

# Poems

Ian Wedde

## *From The Little Ache – a German notebook*

1

*Vergiss deine Tasche nicht*  
'Don't forget your bag'  
my great-grandfather Heinrich August Wedde's  
ghostly admonition  
at Berlin Tegel customs clearance

but I did  
distracted by what might have been  
the irritable clatter in the galley  
where my ancestor was heating soup  
as the *Robin Hood* leaned across an ebb tide  
out of some harbour in Poitou-Charentes  
whose meandering deltas may have reminded him  
of the waterways of his first debouch  
out of Kiel or Hamburg  
a kid with horizons in his eyes  
with Goethe in his kit  
but no idea where he'd be lugging the *Faust*  
my father heard him shouting  
from the bed he took to on pension night  
with a skin-full of schnapps  
at York Terrace, Blenheim.

The same bed where pneumonia  
silenced his *Modersprak*  
after he was pushed into the river  
(some say)  
where he was peacefully fishing  
in 1915  
(because he was German).

How thick is the space  
between what Heinrich had in his bag  
and what he left behind  
or just forgot as it may be  
about the time he jumped ship  
from the *Lammershagen*  
in Wellington harbour in 1875  
making himself scarce up-country  
until such time as he came back  
after a prudent year

with his bag and its frugal contents  
to marry my great-grandmother  
Maria Josephine Catharina Reepen  
of the straight back and forthright gaze?

I recover my bag  
from an amused customs official  
at Berlin's Tegel airport  
and make my way in to the city  
which seems both foreign and not  
perhaps like Heinrich August  
caring little about the difference between what I carry  
and what I don't.

In the courtyard outside my new home  
a chestnut tree drops wads of wet brown leaves  
and I'm only a little tempted by the folly  
of wondering if it forgets them  
for the fresh ones it will grow in spring.

## 10

*Fünf Narren jeden Tag*  
'Five fools every day'  
said the smiling customs official  
when I went to pick up the bag I'd forgotten  
along with most of the German  
I was taught by Robert Lübker  
in 1956 when my brain was young  
and I learned without trying  
but fifty-eight years later  
I remembered enough to reply  
'Und jetzt der sechste'  
and now the sixth  
surprising myself  
as I wheeled my bag out the door.

The last time I saw Robert  
was in 1995 in Hamburg  
he was ninety years old  
and wept politely into the handkerchief he'd prepared  
for that purpose  
as we said goodbye at the station.

He waved the same handkerchief  
as the train pulled out  
which was typical of Professor Lübker's  
philological precision  
as if his handkerchief were language  
capable of various careful deployments.

Likewise his discourse over lunch  
(fresh asparagus and a glass of Riesling)  
which was of Johann Gottlieb Fichte  
and his belief in the social nature of self-knowledge  
which my old teacher explained to me  
in between vigorously chewing  
the way I remember him chewing words  
for example 'Und jetzt der sechste'  
(little bit of spit).

I'm told  
that my great-uncle Rheinhold  
known as Ren or Dick  
born in 1877 in Bute Street Wellington  
the oldest of my grandfather's siblings

lived out his days in Auckland  
in the house of my second cousin Peter  
arriving from the King Country with a cabin trunk  
which he had not forgotten to fill  
with the complete works of Fichte  
and needless to say therefore  
of Kant also  
whose difficult style  
and dense language  
Johann Gottlieb was sometimes accused of mimicking.

In whose bag did those books come ashore  
and where are they now  
and by whom were they forgotten  
and what did my great-grandmother Maria Reepen  
choose to forget  
and Heinrich August  
what did he leave behind  
on a day when someone waved a handkerchief  
from the wharf at Kiel or Hamburg  
as *jetzt der nächste Narr*  
shipped out looking for the horizon  
beyond which he might come to know himself  
among different people?

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*... politisch ohne Vorurteil*  
'political without prejudice'  
was how Johannes Wedde  
'Redakteur der "Burger Zeitung" in Hamburg'  
had described a friend of his  
a local merchant  
in a letter to Friedrich Engels in London  
which Engels had quoted in his letter  
to the Italian socialist Pascale Martignetti  
(London, 21. Mai 1887)  
passing on (from Johannes Wedde)  
the merchant Johannes Paul's request  
for a photograph of Martignetti  
adding  
that the situation for Socialists in Hamburg  
was getting worse by the day  
and further (however)  
that his (Engels') eye was getting better  
'wie es scheint'  
(so it seems)  
but that serious work was out of the question  
and that included 'Thr Manuskript'  
Martignetti's translation of Marx's essay on  
subcontracting and capital.

I pause to brew coffee  
and empty my mind of this historical clutter.

Outside the kitchen window  
sunshine variegates the flickering pale greens  
of the freshly unfurled five-fingered chestnut tree leaves  
that now conceal the nest  
the Elster have finished reinforcing  
where they will soon raise their family.

I watch them come and go  
but the nest I can't see  
has moved into my mind

a 'coactive shadow'  
a ghost  
sharing space with the mysterious photograph  
of the Italian Pascale Martignetti  
negotiated via Engels by my busy cousin  
on behalf of his friend in Hamburg.

Was the man fishing in the Spree  
the ghost of my great-grandfather Heinrich August?

The ghosts are in my mind  
but don't know they are  
which is why I don't believe them  
which is why the fisherman  
gazing at the river's glittering opacity  
opposite Rummelsburg power plant  
didn't turn and address me  
in the Plattdüütsch  
with which he might have uttered  
a final curse  
as the cold water of the Wairau River  
smacked him in his Hun face  
before filling his lungs  
that had sucked up the thick fog  
off Punta Arenas  
the saltmarshy breezes of Poitou-Charentes  
and the blustering seaspray of the Karori Rip  
when his shipmates knew him as  
Heinrich August Wedde  
with one leg crooked from a badly set fracture  
and rumour had it  
with something crooked in his past also  
but not as crooked as the corner he turned  
and was lost to sight  
in a future somewhere south-east of Sydney.

Someone struck his name off the crew list.

Now it comes to mind.

### 36

*The sadness was form, the happiness content.*

*Happiness filled the space of sadness.*

I wasn't thinking about Milan Kundera's unforgettable aphorism  
as I sat in late afternoon sunshine  
on the corner by the Kino bar  
fishing the fluffy Linden blossoms out of my beer

but about my great-grandmother Maria  
a little haunting that made my heart ache.

The ache came back again the next morning  
along with Kundera's aperçu  
as I drank my coffee by the open kitchen window  
after a shower of rain  
had made the chestnut tree's heavy leaves  
droop their five fingers languorously  
in the still air.

First the casting away of leaves in autumn  
then the casting of twiggy shadows  
the casting of blossom  
of shade.

And again  
and again.

What did Maria cast away  
looking out the draughty window  
in Bute Street Wellington  
at the obdurate evergreen of taupata  
and those 'cabbage trees'  
those sky-mops?

And was it happiness  
that filled the space  
her sadness had made for it?

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*'I think I'll let it go'*  
is what my great uncle Frederic Alexander Wedde  
known as Fritz  
the sixth of Maria's eight children  
is reported to have said  
by S. Dutton-Pegram  
the British Vice-Consul in Torreon Mexico  
when told that making a will would cost him \$10

meaning either that he was stingy  
or that he'd drifted beyond the reach of Gedächtnis  
and beyond the thoughts of his seven siblings  
and of his nieces and nephews  
who might have benefitted from a will  
including my father Frederick Albert Wedde  
who shared his uncle's initials  
as well as his wandering ways.

The 1875 Hamburg passenger list of Fritz's mother  
my father's grandmother  
Maria Reepen  
lists Hadersleben (in German) as her place of residence  
Haderslev (in Danish)  
a town passed back and forth  
between the Duchy of Schleswig  
a Danish fief  
and — after the Second Schleswig War in 1864 —  
Prussia and the North German Confederation  
and from 1871 the German Empire  
later returned to Denmark  
by the Schleswig Plebiscite of 1920  
seven years before Maria died  
on 12 June in Kaitieke New Zealand  
it's said while reciting poetry  
whether in Danish or German  
is not within reach of the family's Gedächtnis  
and was buried on 14 June 1927 in Raurimu Cemetery  
near the backblocks farm  
where she ended her days.

She left Hamburg in 1875  
but when did she leave Kiel  
her birthplace and the home of her family  
and go to Haderslev in Denmark?

Her sixth child Fritz left Sydney on the *Guthrie*  
bound for Singapore  
30 June 1906  
and wasn't heard of for fifty years.

He died intestate in his Mexican 'observatory'  
leaving easy pickings for the lawyers of Torreon  
and Eagle Pass Texas  
as well as a terse document  
'A New Hypothesis or Theory of the Universe'  
in which  
above his admonition  
'Please keep this paper  
as it may be of interest sometime in the future'  
I encounter the succinct ghost of his thought

that there are spaces between us  
like those between the astronomical bodies  
he gazed at in Torreon Mexico's  
clear desert sky  
traversed by memory as if by light  
a force-field at once fixed and  
as it were  
intestate.

## 78

### *Plenitude*

the principle of optimism advanced by Gottfried Leibniz  
in his *Théodicée* of 1710  
and fifty years later  
mocked as Panglossianism by Voltaire in *Candide, ou l'Optimisme*  
must have struck a chord with my great uncle Fritz  
the family's mystery man  
a devotee of *Aufklärung*  
since by post from Mexico  
he sent his nephew  
my second cousin Peter  
'a two-volume edition of the essays  
and shorter writings of Leibniz  
modern American translations'.

Fritz's mother  
Peter's grandmother  
my great-grandmother  
Maria Josephine Catharina Wedde

buried in Raurimu cemetery  
14 June 1927  
'last seen alive by certifying doctor' 11 June 1927  
'Senile Arteritis – 6 years'  
'Coronary Stenosis – 3 days'

'Age of each living daughter – 47 43'  
'Age of each living son – 50 48 46 42 39 38'

'Usual occupation, profession or job – Widow'

### 'Mother:

First/given name(s) – Not Recorded  
Surname/family name – Not Recorded  
First/given names at birth – Not Recorded  
Surname/family name at birth – Not Recorded'

### 'Father:

First/given name(s) – Johannis  
Surname/family name – Reepen'

### 'Spouse/Partner:

First/given name(s) – August Henry  
Surname/family name – Wedde'

Steep 'third class country'  
thin volcanic ash soil  
on a skiddy greywacke base  
that her sons cleared of forest  
up in the King Country boondocks

and watched slabs of hill pasture  
slide into the creeks.

Maria was celebrated as a seamstress  
up there in the back country.

No simpering three-quarter studio profile  
in photographs of Maria  
and that direct gaze  
looking past what was left behind  
(her mother's name for instance)  
at a future neither fatuously optimistic  
nor fatalistically pessimistic

a 'plenitude'  
*in der besten aller möglichen Welten*  
the best of all possible worlds

leaving much to be desired  
no doubt  
but not discouraging her son Fritz from his wanderings  
nor her daughters from their learning.

I meant to bring a chestnut  
from the path along Fraenkelufer  
by the Landwehrkanal in Kreuzberg  
where we made our last home in Berlin  
and where in early autumn  
the kids from the nearby Kita  
came in a colourful chattering crocodile  
to collect the glossy nuts  
in red plastic buckets

because I planned to press a chestnut  
into the damp earth  
by the grave of my Urgrossmutter  
Maria Josephine Catharina Reepen  
thinking it might grow into a tree  
*in der besten aller möglichen Welten*

but forgot it

so instead plant in myself the memory  
the coactive shadow  
the ghost  
of the chestnut tree  
through which I watched the seasons pass  
during which words also came and went  
and were sometimes remembered.

*Ian Wedde was New Zealand's poet laureate between 2011–2013; with fourteen collections of poetry to date, he won the New Zealand Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement (for Poetry) in 2014.*

