

The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History by Elizabeth Kolbert.  
Bloomsbury Publishing plc., 2014.

Elizabeth Kolbert may be viewed by some as something of a Cassandra, following her previous brilliant and disturbing book, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, with *The Sixth Extinction*, but there can be little doubt about the rigour of her research and the intelligence of her writing, which combine to produce a new book whose compelling message mirrors its predecessor.

According to scholars there have been five great extinctions since the dawn of life on earth, the one about which we think we know the most, the destruction of the dinosaurs, taking place some 65 million years ago and caused by an extra-terrestrial asteroid, at least according to the physicist Luis Alvarez and his geologist son, Walter. In science, as in religion, one person's theory is another's error, but in *The Sixth Extinction* Elizabeth Kolbert presents a powerful thesis that the sixth in the series is already upon us.

To promote her theory she introduces an impressive range of evidence exemplified by specific creatures or habitats, each with a dedicated chapter, thirteen in all, and whether she is considering a Mastodon tooth found in the Ohio river in the early eighteenth century, or the fate of the Great Auk, or the disappearance of the Panamanian Golden Frog, or the warming of the oceans, the subtext that human beings - and specifically human industrial activity - have brought on the Sixth Extinction is highly persuasive.

Her book ends with a warning that what we have set in motion cannot now be arrested; whether we like it or not the impact of what we have started will continue to be felt on planet Earth long after we are forgotten.

This is a book that should be read by anyone who cares about the world in which we live.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh