

McIntosh, A., **Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition**, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2008, 289 pp + ix

As this review was being drafted bushfires were raging in the southern state of Victoria. Marysville and other small towns nearby had been blasted out of existence leaving only ash, rubble and suffering. Meanwhile, in northern Queensland, floods had deluged large areas leaving people overwhelmed, isolated and angry. In both areas lives were lost, property destroyed and the whole nation burdened with a sense of grief and déjà vu, for this has happened before and it will certainly happen again.

Even without such disasters you only have to travel a few kilometres away from the manicured coastal strip into the vast interior to understand that humans are not in charge – we are merely tenants in this wide brown land and much less secure than we'd like to imagine. Much has been written about how this elemental insecurity lies beneath the patina of everyday life in Australia and how it is remembered mainly when triggered by disasters that very briefly puncture the usual self-confident, up-beat atmosphere.

Our tendency is to struggle through such disastrous times, to pull together, invoke a spirit of mateship and rebuild. There will be government reviews. The experts will gather. Some of their recommendations will be implemented, others set aside. Until the next conflagration, the next flood. Then the whole cycle begins again.

What's different this time, however, in early 2009 is that these familiar disasters are taking place in the context of another slowly-dawning realisation – that we are so very close to the 'tipping points' whereby the global climate spins completely out of human control and spawns a gathering series of disasters from which the human species may not recover. This fact confronts us with primal fears that we are exquisitely well equipped to ignore. The experts could be wrong. They've been wrong before – remember the 'millennium bug'? And so it goes. The 'window' during which effective action for humanity to act in concert to avoid runaway climate change is now simply too short for all the adjustments, revisions, re-thinking and reconstitution of nearly all social arrangements across the board to take place. Theoretically it is possible if, and it's the biggest 'if' in history, perhaps, humankind were suddenly to wake up to its predicament and together decide to change direction. But one has to say there's really little sign of that. I don't detect any diminution in the one-person-per-car traffic chaos every morning. I don't see any reduction in the efforts of marketers and merchandisers to sell us more stuff that we don't need. I don't see the mass media weaning us off of pap and diversion in favour of truth telling and thorough-going cultural innovation. And I don't see governments around the world exhibiting world-centric aspirations or behaviour. 'Sustainability' remains an empty illusion.

Hell and High Water is written by Scottish writer and campaigner Alastair McIntosh,. It is attempt to address this unprecedented situation in a way that goes beyond mere optimism to explore a different notion of hope. The book opens with a telling story of how his mother had moved from a Scottish island to the safety of Stornaway, a small mainland town, only to be almost inundated during an exceptionally powerful storm. Her

attempted move to safety turned out to be illusory and her experience stands as a motif for this book. Our much-vaunted consumer society represents our own collective bid for safety and security. Yet it also hides from us deficiencies that compromise our common humanity and our environment as well.

What I most like about the book is that it deals explicitly with both sides of our dilemma – the interior and the exterior dimensions. In this respect it is unusual. Within the growing debate about our compromised future the vast bulk of attention is given to exteriors – to technologies, the economy, finance, politics and the like. Not that these are unimportant but, rather, that they represent only half of the story. The other half is represented by the interiors of human beings and societies. Indeed it is here that the sources and any possible solutions to the global problematique actually lie. Informed commentators have, for some time, understood that ‘we have met the problem, and the problem is us’. That is, the sources of global breakdown and disaster originate within the very constitution of our own humanity. Or to be even more specific, they lie in the way human beings re-constitute their world and, in the process, destroy parts of it progressively over time. Equally, the most powerful ‘drivers’ of decline are found in the limitations of human perceptions, habits, values, worldviews and the like. This, in essence, is why they cannot be changed overnight. They are embedded, locked in place, by centuries of enculturation, habit and daily practice.

Half of McIntosh’s book summarises the evidence for the onset of drastic climate change. Yet it does so in a way that constantly reflects the way that the exteriors reflect interior factors such as narcissism and hubris. For example, he writes of how ‘we mostly stay ‘sane’ because the hubris of the world is *socially managed* within limits we can cope with.’ (P. 99). He pinpoints a widespread fallacy when he condemns the ‘*arrogance of forgetting* that our own inner realities also shape the world’ (P. 139) The underlying thesis is that ‘the sustained onslaught of hubris, and especially its intensification during the early modern era, diminished our collective capacity to sustain a rich inner life.’ (P. 139)

The second half of the book looks back to Socrates and others in an attempt to revitalise notions of what might be meant by ‘sensibility’. This certainly provides a valuable historical grounding. Yet I found the account less salient than the story of how in the early 20th century US psychologists ‘set about trying to convert therapeutic insight into commercial gain’ (P. 166). While I understood the attempt to re-ground and rehabilitate ‘sensibility’ in classical sources, the identification and ‘calling out’ of those who helped to fashion the consumerist nightmare is perhaps more useful because it allows us to understand and separate ourselves from unconscious immersion in this deadly system of deception and manufactured needs.

The author’s attempt to ‘sort out the human condition’ is an ambitious one that takes on more than he can reasonably manage. His ‘take’ on reinvigorating the inner life is clearly genuine and grounded in his own experience. It’s an authentic record of one person’s journey and I’d be surprised if it were not inspirational for some readers. Yet it’s useful to recall the metaphor of there being ‘a thousand paths to the top of the mountain’ and I

wondered how many would detect resonances with the ‘new age’ thinking that was so in vogue a couple of decades ago. In other words and in very general terms, an approach that involves the re-cultivation of the inner life is undoubtedly part of the solution, but I imagine that most people will need to work out the details for themselves on a case-by-case basis. Equally, his ‘twelve steps for reconstituting the world’ are brave statements of idealism and aspiration, starting points for many kinds of innovative work. Yet, again, I don’t see any real prospect of them being taken seriously, let alone put into wide practice, in the very short time available. Here, at any rate, is the author’s 12-step agenda.

1. We must re-ignite the inner life.
2. We must value children’s primal integrity.
3. We must cultivate psychospiritual literacy.
4. We must expand our concept of consciousness.
5. We must shift from violent to non-violent security.
6. We must serve fundamental human needs.
7. We must value mutuality over competition.
8. We must make more with less.
9. We must regenerate community of place.
10. We must build strong but inclusive identities.
11. We must educate for elementality.
12. We must open to grace and truth.

Clearly this amounts to a cultural revolution but the question is: is there time for it to succeed? For example, to take point 11, the author wants educational experience to embrace nature in all its aspects, including the elemental ones: earth, air, fire and water. Yet I cannot think of any existing system of formal education with the capacity to even begin to embrace a vision of this kind. There are simply too many other agendas, constraints and, overall a mind-numbing capacity for ‘not knowing’ for anything along these lines to succeed.

Overall, the main propositions of the book make a great deal of sense. But I think we need something a little more informed by social process combined with a little more depth and a more clearly actionable framework. The book is certainly a refreshing change from the usual ‘external’ focus and, as such, a step in the right direction. But it won’t shift us very far from the ‘overshoot and collapse’ trajectory that humanity is currently set upon.

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