

Correspondent's Report

From Kiribati

Mark Tredinnick¹

If the land you live on is made of coral and it rises only six feet from the sea; if your home is a constellation of atolls, lovely in limbs, birthed in a sea as vast as it always was vast and growing no gentler; if your islands, though they may look like a scattered fleet of fishing boats, have not yet learned to float (like the laughter of your children, like your voices and your parents' memories and the old ones' stories, like your long coming to belong from elsewhere in this great ocean over hundreds of years); if your islands cannot yet fly like the fairy tern or the frigate bird or the crane — climate change is as bad as news gets to sound.



How do you practise belonging when the lands you belong to belong, themselves, to a sea rising around them? How do you cultivate hope when every idea you have of home is going under? How do you keep remembering when the future is swallowing the past: your shrines and holy places, your dead and all they have passed on to you from the play of the land and the sea here—of flying fish and sharks and winds and children and dance and how to dwell in wealth and peace and modesty and good humour? Where will your children live when they are as old as you? Where will their past live? The ancestors? The stories? Who will teach the young ones what is right when the coasts that schooled the elders are starting to falling back into the sea?



And for Sara Penrhyn-Jones and Richard Gott and me, three members of the cultures of the west responsible for the sea rise and all it may sweep away, three artists engaged with ecological issues: how would it feel to us to confront the impacts of sea-level rise—caused, as it were, by us—on lives and cultures who had no say in what has befallen them?

These were questions we came to Kiribati to ask. Our visit grew out of Sara's passionate engagement as a film maker and social justice advocate for the impact of rising seas on coastal communities and cultures, and we were travelling with money she raised for our cross-arts research project from the UK Arts and Humanities Council. But really we came to learn what a place in this predicament—if this is truly its predicament—wanted to teach us of itself and its people. For Kiribati, whatever its future, is an astonishing world, an elegant way of being, a poem. And none of us—not only the people who are what these islands also are, and what this sea has taught them to be—none of us anywhere can afford to lose what Kiribati knows and what it is. There are many on the thirty-three atolls of Kiribati who are worried about climate change and sad about the damage it is already doing, and where her people will migrate to, carrying what they can of their culture with them when the time comes, and we may not be waiting so long.

But most people are getting on with the present, which is hard and beautiful work enough, while it lasts. Some are more exercised by the overpopulation of Tarawa and the inundation of traditional ways and places with packaged goods and the diasporas of wrapping these new food and consumer goods come in. We witnessed a king tide on a full moon stop millimetres short of inundating the island. We tasted fish. In a hired Subaru and often in heavy traffic, we ran up and down the road that is remaking South Tarawa and powder-coating the whole place in a fine talc of dust. We ate and drank coconuts and all manner of fish; we went to a wedding; we spent time in traditional villages; we danced; we picked up coral and looked at fishtraps; we walked on beaches and travelled by truck and motorbike and bus; we tasted rain, and we listened to creation stories and the tales associated with certain shrines, we stayed with a family and fell into a sense of community here on Kiribati...



This trip was only a start. Still, it will allow us to start work on poems and films and sound recordings, artistic responses that seem to us more able (than journalistic or academic responses) to come to know a place in its predicament, and to do justice in art (word and image and sound) to the genius of this place staring down its fate with grace.

Notes

1. Poet, essayist, and memoirist, Mark Tredinnick lives these days in Newcastle, after many years along the Wingecarribee River in the Southern Highlands. He is the winner of two premiers' literary awards and numerous poetry prizes, the Montreal, Cardiff, Blake, and Newcastle among them. Mark is the author of a dozen works, including *Bluewren Cantos*, *Fire Diary*, *The Blue Plateau*, and *The Little Red Writing Book*. His latest book is *Almost Everything I Know* (Flying Island, 2015). His third collection volume of poems, *Walking Underwater*, will appear in October 2015 (Pitt Street Poetry), and a memoir, *Reading Slowly at the End of Time* (New South) in December. "Mark Tredinnick works elegantly and intimately over a huge terrain," Martin Harrison once wrote..