

# CHILD OF THE EARTH

Can a personal tragedy shed light on the state of the world?  
ALASTAIR MCINTOSH shares how the stillbirth of his son fostered unexpected hope in his work on the spirituality of climate change.



IT WAS the summer of 2006 and we'd just learned that my wife, V er ene Nicolas, was, as they say in the soft French of her mother tongue, *enceinte*. We ran a workshop together at the Greenbelt Festival that August on the theme of sacred marriage. Few people knew that there were not two of us there, but three. Life generally was going well. And when we got back to Scotland, I had a message from Hugh Andrew of *Birlinn*, a leading Edinburgh publisher, commissioning a new book.

Originally it was to be a short work aimed at gingering up the debate about climate change. Could I, he wondered, do for climate change what my previous book, *Soil and Soul*, had done for land reform? I faced this brief with very mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was going to be a good time for me to write another book. With our child expected in March, I'd already planned on avoiding long-distance engagements so as to be present with V er ene. And by now I'd watched the climate change debate develop over three decades. Events like Hurricane Katrina hitting New Orleans were now bringing 'biblical' images home to people's armchairs. The time was as ripe as ever for a leap in public awareness leading to legislative action.

And yet, at another level, I felt flummoxed as to just what it was that politicians realistically could do. In a democracy you've got to walk in step with the electorate. It's all very well to talk to like-minded environmentally aware people and to get excited about how to 'save the world', but frankly, such company is less than five per cent of the vote. A poll that Mori published in 2007 puts it in chilling perspective. 88 per cent of people think that climate change is happening, but only 41 per cent believed that humans are even partly responsible. And while most of us don't mind recycling our bottles or changing a few lightbulbs, just 21 per cent would support raising the cost of flying and a mere 14 per cent would sanction higher rates of duty on petrol. The whole sorry picture is summed up in that popular and ugly car bumper sticker: '*You toucha ma car, I smasha your face!*'

#### VOTES FOR AUSTERITY?

In trying to sell any message to politicians you've got to start by asking how far they can go, even if they want to, and still remain in power. The hard fact is that we live in a hedonistic democracy. As George Monbiot says, most people 'don't vote for austerity'. Behind this is a massive mismatch of time horizons. Environmental degradation is proceeding at a galloping rate on geological timescales. But politically the rate of change remains glacial. Unless they happen to be Mayor of New Orleans or of a town on a flood plain, most politicians pay mere lip service to much of the green agenda. It's NIMTO – 'not in my term of office'. After all, what does global warming mean within most of our lifetimes? For a northern maritime nation like Britain, wetter, more severe winter storms, and sea levels creeping several millimetres higher every year, according to the scientific consensus. But otherwise, it's expected to get warmer! Newspapers talk of rising house prices and vineyards on the south-facing banks of Loch Ness! It's hardly an agenda to mobilise a mass vote for the radical transformation of society. 'The poor, what about the poor?' did I hear somebody say? Well seriously, in a United Kingdom that meets only half its UN obligations to alleviate world poverty, when was that ever a big voting issue?

As we moved into the autumn of 2006, I rapidly found myself becoming a spoiler at green-leaning dinner parties. *Soil and Soul* had been such a hope-filled book – a spiritual Trojan horse, less about land reform than about the spirituality of rekindling community. But I was at a loss to see where the hope could come out of climate change. Sometimes I'd find people listening to me with an air of disbelief. It felt like I myself was part of the problem we were talking about. And they were right. That was precisely my unsettling point. We're all so deeply complicit. The drivers of climate change go to the heart of modern society. Unable to counter this confession of complicity, people sometimes glanced at V er ene's filling belly and asked: 'How, in that case, do you feel about bringing a child into the world?' It was a fair question but not one I could fully answer.

#### KNOWN IN THE WOMB?

More out of sense of duty to my publisher than from heartfelt enthusiasm, I soldiered on with the book. It was profoundly uncomfortable. There was a truth that had to be told and I wasn't enjoying being the messenger. Privately, every well-informed leader of the environmental movement to whom I spoke, both in the UK and internationally, shared much of my pessimism. 'But we can't say that in public. It would be like giving up, and what hope then?' was the typical reply. And yet by holding on to optimism for the good of the cause, we were denying the reality of the cause. They say that legislation happens in prose but campaigning is done in poetry, and the brutal statistics made for dismal eloquence. Worldwide the rate of growth in consumption was continuing to outstrip net efforts at mitigating climate change. Britain's emissions of greenhouse gases had dipped slightly during the 1990s, mainly thanks to the cheap and easy (but temporary) shift from coal to gas. But since then, there had been a slight rise in emissions. And with road traffic set to increase by 40 per cent to 2025, and a planned doubling of airport capacity starting with the new runway at Heathrow, it was clear how the politicians were reading the electorate's entrails. With economic growth always top of the agenda, environmental targets were safely kicked into the long grass of NIMTO.

#### Seriously, in a United Kingdom that meets only half its UN obligations to alleviate world poverty, when were the poor ever a big voting issue?

The sheer injustice of it all was so galling. As usual, endangered species and the poor would pay the price. The earth could perhaps no longer afford the rich, but they'd just relocate to somewhere that still had a bit of environmental credit left. It was all 'buy today' and not 'pay tomorrow', but 'gone tomorrow'.

In November 2007 Paul Valley ran a column in this magazine that made an interesting distinction between optimism and hope. 'I am not an optimist,' he quoted Martin Luther King as having said, 'but I still have hope.' This was one of the things that started working on me. I picked up Bruggemann's *Hopeful Imagination* and wondered where the likes of Jeremiah might have stood in these our troubled times.<sup>1</sup>



Remember Jeremiah? There are large parts of the Old Testament that I think could have done with a good editor, but much of Jeremiah is a living fire that burns from the spiritual heart. Here's somebody in the sixth century BC who made no pretence of *optimism* that his people could be saved from Babylonian captivity. He was an ecologist who saw that inversion of the social order had led to inversion of the environmental order too. He asks, 'How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away.'<sup>2</sup> But he never let go of hope. When things were at their bleakest with Jerusalem under siege, Jeremiah goes out and buys a field for posterity. With a bit of theological licence we might suggest that he started the world's first ever nature reserve!<sup>3</sup> Ah, Jeremiah! That 'fountain of living water' of whom God said, 'Before I formed you in the womb *I knew you*.'<sup>4</sup>

Is it possible to *know* a child before it is born? That question was also in my mind. It was Hogmanay 2006 – the last day in the year. Véréne was seven months with child now and she'd spent the afternoon playing music to him, convinced that he was responding in his movements. We had delighted to watch his little heart

## Who knew what this child might become or what might become of him? The problem is not so much too many children, but too many who haven't been loved in a way that teaches empathy

beating on the scans and to see his bones knitting into shape. Who knew what this child might become or, for that matter, what might become of him? The problem in the wider world is not so much too many children, but too many who haven't been loved in a way that teaches empathy. That's the root cause of the narcissism of hubris, its violence, and its impact through consumerism that destroys the earth's life support systems. To care for the earth we must start with its children. At least, that's how we saw it, and it was such a happy time; a time of wide open possibilities. January and February would see me finishing off the book on climate change. March would be all change at a family level. And who knows what then?

### A BIRD FLOWN

We went to bed early that night on Hogmanay 2006. We thought of him as our love child, this little life that we were carrying in our marriage. And we spoke a lot together about 'sacred marriage' – as if there are three persons in a marriage, and the third is the source of life as love made manifest. Only such depth of relationship can fearlessly face the shadow sides of life. This is the grounding in the Godspace. This is what sets all of life in perspective as it renews what is worn out and restores what is broken.

And when Véréne and I awoke the next morning, on New Year's Day 2007, our child was not moving.

When the doctor turned on the scan, I could

see his little backbone. It was like it was before, but fully formed now. There was no pulsing from his heart. And I just assumed the doctor's sorry job for her. I quietly said to Véréne: 'He has left us, my dear. The bird has flown the nest.'

A complication with the placenta forced the team at Glasgow's Southern General Hospital to carry out a rare and difficult caesarean procedure. A considerable blood supply was on standby, an array of specialist staff in reserve. We were blessed to receive such care. As the surgeons operated, the words 'holy, holy, holy ... glory, glory, glory,' ranged uncontrollably through my mind. Véréne's heartbeat monitor was starting to race and the senior surgeon had to take over from his understudy. I had to stare into death: not just of our child, but also, the small possibility that my wife too could go. They had warned me that I might be asked to leave the theatre. Thankfully that, at least, was not called for.

Our love child was being born. In a vision in my mind's deranged eye I could see what looked like a wedge-shaped column of descending figures. At their head was a huge, solid, compassionate being with wide open arms. 'Véréne,' I whispered, as if with inner knowing. 'The ancestors are here to receive him into their number.' And the only place to go was onwards and inwards – deeper and deeper into the Godspace. These were the words that came to me:

*ashes to ashes  
dust to dust  
life to life  
love to love*

And the midwife said: 'You're never unaffected, no matter how often you see it.' And after what seemed like ages she came round from the other side of the screen. 'It's a baby boy,' she said. 'And he's a beautiful baby! He's *really* beautiful.'

### OSSIAN'S LAMENT

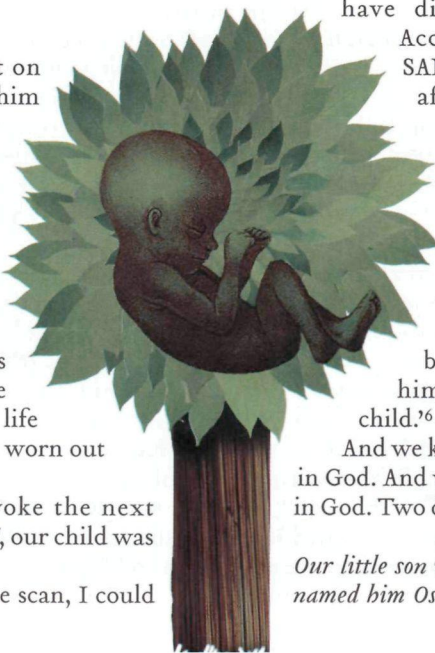
A little being like a teddy bear was laid on Véréne's breast. We wept without inhibition. We cried and cried because we loved him so much. How strange it was. I never expected such an instant sense of connection, of *knowing*. I felt like I would have given my own life for him. He was our love child. Our firstborn. Our son.

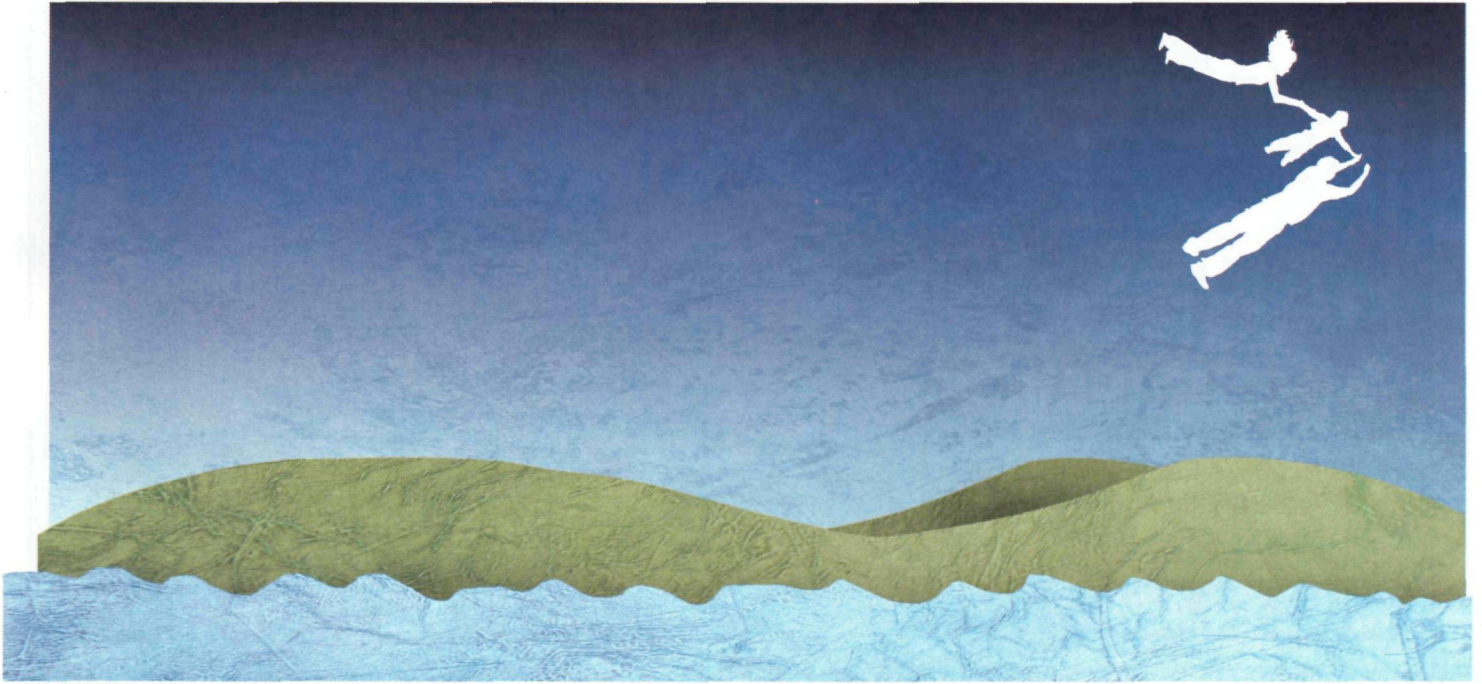
The doctors could find no reason why he should have died. These things just happen.

According to the support group, SANDS, 17 children die before or soon after birth in the UK every day.<sup>5</sup> He looked so perfect. His hands were like my own – broad and with long fingers. Huge feet too. His face made me think of Véréne's the first time I ever saw her. It made me think of the wonder of a line that we'd read together in a book about Christian mysticism: 'The bond between a man and a woman is God himself, as is seen in the face of their child.'<sup>6</sup>

And we knew we would only know him again in God. And we would only *ever* have known him in God. Two days later we wrote to friends:

*Our little son was born absolutely beautiful. We have named him Ossian Nicolas McIntosh. Ossian was an*





ancient Irish/Scots Gaelic bard who spent most of his life in fulfilment of love and art in the Celtic otherworld. His name means 'little deer' because his mother was turned into a deer and he was found on top of a mountain. We are pronouncing the name in a way that sounds like 'ocean' – o-shee-an.

We are both astonished and heartbroken at the love we feel for this child. We have always seen our work with human ecology as being profoundly spiritual work, as it concerns the foundation of the human condition, and somehow we feel that his short and unborn life will carry that work forward in a world where so many people experience suffering.

Today I share this story both in its own right and because climate change, like so many other threats to the world, confronts us with the need honestly to face death. As long as we refrain from looking at death we deny ourselves the potential grace of being able to see through it. We may think we avoid pain, but we do so at the cost of blocking off hidden sources of joy. In our case we had expected to go home with a cradle. Instead, our child lay in a little white coffin. But we found grounding in a love that transcends death. Some weeks later a few lines that came to me captured this. It's called *Ossian's Lament – for his Mother*:

*It's not your breasts that fill tonight  
but your eyes.  
God alone has solace for  
the mother's heart that cries.*

And it felt like Ossian would always be spiritually with us – flying round the world, holding hands with us, like the little boy in Raymond Briggs's *Snowman* – wisely and laughingly present as we go about our work. That is our *hope* for our child and this world.

### ROOTS OF CHANGE

The reason why political, economic and technical fixes alone will never be enough to tackle climate change is that the root causes do not lie in these realms. The problems of our world are not just 'out there'. They are at least equally 'in here'. My book has ended up as

another Trojan horse. It is only superficially about climate change. It is actually an historical, philosophical and theological study of how the inner life has come to be eviscerated and this has left the soul open to colonisation by consumerism. If we want to tackle climate change, we must do all the 'outer' things, for sure, but they'll all just add to the hubris unless matched in step by inner transformation.

To rekindle the inner life means to regenerate creativity, to open to the capacity to appreciate things, and to find empathy, vision and ultimately, anchorage in however we might understand 'God' – the metaphysical ground of reality. The suffering of the world will still be there, but we can hold it better – perhaps in the spirit, as it were, of planetary hospice workers who remain spiritually present come what may through the travails of troubled times. Only those who are resourced in such ways – resourced by grace to enjoy – can circumvent the nihilism by which we either sell out or burn out. That is what makes hope, alongside faith and charity, one of the three foundations of the spiritual life.<sup>7</sup> And that's why, at the last minute, I changed the title of my book.

Originally it had been, *Hell and High Water: Climate change and the human condition*. Now the subtitle includes the word *hope*. That's the transformative difference that facing death has mysteriously made. The dedication, of course, is to Ossian Nicolas McIntosh. □

*Hell and High Water: Climate change, hope and the human condition* by Alastair McIntosh is published by Birlinn on June 23. [www.alastairmcintosh.com](http://www.alastairmcintosh.com)

- 1 Walter Bruggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic voices in exile*, Augsburg Fortress, 1986.
- 2 *Jeremiah* 12:4, NRSV.
- 3 *Jeremiah* 32.
- 4 *Jeremiah* 2:13; 1:5, NRSV.
- 5 SANDS – Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society – [www.uk-sands.org](http://www.uk-sands.org).
- 6 Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New City Press, NY, 1993, p. 60.
- 7 *Corinthians* 13.