



MACKAY, CHARLES EVAN.

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# Stranger than fiction

Paul Diamond talks to *Sarah Lang* about a homosexual mayor, coming out himself, and a year in Berlin.

In 1920, Charles Mackay, who was married with children, had been Wanganui's mayor for 12 years. It shook the town when he shot and was charged with attempting to murder a handsome young poet, D'Arcy Cresswell. Turns out Cresswell was blackmailing the mayor, threatening to reveal that Mackay was homosexual, and had made advances to him. Back then, men found guilty of 'sodomy' potentially faced being flogged and imprisoned with hard labour.

Mackay was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment with hard labour for the attempted murder. Wanganui renamed Mackay Street Jellicoe Street, removed Mackay's portrait from the council chambers, and chiselled out his name from the Sarjeant Gallery's foundation stone.

A condition of Mackay's release after six years was that he leave the country. He moved to England then Berlin, working as a language teacher and a reporter. Mackay was covering Berlin's 1929 'May Day Riots' – clashes between Communists and police – when he was mistakenly shot dead by a policeman.

The 100-year anniversary of Mackay's conviction falls in 2020. You can read all about him in a book by Wellingtonian Paul Diamond – when he finishes it, that is. A formal, affable, impeccably dressed man, Paul shakes my hand when we meet, then inclines his head in a tiny bow. I can imagine him sharing whiskey and cigars with Dickens, Thackeray, and their circle of publishers and journalists.

Paul's been working on a book about Mackay for 15 years – and counting. 'That's a bit embarrassing!' But it's not that he has been idle. Over those years he's worked for Radio New Zealand, and as a government historian, and has published three books. For 10 years, he's

been 'Curator, Māori' at the Alexander Turnbull Library: a research library housed within (and, technically, a division of) the National Library.

The Turnbull was established in 1920 after merchant Alexander Turnbull died, bequeathing to his country tens of thousands of books, magazines, newspapers, maps, photographs, paintings, drawings, coins, and other artefacts. The Turnbull now has millions of items (largely through donations and bequests), 85 staff members, and 16 collections. 'As Curator, Māori I do research, help people do research, work with curators of specific collections, create exhibitions, connect people – and I've written a book on [depictions of] Māori in cartoons.' (The NZ Cartoon Archive is part of the Turnbull collection.)

In 2004, Paul and a Radio New Zealand colleague stumbled on Mackay's story, and made a radio programme about him. Unfortunately, Mackay's 90-something daughter didn't want to talk.

Intrigued, Paul began research for what will be his fourth book. 'Not because it's a sensationalist story, but because it resonates. He was a journalist, I was a journalist; he was gay, I'm gay; he spent time in Berlin, I've spent time in Berlin. I'm following his footsteps in some weird way.' (Hopefully without firearms being involved.)

Mackay was one of the first New Zealand men to come out publicly (if unwillingly). 'Mackay told the court he'd been treated for homosexuality – likely through hypnosis. Most Wanganui people were more shocked by him being gay than they were by the shooting.'

Paul, 51, recently took 11 months' leave from the Turnbull to finish the book, thanks to the Creative NZ Berlin Writer's Residency: use of a

flat, \$40,000, plus a stipend for expenses. Paul delayed the residency for two years because he got prostate cancer. 'I had my prostate removed. I'm fine now. I think more men should talk about prostate cancer.'

Paul has visited Berlin seven times since 2007 – for research (producing one major find: Mackay's will), and to continue learning German with support from the Goethe-Institut (which promotes German language and culture worldwide).

Paul came out aged 27, in 1995. 'Before that, I channelled energy into other things: drama, debating, hockey, enjoying university. I probably wasn't confident enough to be "out" any younger – for instance, to be assertive about safe sex. Those were the AIDS-plague years. But I had my friends' and family's backing. Mum supported me, though she was fearful initially. Her cousin, a nurse, told her about gay men coming to hospital following violent arguments. Mum was a teacher, and said it wouldn't be professional to be "out" as a teacher.' Although New Zealand decriminalised consensual sex between men aged over 16 in 1986, bias still existed in the 1990s. 'I wanted to be a diplomat but thought it'd be impossible.'

1995 was a big year for him. 'I actually came out to the whole city.' Say what? Well, then-*Evening Post* assistant editor Karl du Fresne wrote a column titled 'Here comes the annual look-at-me orgy' about the Devotion gay-pride parade. 'Karl wrote "for every outlandish homosexual of the classic hairdresser variety there's also a homosexual accountant or music professor who's anything but flamboyant". I was a gay accountant, so I wrote a rejoinder for the newspaper. Karl wrote me a gracious letter about us respecting each other's views.'

Paul (Ngāti Hauā, Te Rarawa, and Ngāpuhi), his parents (both teachers) and brother moved from Putaruru to Stokes Valley when Paul was four. 'It took a while to feel comfortable with being Māori. I didn't want to learn te reo at school. When I did a Bachelor of Business Studies, getting a Māori Kupe Scholarship made me identify more as Māori. I did extra papers to

learn te reo. It's funny: because I'm fair-skinned, often [Pakeha] people talk about Māori, not realising I'm Māori, while Māori people say "your te reo's good for a non-Māori."

Paul was an accountant for eight years, for the Treaty of Waitangi Fisheries Commission among others. However, finding himself more interested in writing and history than receipts and spreadsheets, he did a journalism diploma at Wellington Polytechnic, then became a reporter/maker of docos about Māori for Radio New Zealand. Two radio docos were turned into his first two books, one of them on Māori leaders. 'They had to say yes because I'd done their expense claims as an accountant,' he jokes.

Paul then became an oral historian for the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, from 2007 to 2009 running the Vietnam War Oral History Project. This project collected oral interviews with veterans and their families, and created an online digital-history archive for them. Then came the Turnbull job, which draws together his skills and interests.

Paul is lead curator of an exhibition celebrating the Turnbull's centenary. *Pūkana: Te Ihi Te Wehi Te Wana: Moments in Māori Performance* is on until 23 May at the National Library, just downstairs from the Turnbull. It includes tiny, carved 19th-century karetao (puppets), a poster advertising an exhibition of Māori warriors in Edinburgh, and a photo of two girls performing an impromptu haka after the Christchurch attacks. 'I'd like young Māori to come to the exhibition and the Turnbull.'

Do some people wander in not really knowing what the place is about? 'Every day.' Including him, initially. 'I thought this library which you couldn't take anything away from was a bit strange. But I've come to love the place.'

For now, he's enjoying Berlin, despite four-degree temperatures. His partner Richard King will join him this year. 'There's such a variety of gay people and gay life in Berlin,' Paul says. 'It's quite liberating. And I'm determined to finish this book!' ■