



John Bevis

The Keartons

Inventing nature photography

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Frontispiece: "Wren going into her nest in rick".

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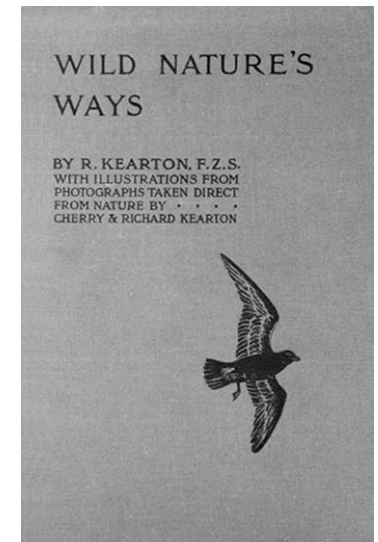
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The Keartons

I first came across the names of the Kearton brothers, Richard and Cherry, on the cover of a green cloth-bound book picked out of a box at a jumble sale in Kenley, Surrey. The title, *Wild Nature's Ways*, suggested one of those familiar, worthy collections from the early 1900s of sentimental musings on the English countryside and wildlife. Leafing through the pages I found, sure enough, charming portraits of birds and other small creatures, flitting their way through chapters devoted to 'woodland and hedgerow' or 'broadland and streamside'. Near the front of the book, the pages fell open at a full-page plate of a cow standing in a field. Wondering how this rather wooden-looking farm animal earned its place in a book about wild nature, I took a second look. There was a caption: "The Stuffed Ox in Operation". I had no idea what it meant, except that it was neither familiar nor sentimental. I bought the book immediately.

That was the start of a long and enjoyable curiosity about the Keartons and their work as pioneering nature photographers, satisfied in small and occasional doses by collecting one after another of their books on cycling trips around London's second-hand bookshops. Both of the Keartons, funnily enough, had lived and worked within a couple of miles of the Kenley village hall where my quest had begun. As for the stuffed ox, it was, I learned, one of a family of photographic hides they had constructed for the purpose of allowing the photographer and camera to encroach unseen on the territory of the nesting or feeding bird. It is, perhaps, their best-known creation, the pantomime creature that hobbles on stage whenever the name of Kearton is called from the wings.



The brothers, showmen that they were, documented the use of the hide in a series of photographs, taken in the spring of 1900, showing the ox's strength (with Cherry mounted on its back), portability (hoisted over his shoulder), and vulnerability (inverted on the ground having been blown over by the wind, with Cherry inside, all six legs kicking up in the air). To modern eyes these images, in which the Keartons' deadpan humour is reinforced by solemn expressions and their antiquated dress code of tweed suits and ties, suggest stills from early silent comedy films; the absurd hides themselves seem to anticipate the harebrained logic of W. Heath Robinson. Not surprising, then, to find a common perception of the Keartons as the merry pranksters of nature photography, eccentrics with the gift of making us laugh with their ever more weird and wonderful apparatus.

But behind the occasional wackiness was a serious intent. In 1947, Eric Hosking proclaimed the Keartons "the fathers of natural history photography".¹ Peter Scott was presented with his first book at school by Cherry Kearton, and recorded later that he was "naturally grateful to the pioneer who led me to so much enjoyment".² At the age of eight, David Attenborough was taken to see *Dassen*, a film lecture presented by Cherry Kearton which "captured my childish imagination and made me dream of travelling to far-off places to film wild animals".³ Eric Ashby, Stuart Smith and Ralph Chislett are among many other eminent nature photographers of their generation to have corresponded with and been inspired by the Kearton brothers.

What made them so influential is, in part, the simple tally of the 'firsts' they notched up. Cherry Kearton's first stab at nature photography, at Boreham Wood in 1892, produced the first ever photo of a nest with eggs. On the back of that shot, they published *British Birds' Nests: How, Where and When to Find and Identify Them*, the first nature book illustrated entirely with photographs, and forerunner of a series of best-selling books written by Richard and illustrated with photographs taken 'direct from nature', as the jackets and title pages crowded, by Cherry. Richard Kearton, of course, invented the concept of the portable photographic hide, in a series of experiments of which the stuffed ox was the most magnificent. Cherry, the younger of the two brothers, made the first field sound recording of a wild bird singing, in 1900, and went on to take the first film footage of London from the air in 1908, of species of big game in Africa in 1909, and of hostilities at the outbreak of World War I in Belgium.

Right: "Female sparrow hawk and young".





Richard laid claim to making a number of nature discoveries, and to resolving through photographic evidence several disputations. He proved, for example, that the sparrowhawk can build its own nest, rather than invariably taking over the old nest of a crow or wood pigeon; that the under mandible of the wryneck is longer than the upper one; that “the female red-necked phalarope wears a white dot, and the male a white streak, over either eye”; that a male adult bird will sometimes feed the chicks of an entirely different species.⁴ Kearton films showed for the first time how a grass snake will sham death when it considers itself in danger; how a grouse may remove her eggs from the nest and then return them; and how an adder bites.

None of these achievements alone was perhaps enough to earn the Keartons Eric Hosking’s accolade. What did was the way they popularised their subject by themselves becoming popular. They helped create, and then corner, the market for nature books by writing for children, young people and adults, in story books, field guides, picture books and essays in adventure and observation. They spurred others to emulate what they did themselves, and were generous in offering advice and sharing the trade secrets of their techniques and equipment. Between them, the brothers produced more nature photography books than any of their contemporaries. Richard became the most sought-after and engaged lecturer of his day on the public circuit; the brothers kindled an enthusiasm for nature in thousands of audiences across the British Isles and beyond, over the course of forty years.

Their other legacy is, of course, the quality of their work. They were prolific and fastidious photographers who as early as 1907 had notched up more than 10,000 plates, including numerous good and some outstanding studies. Eric Hosking and Harold Lowes gave them pride of place in their influential survey *Masterpieces of Bird Photography*. In many of their books we find plates that suggest an originality and ingenuity beyond their journeyman brief. They did not always break new ground; their first photographic mission, to record the nests and eggs of all breeding bird species in Britain, was still under way when other photographers such as R. B. Lodge were already turning their attention to the birds themselves. But they were the first professionals, and that they achieved so much, and are still remembered and valued, is due to the systematic approach they took to their task, funded by their stores of energy, tenacity, originality, insight and enthusiasm.

Left: “Leverets in their form... the tuft of grass was opened out so as to show the animals”.

There is an extra dimension to the Keartons which is a little less easy to define. It has to do with a charisma that pervades, if not all of their work, then at least the better part of the output of their partnership. Opening one of their books from this time is exciting because we don't know what we are going to find inside: sometimes it is a photograph that is so beautifully composed, with such elegance of proportion, to reach above and beyond expectation. Sometimes it is a study from nature interpreted through the camera in such a way as to take on a life, and meaning, of its own. Or it may be something so slight that we are amazed that it was noticed at all, let alone made subject of a photograph. These surprises and fascinations have endeared the Keartons to a modern audience; however much they may have been of their time, their sensibilities align comfortably with modern practices such as conceptual art, especially the evidence (often photographic)-based work of landscape artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, or the sifting and cataloguing of natural phenomena seen in the work of, for example, Chris Drury or the Dutch artist Herman de Vries. The enthusiastic reaction of many writers and artists on mention of their names suggests they have earned a place in the pantheon of those landmark originals worth knowing and talking about.

So it is no surprise to find instances of their material co-opted elsewhere: Kearton sections may be found in, for example, the books accompanying two Scottish Arts Council touring exhibitions, 'The Unpainted Landscape' in 1987, and 'Camouflage' the following year, while a poetry collection by Jeremy Over, published by Carcanet in 2009, features a cover image of Cherry Kearton shouldering the stuffed ox, and borrows a Kearton title: *Deceiving Wild Creatures*. This points up the relative ease with which parallels may be drawn between Kearton and other practices: an instance is the way their photographic documentation of their own photographic exploits—such as the famous example of Cherry aloft on Richard's shoulders deploying the camera on an extended tripod (see p.56)—finds a niche in the history of "the ways in which photography has been used, not just to record, but to transform artistic performances". There is a hint that an image of Cherry Kearton with camera and tripod, abseiling the overhang of a cliff and swinging from the rope in mid-air, nurtures the Kearton myth in much the way that Yves Klein's notorious 1960 image 'Leap Into the Void', in which the artist appeared to hurl himself from the gatepost of a suburban house, was an act "conceived by the artist specifically for its photographic qualities".⁵

Right: "A perilous descent".





The core scientific community has at times been more sceptical of the Keartons' populism. By way of illustration, some years ago I asked the librarian at the Natural History Museum, London, if they would be interested in adding to their then incomplete Kearton book section. She told me that in the recent past questions about objectivity, exemplified by the various Kearton story, pet and menagerie books, were seen as compromising, and the library would only have admitted the field guide and observation titles. But latterly, the histories of human interaction with nature, and of the groundswell of popular interest in the natural sciences, were themselves becoming recognised as being of import—not least for the impact that attendant donations and subscriptions have made to funding conservation and research—and a more holistic approach to the work of cheerleaders such as the Keartons was now considered both appropriate and valuable.

Critical attention to the Keartons to date has tended to take the form of academic studies that use them and specific aspects of their work as exemplars to substantiate critical theses. There have also been periodical local history studies, detailed in 'References' below, particularly those relating the Keartons' connections to Yorkshire, published by the *Dalesman*, and to Surrey, by the Bourne Society. Otherwise, most of what has been written about the Keartons concentrates especially on the numerous adventures, dangers, narrow escapes and comic moments they ran into in the course of pursuing their vocation, illustrated by the picturesque quirkiness of their hides and quaint photographic equipment. All of this is well documented in the original books, produced in sufficient quantities that none are particularly rare and, with a little rummaging on the internet, almost all can be obtained today at prices little more than the cost of a new paperback; e-books of many titles may be downloaded cheaply or for free. In addition, and very usefully, Dr W. R. Mitchell has produced a life-and-work study of the Keartons, *Watch the Birdie!*, that sifts the key facts from their books, with additional material from interviews with some of those who knew and corresponded with them. For these reasons, there seems little point in retelling anecdotes worn smooth with age.

I'm writing this at about the time of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the death of Cherry Kearton and, at this distance, it feels the time is right for a reappraisal, to give some critical voice to their legacy as photographers, writers, film makers, and professional partners.

Left: "Nesting site of nuthatch... a lime and chestnut avenue, Torquay, Devon".

As its title is intended to suggest, this book concerns itself with the lives and working partnership of ‘The Keartons’, especially their role in the history of nature photography; attitudes to and interaction with nature; and the status of invention in their work. I’ve taken as the core to this book the period of their active collaboration, the years 1892–1908, whose characteristics and achievements formulate our idea of ‘The Kearton partnership’. A handful of the photographs taken in this period, I would argue, go some way beyond the usual concerns of the nature photographer; the significance of these was the subject of a previous essay, *Direct from Nature* (1992 & 2007), whose text I have borrowed from here. The partnership is bracketed by two significant moments in their professional lives, each deserving a dedicated chapter. The first covers the events leading up to, and aftermath of, the publication in 1895 of ‘The first nature photography book’, *British Birds’ Nests: How, Where and When to Find and Identify Them*. The second, marking the end of the partnership and Cherry’s reinvention as international wildlife film-maker, is ‘The man who shot Roosevelt in Africa’. An intermediary chapter, ‘The stuffed ox and other hides’, examines some of the most remarkable products of their collaboration.

Praise for the Keartons was not always unqualified. David Attenborough recorded being inspired by Kearton’s film despite “all its obvious flaws”,⁶ while at the age of twelve, Eric Ashby detected that in a Cherry Kearton film about Africa “not all the animals were behaving naturally, which to his mind was what nature films should really represent”.⁷ More recent commentators have, quite literally, taken apart some of Cherry’s footage, frame by frame. Veracity and authenticity are the backbone of nature photography, and the questions raised about these aspects of the Kearton opus are examined in a separate chapter, ‘Deceiving wild creatures’.

Central to the work of the Keartons, as with all serious nature photography, is the attitude taken to wildlife, in particular animal welfare, conservation and collecting, and how these are affected by the role of photography, in particular within the territory that nature shares with culture, and including cultural interpretations such as anthropomorphism. These are examined in a final chapter, ‘The wildness of wild life’.

Most of the published biographical information about the home life of the Keartons and their families is derived from what they wrote themselves, which concentrates on previous generations of their “picturesque forebears” in the Yorkshire Dales, and is sufficiently incomplete for some misapprehensions to have crept in. A little

research has uncovered a deal of fresh unpublished material about the brothers and their siblings, married life and immediate descendants. While this may not have much bearing on their careers, it can help us to picture them, and it would seem an opportunity missed to omit this information from the current volume; to it is added a biographical outline of each of the two brothers’ lives, including their activities and achievements away from the focus of this book. These are gathered in a stand-alone chapter, ‘At home with the Keartons’.

The main purpose of the book is to weigh up how the Keartons achieved such a reputation among their peers, and how well their work has stood the test of time; to ask whether they are best remembered as fathers of their discipline or, as one bookseller I spoke to put it, “those crazy guys who used to take photos from inside a hollow cow”.