

# BRINGING ANTHROPOSOPHY to the Antipodes

Dr John Paull tells the story of the world-travelling, self-proclaimed 'spiritually arrogant' Alfred Meebold, who helped bring Rudolf Steiner's teachings to Australia and New Zealand in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*"It is anthroposophical lore that, when asked by entry officials if he was coming to New Zealand to live, he replied, 'No, I am coming here to die.'" (Turbott 2013, p. 73)*

Alfred Meebold (29 September 1863 - 6 January 1952) was a restless soul. He was born in Heidenheim, Germany. He was a keen traveller, a fervent Germanic chauvinist, an ardent botanist and a forthright anthroposophist. He died in Havelock North, New Zealand, aged 89 years.

Meebold is described as "the most important presenter and teacher of Anthroposophy in New Zealand" (Turbott 2013, p. 71). He was a "peripatetic seeker after spiritual truth" (p. 69), "didactic and austere" and "dedicated to the German culture and spirit" (p. 81).

It appears that Alfred Meebold was a man of independent means. His family owned a business enterprise, Württembergische Cattunmanufactur, in Germany. It seems that the family supported Meebold's wanderlust, since he spent much of his life devoted to his wanderings and, except for a brief stint in the family firm during the Great War, he appears to have enjoyed little or no gainful employment.

Alfred Meebold set off "to see the world" (Meebold 1938, p. 5). "Life is a game of cards. Destiny deals the cards, but man must play them himself," he wrote (p. 22). It appears that he maintained these attitudes for a lifetime, and the convenience of inherited wealth spared him the inconvenience of earning a living.

Alfred Meebold can take some responsibility for the introduction of anthroposophy and biodynamics to the Antipodes. In 1920, Meebold was in Dornach, Switzerland at the inauguration of the first Goetheanum. Also present was the Italian/Australian artist Ernesto Genoni. At the inauguration, Meebold sponsored Ernesto Genoni to join the Anthroposophy Society (Genoni c.1955; Paull 2014).

Meebold was a man of some contradictions. A British observer recorded: "Mr Meebold was most strong in his condemnation of emotionalism and on the need to be guided by reason... Mr Meebold is perhaps the most emotional man of my acquaintance" (A E Waite 1913, in Villeneuve 2004, p. 431).

Alfred Meebold was a founding member of Rudolf Steiner's short-lived and ill-fated business venture Der Kommende Tag AG (The Coming Day) (Riccioli 2013). Kommende Tag was registered in Stuttgart, Germany, on 13 March 1920, and liquidated in January 1925 (Riccioli 2013). Kommende Tag extinguished the savings and hopes of many anthroposophists. The concept of Kommende Tag was to create a grab bag of diverse profit-making business enterprises that could fund loss-making social enterprises.

Of his Kommende Tag idea, Steiner had argued: "It is necessary to found an institution similar to a bank that thanks to its financial measures can put itself at the service of economic and spiritual-cultural enterprises oriented towards its objectives and its way of operating according

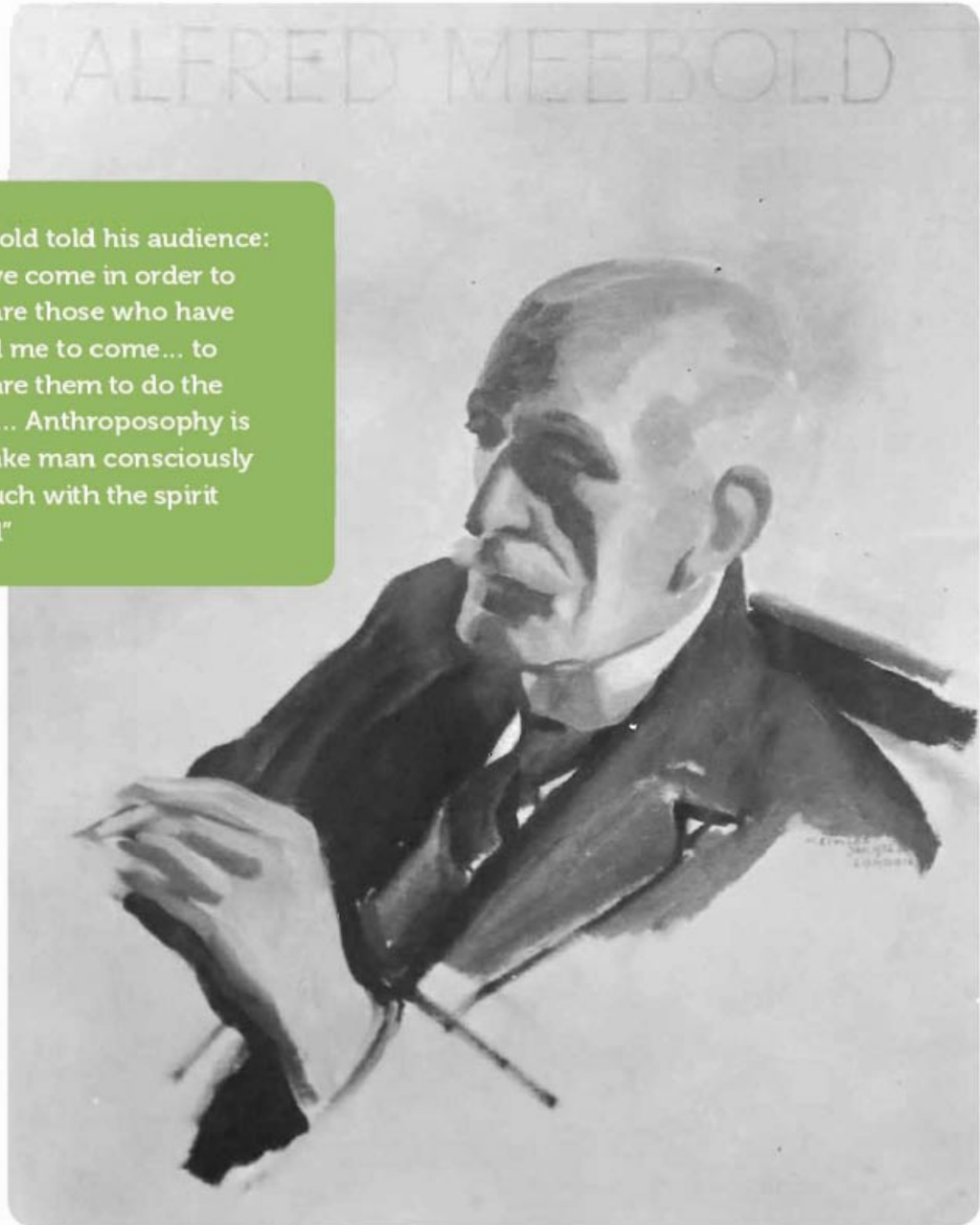
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ALFRED MEEBOLD



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Portrait  
of Alfred  
Meebold by  
M Cowles,  
January 1932,  
London.

Michael Group, Melbourne. Photo by author.

to an anthroposophical vision of the world... It would be especially important to start, for example, immediately profitable businesses capable of supporting other businesses, which only later lead to economic results, above all thanks to the seeds of the spirit contained in them which must now be watered and which are destined to germinate only in later times" (Steiner 1920).

Perhaps Kommende Tag failed because it was a cranky idea, or because it was an idea before its time, or because the fundamental idea was sound but the management was not, or because the idea was sound but the economic

circumstances of the times were not. A parallel enterprise, Futurum AG, founded in Dornach, suffered the same fate (founded 1920, wound up 1924) (Goetheanum 2019).

### Carrying the teachings

"Australia called and I had to come," Meebold wrote (Meebold 1928a, p. 13). Ernesto Genoni had returned to Western Australia in 1926, after stints in Dornach and Milan (Paull 2014). He encouraged Meebold to visit, and Meebold's first visit to Australia and New Zealand eventuated in 1928 and 1929.





The first Goetheanum, in Dornach, Switzerland, pictured on a postcard circa 1920.

Meebold delivered his first Antipodean anthroposophy lectures in Broome Hill, Western Australia. It was the rural heartland of the extended Genoni family (Paull 2014). Meebold told his audience: "I have come in order to prepare those who have asked me to come... to prepare them to do the work... Anthroposophy is to make man consciously in touch with the spirit world" (Meebold 1928b, p. 2).

He was described as "the well travelled German anthroposophist Alfred Meebold" (Villeneuve 2004, p. 430). It was said that "Mr Meebold is an emissary of Steiner and an ardent worker in England of the spread of Steiner's views" (A E Waite 1913, in Villeneuve 2004, p. 430). "The position in respect of himself is... The only living person who possesses the vital truth is Dr Rudolf Steiner whom he has not only the happiness of knowing but is in his confidence, and works with him and for him" (p. 431). Meebold told his Western Australia audience: "I have the right to speak for the Anthroposophical Society" (Meebold 1929, p. 5).

From Western Australia, Meebold travelled to Eastern Australia and then on to New Zealand. This was the first year that Meebold could visit New Zealand, as "not until 1928 were nationals of former enemy states permitted to enter New Zealand" (Taylor 1986, p. 851).

Meebold spoke German and also English and Italian. He was well travelled, a 'man of the world'. Meebold was both comfortable and confident in front of an audience. He had spent time with Rudolf Steiner in Germany and in Dornach, Switzerland. Meebold lectured on anthroposophy, for example, in Vienna (in German) (Meebold 1940), at San Remo (in Italian) (Meebold 1934), and at Broome Hill,

Western Australia (in English) (Meebold, 1928b).

This was the closest connection most of his audience were ever going to get to Rudolf Steiner, and so Meebold was a welcome guest amongst Antipodean anthropops and aspirants. He told them: "In our movement we have no dogma whatever. Nobody asks you to believe" (Meebold 1928b, p. 5).

Alfred Meebold made a return visit to Australasia in 1932/1933. He again visited Ernesto Genoni, who was now developing a biodynamic farm in Victoria (Paull 2019), and then once again he travelled on to New Zealand. There was a further Antipodean visit in 1936/1937 and a visit to the Demeter Farm of Ernesto Genoni and Ileen Macpherson (Paull 2017a, 2017b).

Alfred Meebold relates in his autobiography, *The Way of the Spirit*, that he previously had joined the Theosophy Society in his spiritual quest. "I was a Theosophist" (Meebold 1938, p. 137). He subsequently visited India and met Annie Besant. He was told that "She will not accept you. With such views as you have about India and the Indians, you will be better off away" (Meebold 1938, p. 149). Meebold left India disillusioned. He was subsequently attracted to the Christology of Rudolf Steiner rather than the Eastern-infused Theosophy of Besant. Meebold asserted of Indians: "They cannot reach to the highest. They will have to reincarnate in Europe" (Meebold 1928b, p. 8).

### "Spiritual arrogance"

Alfred Meebold must have appeared to some as an insufferable Germanic chauvinist, as well as, more broadly, a Euro-chauvinist. His biography appeared during World War I, in 1916, apparently to perk up the spirit of Germans.



Meebold declared that *The Way of the Spirit* "was written for the Germans, in order to help them over and out of the bitterness roused by the flood of misinterpretations... concerning the Germanic Folk Soul" (Meebold 1938, p. 1).

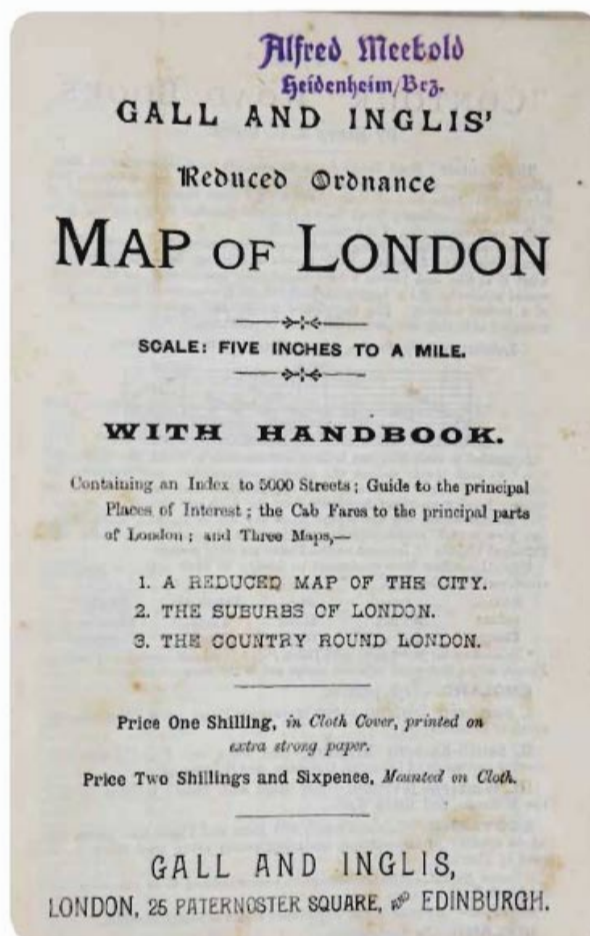
Meebold was a self-admitted jingoist. "I do not care a scrap if people say I am a German jingo... As I have said here I have said it in New Zealand" (Meebold 1929, p. 6). He declared: "the spiritual mission of the epoch comes from the German spirit... All who were ready to receive it, all incarnated in Germany. That has to be recognised" (Meebold 1929, pp. 6-7). He admitted: "There was somebody in Sydney, a man, who said that I had come out in order to make propaganda for German culture" (Meebold 1929, p. 7).

"Meebold was uncompromising in his belief that the German folk soul was a fundamental source of the anthroposophical impulse... It simply had been Germany's historical fate to have evolved such a soul state. He now saw the historical task as bringing the fruits of the German folk soul to the rest of the world" (Turbott 2013, p. 72).

Alfred Meebold admitted his "spiritual arrogance" (Meebold 1938, p. vi), and his "volcanic temperament" (p. 150). He wrote: "I saw in the words and works of Dr Rudolf Steiner, the modern bearer of Spiritual Science, quite definite contradictions, one after another" (p. vi). Of his biography, he wrote: "These concepts come from the Germanic Spirit and have been transmitted to us by Dr Rudolf Steiner whose pupil I had the privilege to be. This book is meant to be a testimony for it. I do not name him in the text, because at that epoch I thought it better to avoid everything which might have led to discuss Steiner's personality" (p. ii). Where he appears in the autobiography, Steiner is referred to as "the man" rather than by name.

Alfred Meebold was a prolific botanical collector, carefully preserving and noting the date and location of his specimens. In Australia there are 1539 specimens collected by Meebold recorded in the Australasian Virtual Herbarium (avh.chah.org.au), with specimens in eight different herbaria, and specimens from 14 countries. In New Zealand there are 152 Meebold specimens, collected from 10 countries (www.gbif.org). Alfred Meebold's name is honoured in the plant genus *Meeboldina* (in the family Restionaceae), which is endemic to Western Australia. Several plant species are named for Alfred Meebold, including *Geranium meeboldii* (Pakistan), *Lagenandra meeboldii* (India) and *Darwinia meeboldii* (the Cranbrook bell), which is a shrub endemic to the southwest of Western Australia.

Meebold also tried his hand at fiction. He is mentioned in the *Encyclopedia of German Literature*: "in a novella by Alfred Meebold, *Dr Erna Reddens Thorbeit und*



Alfred Meebold's map of London, with his personal name stamp, gifted to Ernesto Genoni.

*Erken* (1900; Dr Erna Reden's Folly and Realization), the eponymous heroine according to Jeanette Foster "returns to Germany full of crusading zeal against those who persecute homosexuals" (Gillett 2000, p. 498). A classic technique in European literature has been to explore *verboten* issues in fictional narratives rather than directly. If Alfred Meebold was gay, then his liberty and life would have been at risk in Nazi Germany, where groups exterminated included homosexuals. Nazi Germany was also antagonistic to anthroposophy and its enterprises. All the works of Rudolf Steiner were banned by the Nazis in 1935.

### Wartime

With the Nazis in power in Germany, and war looming in Europe, for those with the wherewithal to do so, 1938 was a good year to be leaving or avoiding Europe. Meebold headed toward New Zealand. Whether by luck or sound planning, he got as far as Hawaii, and there he stayed for the duration of the Second World War. The USA did not

Photo: Tasmanian State Herbarium, Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, Hobart. Photo by author.



Botanical specimen collected by Alfred Meebold, 1936, Warrandyte, Victoria.



enter the war until Pearl Harbour Day (7 December 1941).

If he had been in New Zealand during World War II, Meebold would have been an unwelcome enemy alien and subject to registration, classification and possibly internment. Enemy aliens were classed as A, B, C, D or E. Local Nazis included the Samoan Nazi Party and a group operating within the Auckland German Club (Mason 1954). Class A enemy aliens were interned; the rest were not. Class B were considered "untrustworthy", "theoretically booked for internment if invasion or attack threatened... it included those politically pro-Axis but regarded as harmless through age, infirmity or domestic circumstance; those claiming Allied views but who were thought to have deeply divided loyalties" (Taylor 1986, p. 870). Class C aliens were subject to special conditions. Class D were "probably trustworthy". Class E were "harmless" and "notified of exemption". Aliens "were not told of their classification" and consequently only Class A (interned) and E (exempted) were aware of their classification (Taylor 1986, pp. 868-9). In 1939, in a New Zealand population of 1,640,000, there were 8000 aliens. Half the aliens were Chinese and were Class E (exempt). The number of internees in New Zealand peaked in 1942 at 160, with 90 of these being German (42 were from New Zealand and 48 were from outside New Zealand) (Taylor 1986, p. 883).

The New Zealand Alien Control Emergency Regulations 1939 were passed just three days after the war began, and there were various time periods within which to register (Jeffery 1939). Within the first several months of the war, the German consular staff and others left New Zealand. By good luck or good timing, Meebold avoided these challenges.

The war over, Alfred Meebold arrived in New Zealand, from Hawaii, in 1946. It was his final visit. He was by now 83 years old. He came to a place now well known to many in New Zealand biodynamics: "Alfred Meebold stayed from 1946 until his death in 1952 in the converted stables at 'Taruna', maintaining his correspondence, documenting his botanical collections and working on translations of Steiner's works... The high temperature at which he maintained his room, his heavy smoking and coffee drinking, and his love of detective novels and cats became well known... Until the end he remained the *éminence grise* of the Anthroposophical Society in New Zealand, deeply influencing the thinking of... the core of the movement, and inspirational to younger members" (Turbott 2013, p. 74).

Meebold had declared: "My archives are the most complete, although I am only a private man. I got all that was printed at Dornach. Dornach & Stuttgart have the biggest archives. I have all these things" (Meebold

1928b, p. 1). Whether his archive has survived, or if it ever made its way to New Zealand, is unknown to the present author. Likewise, it is unknown to the present author if photographs, diaries and later memoirs of Alfred Meebold have survived the passage of time.

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