



BELFAST – BERLIN – BELFAST
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Belfast, where I have lived and worked since 1973, still retains a wall – the ironically named “peace line” – which separates the Protestants of the Shankill Road from the Catholics of the Lower Falls Road. Notwithstanding the “Peace (or, ‘piece by piece’) Process”, it remains a troubled city. Thanks to the Real IRA, the level of security alert in Northern Ireland has been “high” throughout my time at Wiko. Ominously, in April dissident Republicans murdered Catholic police officer Ronan Kerr in Co Tyrone. In July, rioting broke out once again at the Catholic/Protestant interfaces in east and north Belfast. In the ghettos, recession and rising unemployment are playing into the hands of the paramilitaries. It sounds grim and yet, despite it all, the city is a good place to live. What

makes it so is less the spectacular setting and beautiful coast and countryside than the inhabitants' irrepressible and frequently black humour. They shrug off and laugh at what might make others cry.

Nevertheless, after 37 years living and working through bad times and good, it has been great to get away to a city which is putting past divisions behind it. Berlin's past is darker than Belfast's, and reminders of it are omnipresent, but, with the Wall that once divided East from West torn down and old scars fast healing, its present is far brighter. Modern Germany is living proof that time is a great healer. Of course, Berlin is far from beautiful, World War II and the sheer scale of post-war reconstruction made sure of that, but the city is never dull and the eye rarely bored. The ugly invariably provokes a response and beautiful things do exist – Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Elisabeth Church and Dorotheenstädtische Friedhof, his final resting place – even if they take some seeking out. In leafy Grunewald, stark juxtapositions of building styles and periods lend interest to every street. The *Stolpersteine* stop you in your tracks. Wiko's immediate suburban surroundings repay exploration.

Berlin is ten times the size of Belfast and offers more than ten times the cultural opportunities. Consequently, I came to Wiko and Berlin with many aspirations. Culturally, I hoped to hear J. S. Bach and Anton Bruckner performed by experienced German musicians; attend as much opera as possible in a city with three active opera companies, each with a wide repertoire; become better acquainted with the architecture of Schinkel; see something of Berlin's immediate environs; and visit the ancient city of Würzburg on the River Main. Academically, I looked forward to liberation from narrow preoccupations with Research Evaluation Frameworks, performance league tables, research outputs and impacts, and all the tedious and intrusive monitoring which each of these entails plus the opportunity to live and work once again within the kind of inter-disciplinary, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environment from which I had profited so much as a postgraduate at Darwin College, Cambridge. My Wiko project was to write a book. To it I have devoted the greatest part of my time.

The only tickets hard to obtain in Berlin are those for Sir Simon Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Fortunately, Eliahu Inbal conducting the Konzerthausorchester in Bruckner's 5th Symphony and Kent Nagano conducting the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester of Berlin in the same composer's 7th and 9th Symphonies at the Berlin Philharmonie demonstrated that there is no shortage of excellent alternatives. The prospect of hearing the Ulster Orchestra perform these works to this standard in Belfast is

remote. Irish performances of Bach's St. Matthew Passion are less rare, but the RIAS Kammerchor's Eastertime performance of this great work, with Lothar Odinius's crystal-clear enunciation of the words of the evangelist, far exceeded in quality what I might hear at home. For those of us fortunate enough to be facing the performers, not a word or note was lost. The Berlin Philharmonie may have great acoustics, but this is scant consolation for that third of the audience seated to the rear of the platform. It is one of the mysteries of Berlin that a concert hall with such an unsatisfactory seating plan should be so above criticism.

Seating arrangements in Berlin's three opera houses are more conventional. All have unrestricted sightlines and excellent acoustics. The Komische Oper occupies by far the loveliest theatre, with the added benefit of seat-level subtitles in the language of your choice, but the Schillertheater provides a stylish alternative home for the Staatsoper and I even became fond of the stark auditorium of the Deutsche Oper. Lucky Berliners to have such a choice of theatres, operas and productions. Opera in Germany, and certainly in Berlin, is affordable and usually excellent value for money, with singing and playing of a consistently high standard. There is nothing remotely snobby about the audiences and anyone and everyone goes. There is also so much opera that singers can gain experience without overtaxing their voices, as they work up from small roles and houses to big. The main hazard is weird productions at variance with the works being performed, of which Berlin appears to have more than its fair share. Never to be forgotten is the chorus of disapproval that rained down on director Graham Vick and designer Paul Brown when they took their curtain call at the Deutsche Oper's premier of a wonderfully sung and played but dismally interpreted *Tristan und Isolde*, hideously set in what appeared to be a cross between a motel and an old people's home. To hear almost the entire audience in full cry, whistling, hooting and booing, was worth every Euro. The same company's productions of *Don Giovanni* (which took liberties with Mozart's score) and *Samson et Dalila* (which took liberties with the opera's libretto and plot) were worse. At the Staatsoper Krzysztof Warlikowski's no-holds-barred staging of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* was the single most outrageous assault on the senses, but since it basically respected both plot and score he just about got away with it. This proved to be the ultimate Berlin operatic experience.

Starting with Eugene D'Albert's *Tiefland* at the Deutsche Oper, ending with Toshio Hosokawa's *Matsukaze* at the Staatsoper, and taking in *Der Freischütz* at Magdeburg's smart modern theatre, an outstanding (and disconcertingly inexpensive) *Parsifal* at Würzburg (for once staged almost exactly as Wagner intended), and an intelligently directed

and economically staged *Ring* at Weimar (in which Würzburg's Parsifal – Irish tenor Paul Macnamara – turned up to sing Loge), I eventually attended 45 productions of 43 operas. There were many highlights. The harrowing final scene of the Deutsche Oper's powerful staging of Poulenc's *Dialogue of the Carmelites* – a unique work about fear, fear of death, fear of fear, and conquest of fear through faith – was especially memorable. In the same house the entire audience held its breath during Jane Archibald's virtuoso and moving performance of the celebrated mad scene in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. This was the kind of experience of which all opera lovers dream. At the Staatsoper, René Jacobs' powerful but simple realisation of the rare Tommaso Traetta opera, *Antigona*, demonstrated what can be achieved on a modest budget with supreme dramatic intelligence. The same was true of the Komische Oper's imaginatively staged and brilliantly cast *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. It was so joyful I went twice and, for a whole range of reasons, it is the opera above all that I shall probably associate most with my time at Wiko and what that was all about.

It is commonplace in Berlin to update operas to the present, or at least the time of the work's composition, but in the case of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* the Staatsoper opted to recreate Schinkel's 1815 set designs and costumes. Although it was certainly fascinating to see them, they did bring home just how much stage design has moved on since then. Many of Schinkel's interiors share a similarly stagey and skin-deep quality, since they rely upon painted-on rather than three-dimensional decoration and serve as a reminder that his original ambition was to be a painter. The best are exquisite: at Potsdam the Charlottenhof and Roman Baths (a dream of Herculaneum as it may once have been), Schloss Tegel's sculpture gallery, the Belvedere at Schloss Glienicke. Architecturally more ambitious and impressive are his Greek Revival Altes Museum (its colonnade and stairway now compromised by modern glazing), the classical gem that is the Neue Wache, the spectacularly domed St. Nikolai Church at Potsdam, with its vast single central space, alas, following wartime bombing, now shorn of much of its rich interior decoration, and, in Berlin, the perfectly proportioned interior of the Gothic Revival Friedrichswerder Church.

Anyone interested in Schinkel (or the 20 July 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler) should make a pilgrimage to Neuhardenberg, 30 km east of Berlin, in the valley of the River Oder where each village contains a cemetery of Russian soldiers who fell in the final 1945 advance upon Berlin. Here, in one of his earliest commissions, the young architect reworked an unfinished earlier Baroque house into a Neoclassical *Schloss* of stocky

dignity. He also designed the parish church on the village green just outside the gates. Both have recently been skilfully and sensitively restored. It was at Schloss Neuhausen-Neuhardenberg that the plot against Hitler was hatched. Carl-Hans Graf von Hardenberg hosted meetings of the conspirators, and a small exhibition in the house, now restored and operated as a residential conference centre by the German Savings Bank and Giro Association, tells of his involvement and subsequent fate. He was arrested, imprisoned and interrogated, attempted suicide, but, cared for at Sachsenhausen concentration camp by the communist and fellow internee Paul Hofmann, he actually survived the war and eventually died, exiled from his confiscated Neuhausen-Neuhardenberg estate, in 1958. Not until 1991, following *Die Wende*, were his remains finally interred in the family burial plot beside Neuhausen-Neuhardenberg Church. An earlier request for burial had been declined by the DDR authorities, on the principle that von Hardenberg was an aristocrat and even his bones were unwelcome in the model socialist settlement of Marxwalde which Neuhausen-Neuhardenberg had become.

The Neuhausen-Neuhardenberg estate also boasts an exceptionally beautiful park, designed in the English style by Peter Joseph Lenné and Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, the two most celebrated German garden designers of their age. The German talent for gardening was a new discovery for me and one of several striking affinities between the Germans and English, who pride themselves as a nation of gardeners. The great park at Wörlitz, with its superfluities of follies and visitors, is an explicit homage to England and the English-designed landscape, while Schinkel's Schloss Babelsberg at Potsdam takes its inspiration from Windsor Castle and an Anglo-Irish penchant for the neo-Gothic style. The *Schloss* remains shuttered up but its grounds and gardens are now restored and well worth a visit, as are those of his neo-Italianate Schloss Glienicke, just a short walk away. When it comes to garden restoration, the Germans are in a league of their own, as historic garden after garden testifies: at Charlottenburg, Kloster Jerichow with its recreated monastic herb garden, Oranienbaum near Dessau with its Dutch and Chinese gardens, romantically landscaped Pfaueninsel, formal Rheinsberg (where Frederick the Great spent some of the happiest years of his not particularly happy life), Goethe's House with its intimate town garden in Weimar, the showy Residence at Würzburg, and Rococo Veitshöchheim.

North, south, east and west of Berlin there is more to see and explore than can be fitted into a 10-month Wiko fellowship. The twelfth-century brick-built Praemonstratensian monastery at Jerichow was the destination of one particularly rewarding excursion,



Havelberg Cook

together with the *Dom* and town at Havelberg, a few kilometres to the north. The latter's little-known cathedral proved to be an almost perfectly preserved gem. It is charmingly cloistered, modest in size, formidable in the stark militarism of its mighty west-work, and impressive in its setting high above the River Havel (just above its confluence with the Elbe). The original Romanesque church burnt down in 1279 (an architecturally fortunate date) and a High Gothic church was then erected within the skeleton of the earlier Romanesque structure. The result is idiosyncratic and pleasing. Its interior contains a wealth of late medieval, Renaissance and Baroque fittings and furnishings, some exceptionally fine but much restored stained-glass windows, and two remarkable giant stone candelabra carved with brio and finesse around 1300, featuring representations of a chubby little cook with his wooden spoon and his colleague, the assistant cellarer. The *Dom* still preserves its medieval rood, as does the larger and grander *Dom* at Halberstadt, the first German cathedral to be built from start to finish in the Gothic style. It was a source of inspiration for Schinkel and other German Romantic painters and architects, who, rightly, idealised Gothic ecclesiastical architecture.

Wartime bombing sadly flattened Halberstadt and inflicted much structural damage on the cathedral (all now made good). Not far away, Magdeburg also suffered

much devastation, so much so that Vera Schulze-Seeger expressed amazement at my wish to visit. Nevertheless, the city still contains more sites of interest than can be fitted into a single day's visit and the scale and grandeur of its cathedral, one of the greatest in Germany, with its wealth of fine sculpture well repaid the pilgrimage. Surprisingly, given the damage meted out to the rest of the town, the vast *Dom* sustained only minor damage in the blitz. Würzburg was less fortunate. The destruction of this lovely old Franconian city on the night of 16 March 1945 was almost total. Within the space of just 17 minutes, 1,127 tons of incendiary bombs were dropped upon the historic town centre: civilian casualties were heavy and the cathedral, historic churches, Würzburg Residence and Marienberg fortress were all seriously damaged. The bombardment was more concentrated even than the more notorious bombing of Dresden, and post-war Würzburg inherited a similarly daunting task of reconstruction. Miraculously, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's spectacular ceiling painting depicting the supremacy of Europe over Asia, Africa and the Americas survived intact. The rest of the Residence, along with most of the city's principal cultural monuments, is now restored but the town itself has been more blandly rebuilt in a pared-down post-war style. Nevertheless, as a thriving university city and provincial capital it bustles in a way that better-preserved Weimar, killed with kindness and an excess of cultural reverence, does not.

Würzburg has been badly damaged before. During the Thirty Years War the Swedes attacked and destroyed the Marienberg; and the River Main, astride which Würzburg sits, has periodically flooded with destructive force, most recently in August 2002. The riverbanks are now crowned with sophisticated electronically-controlled flood defences but, were the river to rise as high as it did in the St. Mary Magdalene's flood of July 1342, even these would be ineffective. The torrential rains which drenched central Europe that summer caused the Main to rise higher than ever before or since. As a stone plaque now on display in the Marienburg fortress commemorates: *On the twelfth day before the calendars of August AD 1342, on the Sunday before Jacobi, the river Main rose as high as never before. The water level reached the steps of the cathedral of Würzburg and flowed around the first stone statues. The bridge with the tower, the walls and many stone houses in Würzburg collapsed. In the same year there were similar floods all over Germany and in other regions.*

To view at first hand this tablet and the River Main was my primary reason for visiting Würzburg, for the weather event responsible for this extreme flood occurred at a tipping point in climate systems around the globe. Historical records and evidence derived from ice cores, speleothems, ocean shelf varves and tree rings all point to a major

shift in established climate patterns right across Eurasia from the late 1330s and early 1340s. The devastating epidemic known as the Black Death followed in their train.

My project at Wiko has been to research and write a book on climate, disease and society in the fourteenth century. I arrived with the data collected and analysed and a clear idea of the form that the book would take. Nevertheless, the space and opportunity to read beyond the literature conventionally relied upon by medieval economic historians, especially the fast-growing scientific literatures on past climates, climate change, climate and disease, and plague (alias *Yersinia pestis*) rapidly transformed both my vision and the dimensions of the project. Preparation for my colloquium presented on 7 December further focused my thoughts and resulted in a complete reformulation of the whole project. Subsequent conversations with Wiko Fellows working on infectious disease have also been of great benefit. Half the book (the most difficult half dealing with climate and disease) is now in first draft; the rest, dealing with society and the interactions between climate, disease and society during the fourteenth century, remains to be written. This is the task that I shall be returning to Belfast to complete, spurred by the invitation received while at Wiko to deliver the 2013 Ellen McArthur Lectures at the University of Cambridge: the book's four themes of climate, disease, society and the interactions between them during the fourteenth century will comprise the subjects of these four lectures. Is there anything more guaranteed to concentrate the mind and lend purpose to a difficult writing task than the prospect of having to speak knowledgeably and interestingly about its subject in public?

I have pondered whether I would have made better progress with my book if Wiko had been a less sociable place, its Colloquia and meals more conveniently scheduled, and Berlin a less fascinating and diverting city. I shall never know the answer. What is beyond doubt, however, is that given all that has happened financially, politically and environmentally in the world during 2010–11, this has been an extraordinarily fascinating year to spend among such an informed, diverse and international group of colleagues. Within and beyond the Eurozone there has been the continuing and seemingly escalating financial, economic and political fallout from the ongoing international credit crisis. There have been the popular Arab risings, successful in Tunisia and Egypt, but so far violently resisted or repressed everywhere else, and leading to NATO's direct military involvement in Libya, with potential outcomes which give cause for grave concern. In February the Gutenberg plagiarism scandal hit the news; on 2 May the Americans finally succeeded in tracking down and "assassinating" Osama Bin Laden; and two weeks later Dominique

Strauss-Kahn was forced to resign as head of the International Monetary Fund following the accusation that he had committed a violent sexual assault. Each in its own way seemed incredible. Meanwhile, in December and January, while Germany and much of northern Europe froze, strong La Niña conditions in the tropical Pacific caused torrential summer rains to fall over north-eastern Australia, precipitating the devastating Queensland floods. 2010–11 will stand out as a year of extreme weather events, with serious drought in Somalia, drought and floods in China, tornadoes and a scorching heat wave in North America, and poor harvests in many of the main grain-producing regions of the world. Whether these developments were chance, random events or are symptomatic of more profound changes in the World's climate is far from clear. And as if this were not enough, Christchurch, New Zealand, was devastated by a serious earthquake on 22 February, northern Japan by a combined mega-earthquake and tsunami on 10–11 March, there were volcanic eruptions in Iceland in May, Chile in June and Eritrea and Indonesia in July, and in May a mutant *E. coli* bacterium resulted in a major public-health scare in Germany. So all in all it has been an extremely eventful year. Interesting as so many of the Colloquia have been, it is the many conversations over lunches and dinners about these fast changing situations which have in many ways proved to be the most illuminating and rewarding aspect of life at Wiko. I shall miss this breadth of experience and knowledge when I return to the more provincial world of Belfast.

While I have been away, the UK's coalition government has introduced a series of austerity measures intended to redress the country's seriously imbalanced finances. These have yet to bite. Government funding of universities, and especially of humanities and social sciences teaching, has been cut and English universities have responded by raising student tuition fees. The situation for Northern Ireland's two universities is worse, since they are funded directly from the Northern Ireland Assembly's block grant: not only is their cut in funding greater, but a cap has been imposed upon students' fees, leaving Queen's University with a multi-million pound shortfall in revenues. The university has responded by placing a freeze on all appointments and inviting staff to apply for voluntary severance or early retirement. Morale among academic staff is understandably very low and pessimism about the future rife. On 15 July my Vice Chancellor wrote: "It is extremely disappointing to report that the most recent attempts by the Minister for Employment and Learning to secure agreement for the future funding of higher education and student support have yet to reach a successful conclusion." Meanwhile, the Universities and Colleges' Union is balloting members on strike action over threats to academic

pensions and is actively opposing government proposals to open universities up to wider competition. Whatever the eventual outcomes and uncertain merits of these government proposals, it is clear that the school and university to which I am returning are already much altered from those I left last September and profoundly different from those I joined in the halcyon days at the start of my career when academics placed teaching and students before research, minority subjects and small departments thrived and were cherished, and the Northern Irish Troubles were at their worst.