Free radical

Alastair McIntosh is a writer, academic and campaigner whose latest book 'Hell and High Water' carries the subtitle 'Climate change, hope and the human condition'. ***Simon Hodgson*** *finds that he advocates a politics more of poetry than prose.*

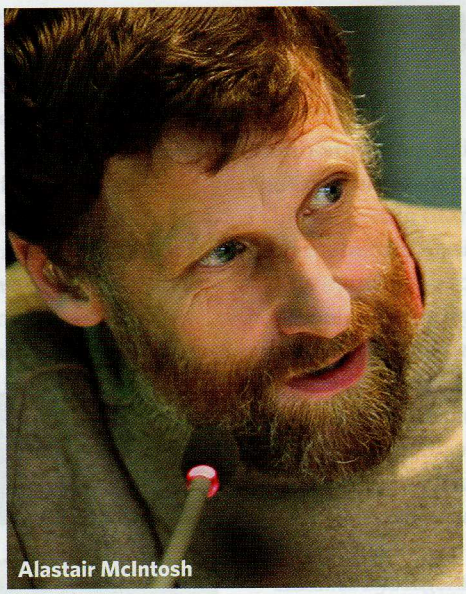
Alastair McIntosh looks just like I expect him to. He has a lean frame, neatly trimmed beard and his clothes are the muted greens and browns that could equally imply the countryside or the university: in his case – both. But his voice surprises me – the lovely Scottish-Irish lilt that comes with a Hebridean upbringing. He talks rapidly throughout our interview, both of us conscious that the Glasgow train leaves in less than an hour. So I get straight down to it. What, I ask him, led him to write the book?

"The key idea is that existing political, economic and technological approaches to tackling climate change are not going to get us where we need to be," he states baldly. "Our society is far more deeply implicated in intensive carbon energy use than most people are aware of and so when governments talk about 60-90 per cent [carbon] reductions by 2030, the consequences are politically unacceptable in a hedonistic democracy that votes from its pocket." These current approaches will founder on public disquiet and selfishness.

Aren't we surrounded by a rising interest in all things eco?

"We environmentalists have to be very careful because when we float around in our own green bubble we can easily get enthusiastic. The trouble is that only a few per cent of us actually vote that way so we are in cloud cuckoo land with regard to the majority of the electorate. Unless we take up arms and impose a green dictatorship, I don't think the kind of thing we're aiming at is ever going to happen. Our efforts at environmental protection are constantly being outstripped by the rate at which consumerism is growing, not just in this country but around the world."

This seems a rather bleak assessment from the author of a book on climate change and hope. Indeed, the first four chapters of McIntosh's book are a concise and concerning summary of the current thinking on the science of climate change



Alastair McIntosh

'He talks about rekindling the inner life, building communities of place and finding inner fulfilment making more with less. We need nothing less than cultural psychotherapy.'

which even he admits will likely prove to be an understatement. Once you've read them, you're in no doubt that he sees the full magnitude of the problem. Where does the 'hope' come from?

The answer to that is set out in eloquent and bewitching style over the remaining five chapters. As McIntosh explains in the book, "the question of whether technology, politics and economic muscle can sort out this problem is the small question. The big question is about sorting out the human condition". After building a scientific foundation, he turns unashamedly to metaphysics. "If we're looking at our relationship with the natural world it's not enough just to be chemists, physicists, educators or whatever – we've got to be philosophers," he explains.

And here is McIntosh's distinctive contribution. He's willing to combine solid research with spirituality. Chemistry with community psychology. This is, after all, a man who invited Chief Stone Eagle – a Native American warrior chief – to come and advise the islanders of Harris in their battle with Lafarge over a planned superquarry. And who delivers an annual lecture on non-violence to senior soldiers at the Joint Services Command and Staff College.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that he's just some yurt-living hippy. McIntosh is rooted in serious academia: he has a geography degree, a financial MBA and a PhD. He's visiting Professor of Human Ecology at Strathclyde where he teaches on the MSc course. He sits on Lafarge's sustainability stakeholders' panel (after winning the superquarry battle) and works occasionally for WWF.

So, unsurprisingly, his analysis of the problem is thorough, deep and – it has to be said – compelling. Starting with Plato and the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh he reveals the human tendency to hubris – excessive pride, a bloated sense of self – and "all the trappings and all the violence that go with it". This, he argues, is running wild in our modern culture. We are masters of the planet, we have undreamed-of levels of scientific and medical control, technology and wealth and sophisticated modern cultures. And yet it wrecks our "capacity to relate with feeling to one another, and has opened up a profound emptiness, profound loneliness and profound lack of meaning".

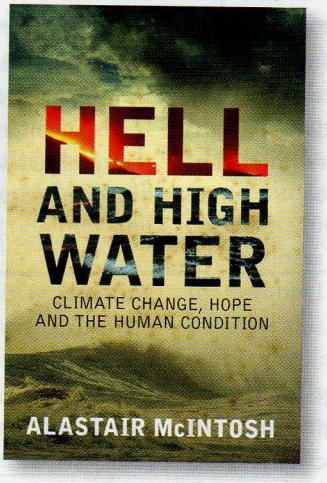
And it is into this emptiness that consumerism flooded during the second half of the 20th Century. As the economist J K Galbraith put it, "Wants are increasingly created by the process by which they are satisfied. Increases in consumption act by suggestion and emulation to create wants".

In other words we consume more and more in pursuit of happiness that taunts us from just beyond our next purchase. McIntosh delves deep into the ever more sophisticated marketing and advertising that fuels this machine – techniques that put down deep taproots into the emptiness, uncertainty and insecurity created by our hubristic atomisation.

With me so far? Well, we're almost there. We've gone through hubris, damage to our inner selves, vulnerability to the blandishments of marketing and, eventually, to the hollow satisfaction of consumerism. "Consumerism has become to the environment what the H-bomb became to war," says McIntosh: unless we tackle consumerism we have no chance of tackling climate change. And there's the rub. We can't tackle consumerism without looking deep into the human psyche.

So where do we go? What can we do? We're like an alcoholic with his bottle, implies McIntosh. And like Alcoholics Anonymous, he prescribes a 12-step programme to counter such addiction. He talks about rekindling the inner life, building communities of place and finding inner fulfilment making more with less. We need nothing less than cultural psychotherapy. And – McIntosh implies – it's all there inside us. We can do it because our humanity is a remarkable thing.

So a book that starts so bleakly ends up on a profoundly hopeful note. 'Hope', you notice not 'optimism'. McIntosh makes the following distinction: "Optimism ... tries to alleviate suffering by denying reality. Hope, on the other hand, draws on inner resources that can co-exist with outer pessimism or even catastrophe. One can therefore be pessimistic about climate change but still retain hope."



Or, as he put it during the interview, "When we [environmentalists] look at our job and say 'what I am doing is important but it is only scratching the surface' we must not despair. We must connect it with a much deeper purpose in the human life and the human condition. What matters are the potential emergent properties of our integrity".

There is – it has to be said – a marked difference between the precision with which McIntosh analyses the problem and the rather tentative and general solutions he proposes. As he himself is happy to point out, he is advocating a 'politics more of poetry than prose' which – by reference back to my dimly remembered English lessons – I could mischievously interpret as "it packs an emotional punch, but I'm not sure I can quite explain all the details". This is partly because as he says "exactly how [this] translates back into the world of politics, economics and technology I'm not quite sure". But it's partly from a desire not to burden a new way of thinking with the performance-management machinery of the old. To set out his ideas in any more detail would be "like pulling up the seedling by the roots every so often to check on how it was growing".

Nevertheless, I put down the book feeling enlightened, challenged and awakened to new ways of thinking. And as McIntosh shook my hand and headed off to his train he left behind him an air of something intangible, new and faintly encouraging. Perhaps I could call it 'hope'. ■

Simon Hodgson is a senior partner at Acona, where he heads the Group's sustainable business practice
simon.hodgson@acona.com

iema
Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment

BSI

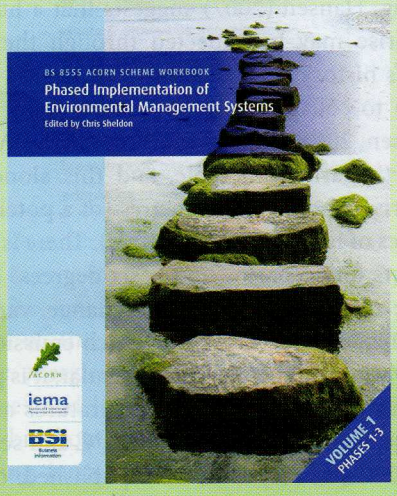
ACORN

The BS8555/Acorn Scheme Workbook

This joint IEMA/BSi publication provides a user-friendly companion document for SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises) and larger organisations wishing to implement an Environmental Management System (EMS) using the process outlined in BS 8555 *Environmental management systems - Guide to the phased implementation of an environmental management system including the use of environmental performance evaluation.*

Volume one covers Phases 1-3, giving practical help and support.
Further details can be found overleaf.

IEMA Members: £45
Non-IEMA Members: £50



Order online at www.iema.net/shop by visiting 'Other IEMA Publications'.