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## ROUNDTABLE

whimsy. is there a role for laughter,  
subversive curve balls, ironic romance  
and "oh wow that's cool" moments in the  
mainstreaming of knowledge and action  
in sustainability, climate change, and  
biodiversity?

15 November 2024

*art, science, action: green cities re-imagined*

### authors in this roundtable

Molly Anderson, Cape Town	Pippin Anderson, Cape Town	Emmalee Barnett, Spokane
Nic Bennett, Austin	James Bonner, Glasgow	Tam Dean Burn, Glasgow

curiosity, shifting how people feel about an issue. These positive emotions can encourage people to be more optimistic and proactive rather than paralysed by fear or guilt. Irish collective We Built This City on Rock and Coal brings scientists and theatre makers to rural and coastal towns across Ireland for an interactive performance driven by research and comedy. It's good fun and good for the planet, helping individuals and their community become part of a collective action.

That said, however, while levity is powerful, there is a fine line between engaging people with humour and making light of a dire situation. The key is balance. Levity should complement, not replace, the serious messages at the core of climate communication. Blending moments of lightness with critical information to ensure the humour supports the call to action without diminishing the issue's urgency.

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## alastair mcintosh



### about the writer [alastair mcintosh](#)

Since 1996, his work has been mainly freelance as a human ecologist, writer, speaker, researcher and activist. Alastair is a Quaker, an honorary senior research fellow (honorary professor) in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow, and as a Fellow of the Centre for Human Ecology was Scotland's first professor of human ecology at the University of Strathclyde. He has also held honorary fellowships at the Academy of Irish Cultural Heritages (University of Ulster), the School of Divinity (University of Edinburgh) and the Schumacher Society.

### Through the eye of a potato: Tips on writing a thesis in Human Ecology

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## Enjoy your thesis, and open others up to visionary possibilities.

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I would like to share a few words about what, in my experience, is important in writing a scholarly thesis in the relationships between the social and the natural environment, and having fun in so doing.

Let me assume that you are here to do a master's degree, and your thesis, in the old model of apprenticeship learning, is your "masterpiece". It is that with which you can show the world that you are a competent human ecologist. For this reason, choose something that is useful—something that you can do things with—like publishing it for others' edification, or to influence people or a movement, or to bear witness. Your work may well serve personal intellectual or even therapeutic interests, but if it is constrained to that, it will be a narcissistic piece, which is not why we are all here. So, please, my suggestion would be to set yourselves a fundamental framework of operation by asking yourselves, "Is it going to be of service to either the poor or the broken in nature?". If the answer happens to be "no", that doesn't necessarily mean you're off the track, but I would urge careful

discernment—careful sifting of your motives—so as to reveal more clearly who or what it is that you serve.

As your masterpiece, try and integrate the fullness of human ecology into the wider framework. Ensure it has linkages to the social and the natural environments. Strive to convey the passion of the heart, guided by the reason of the head, applied with the practicality and sheer hard work of the hand.

But, and it is a huge “but”, in holding everything in a framework that is nothing less than your worldview—your cosmic experience of being alive on this planet—develop a sharp focus. If you don’t, you’ll be all over the place. You’ll get into a horrible flap, and be a considerable pain in the flapping parts of the anatomy to your poor supervisor.

Remember, a stone mason doesn’t start with the whole mountain, or with the cathedral that she is to build. She chooses a small part from the mountain, and contributes to the pattern of a whole that is greater than she herself.

How do we do this? My suggestion is to think of your thesis in terms of story. Ask yourself, “What is the beginning, middle and end?” Find a small question, a very small question, and ask it. But ask it well. As a 1965 Ned Miller hit put it, “Do what you do well”.

For example, don’t focus on saying, “I want to examine nutrition in Scotland, or England”. Run with a small question like, “I want to study who is buying organic potatoes in Edinburgh, or Liverpool”. Then you’ve got something that you can research and handle easily. Then you can go round all the shops—I guess maybe only 20 or so—and interview the shopkeepers or the customers. In a containable manner you can analyse your data, set it in the context of the relevant literature, and end up with a concluding chapter that reflects on the relevance of your well-grounded findings for your wider interest in nutrition.

Do you see from this small example how helpful it is to think in terms of telling a story? Your story would go like this: I was interested in this big picture, and I spent a couple of weeks thinking and reading around it. I then refined it down to one (or at most, two or three) questions. Over another couple of weeks, while still doing my literature review, I developed a robust methodology for how I was going to explore those questions. I tested my methodology on a few friends, tweaked it a little, until I was satisfied with the result. I then spent a couple of weeks carrying out the interviewing (if that be your approach), and then allowed four weeks for analysing what I’d done and writing draft chapters. This left me two weeks at the end to write up a polished version ... which I was able to proudly deliver to my supervisor (with a large bottle of organic malt whisky).

There you are. Total job finished in 12 weeks, which is roughly what you need to be looking at in a typical master’s thesis if you’re going to manage your lives, and work well, and allow a little slack time for possible technical problems, sickness, a broken heart, a mind-blowing mystical experience, or ... too much whisky.

And notice how, in all of this, you have never deviated from following the silver “faerie path” of your passion. The discipline you will have had to apply in following that passion will have been your “working under concern”, your calling, your vocation at least for the time being. It will leave you with a great story to tell, a very practical one because it is grounded, and something that may be, above all, a contribution to the cause, to “the great work”. Neither will your wider interests have been frustrated by choosing such a specific focus. Indeed, if

your focus fell upon the vegetable realm, my bet is that you'll end up finding that you can see the whole world *through the eye of a potato*.

You can see how such a thesis could easily be published. For example, a scholarly paper in a journal of agriculture or retailing, or an article in a permaculture newsletter, or in a greengrocer's trade magazine. If you need to dress up such an honest-to-goodness approach to serve what Mary Daly called "academentia", you can justify it in through such qualitative social research methodology as "grounded theory".

One last thought ... my late friend Ralph Metzner of Leary-Metzner-Alpert fame at Harvard in the 60's, "stardust" and "golden", had a wonderful saying. "Stories are what tell us of the past: visions tell us about the future". Enjoy your thesis, and open others up to visionary possibilities.

### **As added whimsy, is an excerpt from the closing part to Alastair's Sermon**

#### **"Lesson to The English on And Reform at Dark Mountain in Wales. The Sermon Application"**

##### *Sermon Application – Lifelines*

A likely Gaelic derivation of Tom Forsyth's name is *Fearsithe*, "the Man of the Faeries" or "Man of Peace". But getting him to Llangollen (The meeting place for the event) had been anything but irenic. It had been a complex two-day journey by small boat, bus, and trains. Being in his eightieth year, and with reduced agility, we struggled with the tightly-timed connections between stations. Finally, the two of us were seated on Dark Mountain's stage.

I spoke. Tom held silent presence. I invited his contribution. But he just sat.

After what seemed an age, he reached into his shirt pocket and held up on a chain an antiquated watch.

"I see that here you live by deadlines", he said, referring to the journey.

"Where I come from, we live by lifelines".

And then, he just sat there: slowly shaking his head, as if beguiled in wonderment.

At length, he added a little more. The butterfly may look as if it's wander-ing aimlessly through the garden. But don't be misled by the butterfly mind. It's following its nectar to the source. That was Tom's message, to *Time to Stop Pretending*.

I thought: "Is that it?"

Then, of course: *that's it!*

And I raised my eyes to the balcony that ran around our seated auditorium. In full Highland Dress, appeared MacKinnon of MacCrimmon. (Ian is one of the most acclaimed Highland bagpipers of the Scottish Highlands and Islands tradition).

And I *rooted* my feet to the ground. And I shouted at the top of my voice.

*IAN, WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?*

And the pipes skirled. And then he burst into an ancient Gaelic song.

And the assembled bards ... and the Old Things on Dark Mountain ..... stirred at the Gates of Dawn.

Full Sermon Available:

<https://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/2024-Dark-Mountain-Sermon.pdf>

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## elizabeth frickey



### about the writer [elizabeth frickey](#)

Elizabeth Frickey (she/her) is a Ph.D. student in musicology and MacCracken Fellow at New York University. Her current research examines the cultural, ecological, and political impact of community gardens and other urban greenspaces through the lens of music and sound.

### Whimsy Is in the ear of the beholder

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## How could the presence of a keytar in a community garden be anything but whimsical?

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You're walking down Houston Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York City on a brisk Sunday afternoon. The busy thoroughway, with its four lanes of traffic, thrums with the usual sounds of wheels on pavement, distant sirens, and the voices of fellow pedestrians in jovial conversation. Seeking respite from the urban thrall, perhaps you stroll towards the nearby First Street Garden. However, as you approach, you are met not with the quiet you were seeking, but something else entirely. You aren't even quite sure what you hear... there's a mournful wailing sound... or a mechanical tapping sound met with a ghostly whirring... or is that a noise rock band playing around the corner?

I like to imagine the number of people to have had this exact serendipitous experience—to have paused at the fence separating the garden from the bordering sidewalk, surprised to find, not a secluded space of peaceful refuge, but a free jazz concert unfolding before their very eyes and ears. This is not an isolated experience, however, but merely one of the many iterations of the Arts for Art annual InGardens Festival which you have stumbled upon.

As a musicologist, I am often drawn towards networks of urban ecologies first and foremost through my ears. In the context of the InGardens Festival, for example, I wander into this space, wondering:

Why does this cacophony of free and raucous improvisation exceed my expectations for the garden's soundscape, and am I alone in this impression? What do I imagine the idealized urban greenspace to sound like?