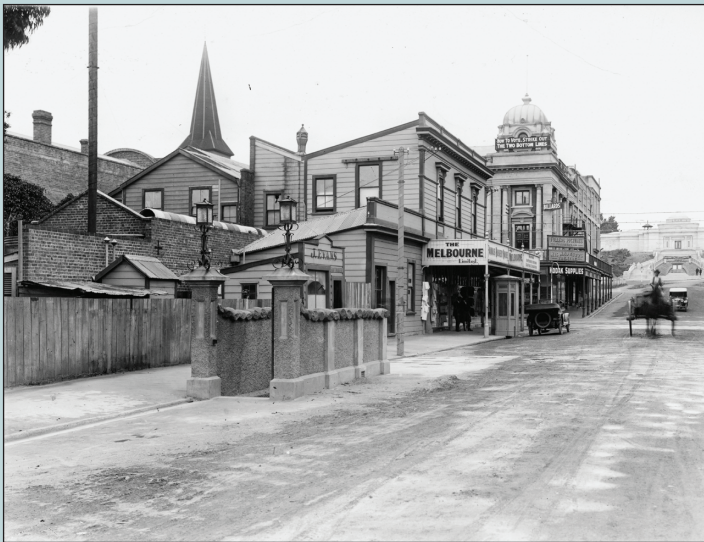
On Thursday, the day after his return from Taranaki, Cresswell invited Mackay to dinner, again with his cousin. This time the trio dined at the Rutland Hotel, on the corner of the Avenue — as Whanganui locals call Victoria Avenue — and Ridgway Street. There has been a succession of hotels on this site 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.

Ridgway Street is now part of the city's heritage precinct, full of old buildings in various states of repair. Today, a park opposite the Rutland marks where a group of buildings burned down in the 1990s; one of them contained what had been Mackay's legal premises. For some reason, he met Cresswell in a different office, on the same side of the street but further along, in the next block. It is not clear why Mackay was using two offices in addition to his mayoral office in the council building. He was apparently having trouble paying his bills around this time, and this may have prompted the shift to an office further from the Avenue,⁶ in a wooden two-storey building owned by estate agent, sharebroker and valuer Charles Duigan, who was keenly interested in the Sarjeant Gallery, and who later served as an honorary curator. Perhaps Duigan let Mackay use the office for a reduced rent. He had two rooms on the first floor: his faced the street and a smaller room, connected by a door, was occupied by his secretary.

These days, what was then known as Duigan's Building is one of three owned by Meteor Print, which has been there since the 1940s. The original building had sets of offices on the ground floor; upstairs was a space intended to be used as an auction room and offices designed for solicitors, complete with a strongroom. Mackay's office, used for many years as the Meteor staff tearoom, is remarkably well preserved; only the door between the former office and an anteroom is missing. On the opposite, Queens Park, side of the street is a concrete-block substation which, in 1920, was occupied by a carrier/taxi stand. The office was also diagonally opposite the former public library,⁷ now used by the Whanganui Repertory Theatre.

The Wanganui Club is a large, two-storey neo-Georgian brick building in St Hill Street, one street over from the Avenue and about 10 minutes' walk from Mackay's office. Designed, like others of its ilk throughout the country, to emulate an English gentlemen's club, it originally opened as a farmers' club in the Avenue. In 1915 it had



ABOVE

The Wanganui Club, on St Hill Street. Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection, photograph by Allen Russ, c. 1915–1920s, 2020.32.64

BELOW

The underground urinals in Maria Place, Whanganui, photographed some time after 1919. The Sarjeant Gallery is in the distance at right. Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection, 1800.1227

moved to this much grander building, which had a lounge, a billiard room with four tables, sitting rooms, a dining room, committee rooms, card rooms, a secretary's room and a 'strangers' room', where women, who were not allowed in the club, would wait for their husbands.⁸ Upstairs were bedrooms to accommodate members from out of town. The staff and kitchen quarters were at the back of the building, which had its own electricity plant.

To get to the gallery after leaving the club, Mackay and Cresswell turned left and then left again into Maria Place, at which point the gallery would have loomed up in front of them. They then crossed the Avenue. On their way, they passed the town's underground urinals, which still exist but were closed around the time of the Second World War, following complaints that they were 'detrimental to the best interests of the business premises in the neighbourhood'.⁹

As in other urban areas in the 1920s, the urinals were a meeting place for men seeking sex with other men. Case files for indecency cases in the town testify to the existence of what British historian Matt Houlbook has termed a network of sexual opportunity.¹⁰ Men would meet in bars or on the street but, unable to go back to boarding houses where they might be seen by nosy landladies, they would go to a public place like the urinals or, in Whanganui's case, Queens Park.

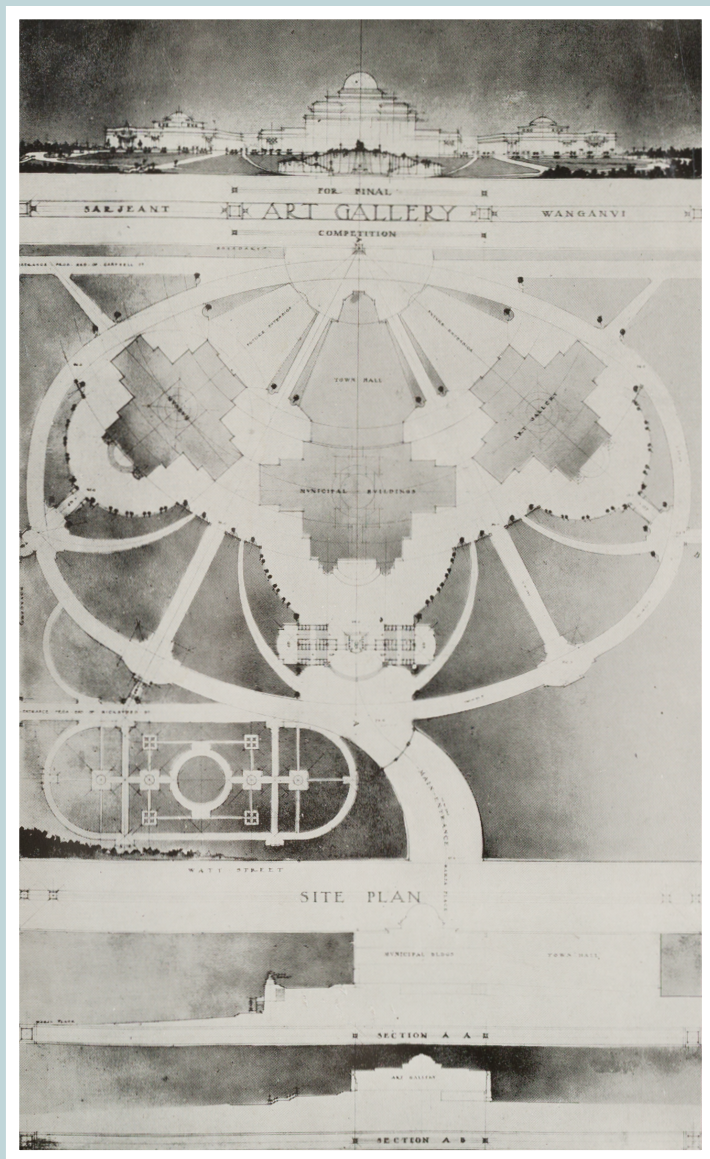
The Sarjeant Gallery, which dominates Queens Park, has been called 'the mausoleum on the hill'. The nickname is apt: the squat, white, domed stone structure does look like a tomb. It sits on the highest point in the town centre — a hill known to Māori as Pukenuamu before it was renamed Queens Park by European settlers — and is visible from all over the city. Even more impressive, as visitors approach, is the building's alignment with Maria Place on a north-south axis that connects Cooks Gardens/Patupuhou, the other high point in the city, with Queens Park/Pukenuamu, in what has been described as

one of the most important planned streetscapes in the country.¹¹

It was not surprising that Mackay had a key to the gallery; he had been a driving force in its construction. The gallery was funded by a bequest from Henry Sarjeant, a wealthy local farmer who died in 1912, and was opened by Prime Minister William Massey on 6 September 1919. Building a gallery during the late stages of the Great War, when labour and materials were scarce, was a considerable achievement. In 1915 the gallery committee had recommended that the council appoint Christchurch architect Samuel Hurst Seager to judge a national competition for a suitable design. By June 1916, four of the 33 entrants had been selected to develop their ideas.¹²

In October, an entry from Dunedin architect Edmund Anscombe was named the winner. It was, in fact, the work of Anscombe's artiled pupil, 21-year-old Donald Hosie, who, because he was not yet registered, could not take on the commission.¹³ Hosie was called up for military service in November 1916, but he kept working on the drawings over the summer before going into camp. As mayor, Mackay wrote to the Featherston Military Camp, arguing it was absolutely essential that Hosie be allowed to continue with the drawings.¹⁴ He then met with the commandant of the New Zealand Defence Forces, Major General Alfred Robin, who granted Hosie 12 days' leave to do so. In March 1917 Hosie embarked with the Otago Infantry Regiment. He had been in Europe for only three months when he was killed at Passchendaele on 12 October 1917. His body was never found.

And so the gallery, which Seager had specified in his competition conditions was to be a memorial,¹⁵ did end up being a poignant monument to the losses in the Great War; at the opening, Mackay noted Hosie's death.¹⁶ Seager had also instructed that particular attention be paid to the interior lighting to provide a soft indirect light. The system used has been the prototype for lighting in similar buildings in many parts of New Zealand.¹⁷



This site plan from the winning design for the Sarjeant Gallery — showing the gallery alongside the municipal buildings, the town hall and the museum — was printed in a competition booklet found in a time capsule in a gallery wall during strengthening work of the Sarjeant Gallery in 2021.

Collection of the Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui

Mackay remained closely involved in running the gallery and sourcing material for exhibitions from New Zealand and overseas, including an important collection of several hundred Great War cartoons and posters.¹⁸

By May 1920, when Mackay was showing the gallery to D'Arcy Cresswell, the Sarjeant Gallery had been open for only eight months and did not have much of a collection; the initial exhibitions were of borrowed items. On permanent display already, though, was a marble, three-quarter-sized copy of Raffaello Romanelli's *The Wrestlers*, the original of which resides in Florence's Uffizi Gallery.

Ellen Neame, the much younger widow of Henry Sarjeant, and her second husband John Neame, the art master at Wanganui Collegiate, whom she married less than a year after her first husband died, had bought the sculpture in 1914 while in Florence.¹⁹ At that time buying copies, either reproductions or plaster casts, was commonplace and respectable, a way of allowing visitors to see famous works. *The Wrestlers*, itself a Roman marble copy of a lost third-century Greek bronze, has been extensively reproduced. The one other copy in New Zealand is in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, which was presented to the gallery in 1928 by wealthy Dunedin businessman and philanthropist David Theomin.²⁰ Whanganui could not compete with the size and wealth of Dunedin, but the Neames clearly had similar aspirations for the Sarjeant. John Neame considered *The Wrestlers* as perhaps one of the six most famous works of Greek art in the world.²¹

The Wrestlers is also famous among homosexual men, who have admired the entwined naked male bodies for their homoerotic beauty and association with what the Romans called 'the way of the Greeks'. As Robert Aldrich has explained, 'Greek love' was the most clearly articulated and influential homosexual subculture before the words 'homosexual' or 'subculture' were invented.²² Homosexual men experienced it both by travelling to southern Europe and through the art and literature of the period. This was important at a time when



Prime Minister William Massey speaking at the opening of the Sarjeant Gallery on 6 September 1919. *Whanganui Regional Museum, 2022.2.1*

homosexuality was condemned. During the twentieth century, this classical focus was overtaken by the development of new subcultures in places such as Berlin, New York and San Francisco, but in 1920 cultured men like Mackay and Cresswell would have recognised the coded significance of *The Wrestlers*.

According to Cresswell's statement to the police, after the gallery visit, things turned nasty:

When we left the Art Gallery we went to Mr MacKay's office in Ridgway Street and while there I discovered a certain disgusting feature in Mr MacKay's character, I purposely encouraged him to display his qualities in his nature which I expected, he also showed me several photographs of nude women. On making that discovery I told him that I had led him on, on purpose to make sure of his dirty intentions, and I told him also amongst a lot of other candid things that he must resign the Mayoralty [sic] at once.

How did Cresswell encourage Mackay? Did he make some sort of pass at the older man? Did the men have sex?²³

Mackay showing Cresswell photos of naked women is a strange segue from viewing a statue of naked men wrestling, but this was not an untypical way of discovering if someone was gay in an era when men were having sex with each other before any modern notion of a gay identity had emerged. If mistaken, the man with the photos could say, 'Ah well, I fuck them all.'²⁴ The photos could also be used to arouse the other man, which would fit a scenario of offering sex for money. The photos also suggest that Mackay might have thought he had a chance of seducing Cresswell.²⁵ If so, it was to be a terrible miscalculation.