

## Shining a light

There is a clear trend in much modern English-language nature writing to think of 'place' in many ways: not simply as a place on a map, or even as a community of humans, flora or fauna, but place as informed by its past and, by implication, headed towards a future. It's a fruitful way of looking at the land, and one of its principal recent examples is *This Luminous Coast*, by Essex University environmental scientist Jules Pretty.

It's a splendid production, illustrated with the author's own evocative black-and-white photographs. Pretty structured the book around his own coastal walk from the Essex side of the Dartford crossing to the Norfolk port of King's Lynn, vaguely a homeward trek as Pretty grew up in Norfolk. But this was no walker's manual; his way of working was to meet people, record wildlife, observe both as they interact with and shape the land and sea, and to conjure light:

"I know the sun should come, as the stars were bright from up on the nearby hill ... The sun appears this morning first as a yellow disturbance in the mist, grows and coalesces, and then reflecting on the water becomes a pair."

It would have been easy for him to write a mere travelogue. That would be to live too much in the present. As a scientist, Pretty is accustomed to the nature of time, both geological and generational, but before embarking on this work he immersed himself in writings on Essex and East Anglia to get a better understanding of the historian's grasp on the fourth dimension. And this ability to stand between the viewpoints of arts and sciences lend the book a scope and depth that rewards re-reading.

It's a bleak start. "This is a coast about to be lost," he writes. "Not yet, but it will happen soon" – human lifetime soon, in part. For Pretty understands the multiple threats to the Anglian-and-Essex coast: as sea-waters bulge in a warming climate, and the slow geologic tilt of the British mainland raises the north-west and dips the south-east, the low-lying coastlines from the Thames to the Wash could not be more ill-sited. He details the multiple attempts of both nature and humans to resist the waves, from the mazy channels of the Essex saltmarshes to the many dykes and walls, some dating back to the thirteenth century.

And yet there is, as one reviewer has said, celebration here, perhaps because there is no preaching. He has the background to make elaborate technical points but refrains – he has much other technical writing for those who wish to pursue it. As he walked, he collected scraps of memorabilia to live on in a memory box. Here, in this light-filled work dealing with our local coast, those memories live on. And that is call to action enough.

*From the Wren group newsletter, June 2013*