

The Keartons

Inventing nature photography

John Bevis

In 1892, brothers Richard and Cherry Kearton took the first ever photograph of a bird's nest with eggs. Realising the camera's potential to reveal secrets of the natural world, they resolved to make the best possible records of their discoveries in the habitats, habits and behaviour of birds and other creatures. The following three years of field work resulted in the first nature book to be illustrated entirely with photographs.

This was the springboard to two outstanding careers in wildlife photography. Richard developed the photographic hide through a series of devices which included the extraordinary Stuffed Ox, was author of numerous best-selling nature books, and with an exhaustive programme of public lectures did more than anyone of his generation to popularise nature studies. Cherry excelled at both still and cine photography, made the first recording of birds singing in the wild, and brought back the first film footage of African big game. They were, as numerous natural history photographers have proclaimed, founding fathers of their discipline.

This new and definitive study concerns itself with the lives and partnership of the Keartons, especially their role in the history of nature photography; their attitudes to and interaction with nature; and the status of invention in their work.

Reproduced throughout the book are the remarkable photographs that they declared as having been taken 'direct from nature'.

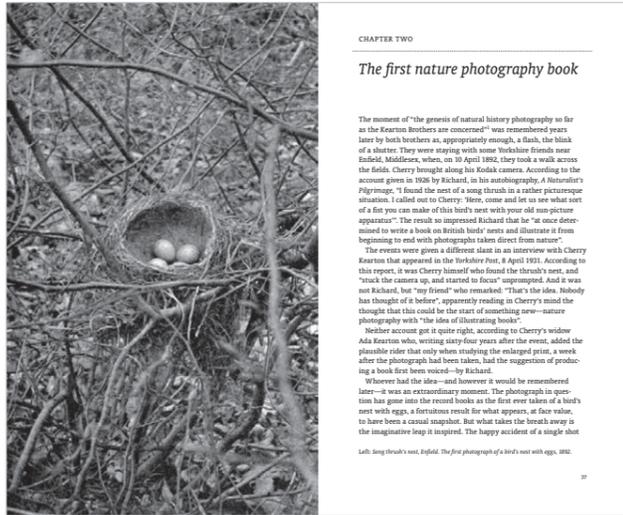
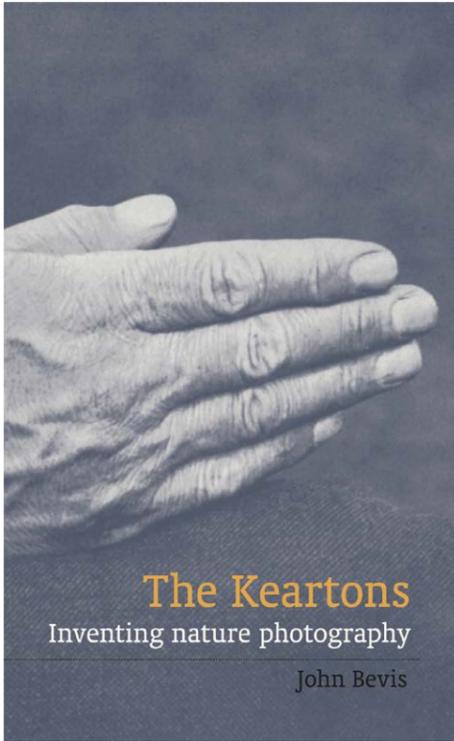
JOHN BEVIS is a writer specialising in nature and the arts, poetry and criticism. His involvement in writing since the mid-1970s has gone hand-in-hand with working in book design, printing and publishing. As well as many critical essays and commentaries on the work of individual artists, his books include *Printed in Norfolk* (RGAP, 2012) where he describes a history of the gallery and artists' publisher Coracle Press; *Aaaaw to Zzzzzd: The Words of Birds* (MIT Press, 2010) a study of the various ways we attempt to capture, preserve, imitate and influence the songs of birds, with a lexicon of 'bird words'; and *From Furnace to Paradise... and back* (Coalport Press, 2005) about the landscape of the Ironbridge Gorge, Shropshire.

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CHAPTER TWO
The first nature photography book

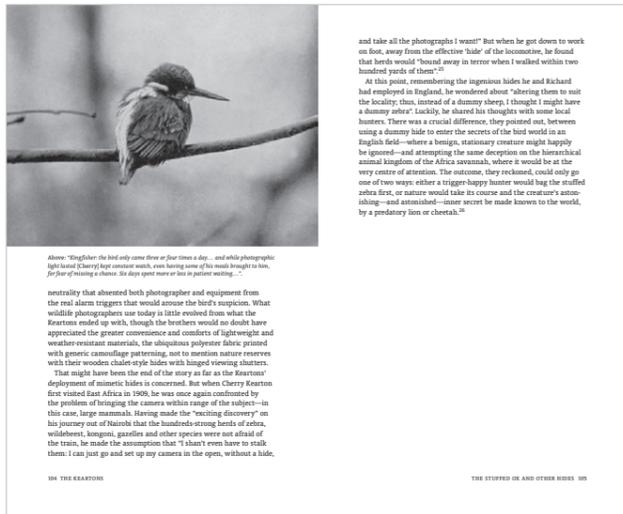
The moment of "the genesis of natural history photography as far as the Kearton Brothers are concerned" was remembered years later by both brothers as, appropriately enough, a flash, the blink of a shutter. They were staying with some Yorkshire friends near Enfield, Middlesex, when, on 10 April 1892, they took a walk across the fields. Cherry brought along his Kodak camera. According to the account given in 1906 by Richard, in his autobiography, *A Naturalist's Pilgrimage*, "I found the nest of a song thrush in a rather picturesque situation. I called out to Cherry. Here, come and let us see what sort of a fit you can make of this bird's nest with your old tin-plate apparatus!" The result, as happened, Richard said, "is an interesting record to write a book on British birds' nests and illustrate it from beginning to end with photographs taken direct from nature!"

The events were given a different slant in an interview with Cherry Kearton that appeared in the *Yorkshire Post*, 8 April 1921. According to this report, it was Cherry himself who found the thrush's nest, and "took the camera up, and started to focus" it. "I interrupted. And it was not Richard, but "my friend" who remarked, "That's the idea. Nobody has thought of it before!" apparently reading in Cherry's mind the thought that this could be the start of something new—nature photography with "the idea of illustrating books".

Another account got it quite right, according to Cherry's widow Ada Kearton who, writing sixty-four years after the event, added the plausible rider that only when studying the enlarged print, a week after the photograph had been taken, had the suggestion of producing a book first been voiced—by Richard.

However that the idea—and however it would be remembered later—it was an extraordinary moment. The photograph in question has gone into the record books as the first ever takes of a bird's nest with eggs, a fortuitous reveal for what appears, at face value, to have been a casual snapshot. But what takes the breath away is the imaginative leap it inspired. The happy accident of a single shot.

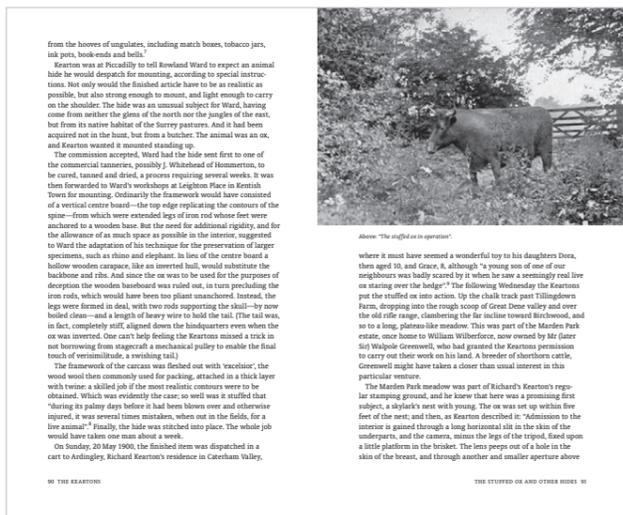
Left: Song thrush's nest, Enfield. The first photograph of a bird's nest with eggs, 1892.



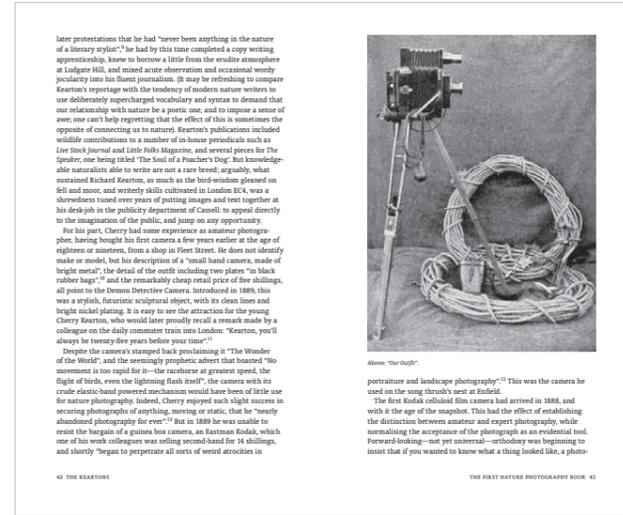
and take all the photographs I want!" But when he got down to work on foot, away from the effective "hide" of the locomotive, he found that birds would "bust" away in terror when I walked within two hundred yards of them.²¹

At this point, remembering the ingenious hides he and Richard had employed in England, he wondered about "abridging them to suit the locality; thus, instead of a dummy sheep, I thought I might have a dummy antelope. Luckily, he shared the thought with some local hunters. There was a crucial difference, they pointed out, between using a dummy hide to enter the secrets of the bird world in an English field—where a benign, stationary creature might happily be ignored—and attempting the same deception on the hornbilled animal kingdom of the African savannah, where it would be at the very centre of attention. The outcome, they reckoned, could only go one of two ways: either a trigger-happy hunter would bag the stuffed robin first, or nature would take its course and the creature's astonishing—and astonishing—secret be made known to the world, by a predatory lion or cheetah.²²

Above: "Straggle" the bird only came three or four times a day, and while photographs light faded Cherry kept constant watch, even having some of his meals brought to him, for fear of missing a chance. His days spent on or in his greatest nesting...
...naturally that alerted both photographer and equipment from the real alarm triggers that would arouse the bird's suspicion. What wildlife photographers use today is little evolved from what the Keartons ended up with, though the brothers would no doubt have appreciated the greater convenience and comforts of lightweight and weather-resistant materials, the ubiquitous polyester fabric printed with generic camouflage patterns, and to mention nature reserves with their wooden chalet-style hides with hinged viewing slats. "That might have been the end of the story as far as the Keartons' deployment of camera hides is concerned. But when Cherry Kearton first visited East Africa in 1906, he was once again confronted by the problem of bringing the camera within range of the subject—in this case, large mammals. Having made the "testing discovery" on his journey out of Nairobi that the hundreds-strong herds of zebra, wildebeest, kudu, gazelle and other species were not afraid of a train, he made the assumption that "I don't even have to stalk them: I can just go and set up my camera in the open, without a hide."



from the hooves of ungulates, including match boxes, tobacco jars, tin pots, book-binds and hats.
Kearton was at Piccadilly to tell Rowland Ward to expect an animal hide he would dispatch for mounting, according to special instructions. Not only would the finished article have to be as realistic as possible, but also strong enough to mount, and light enough to carry on the shoulder. The hide was an unusual subject for Ward, having come from neither the glens of the north nor the jungles of the east, but from its native habitat of the Surrey pastures. And it had been acquired not in the bush, but from a butcher. The animal was an ox, and Kearton wanted it mounted standing up.
The commission accepted. Ward had the hide sent first to one of the commercial taxidermists, possibly J. Whitehead of Hammersmith, to be cured, tanned and dried, a process requiring several weeks. It was then forwarded to Ward's workshop at Legation Place in Kentish Town for mounting. Ordinarily the framework would have consisted of a vertical centre board—the top edge replicating the contours of the spine—from which were extended legs of red wood whose feet were anchored to a wooden base. But the need for additional rigidity, and for the allowance of as much space as possible in the interior, suggested to Ward the adaptation of his technique for the preservation of larger specimens, such as rhino and elephant. In lieu of the centre board a hollow wooden canopy, like an inverted bowl, would substitute the backbone and ribs. And since the ox was to be used for the purposes of depicting the wooden baraboard was raised out, in turn precluding the iron rods, which would have been too giant unanchored. Instead, the legs were formed in deal, with two rods supporting the skull—by now boiled clean—and a length of heavy wire to hold the tail. (The tail was, in fact, completely stiff, slung down the hindquarters even when the ox was inverted. One can't help feeling the Keartons missed a trick in not borrowing from sagratta's mechanical pulley to enable the final touch of wormholes, a twisting tail.)
The framework of the canopy was fleched out with "racoon" (the wood used then commonly used for packing, attached in a thick layer with twine: a skilled job if the most realistic contours were to be obtained. Which was evidently the case, so well was it stuffed that during its palmy days before it had been blown over and otherwise injured, it was several times mistaken, when out in the field, for a live animal!) Finally, the hide was stitched into place. The whole job would have taken one man about a week.
On Sunday, 20 May 1900, the finished item was dispatched in a cart to Ardingley, Richard Kearton's residence in Caterham Valley.



later pretensions that he had "never been anything in the nature of a literary stylist" he had by this time completed a copy writing apprenticeship, have to borrow a little from the evasive atmosphere at Ludgate Hill, and mixed acute observation and occasional warty jocularity into his fluent journalism. It may be refreshing to compare Kearton's reports with the tendency of modern nature writers to use deliberately supercharged vocabulary and syntax to demand that our relationship with nature be a poetic one, and to impose a sense of awe, one can't help regretting that the effect of this is sometimes the opposite of connecting us to nature. Kearton's publications included wildlife contributions to a number of in-house periodicals such as *Live Stock Journal* and *Little Folks Magazine*, and several pieces for *The Sportsman*, one being called "The Soul of a Poacher's Dog." But knowledge-able naturalists able to write are not a rare breed, arguable sustained Richard Kearton, as much as the bird-world gleaned on hill and moor, and writerly skills cultivated in London ECK, was a thoroughbred trained over years of putting images and text together at his day-job in the publicity department of Cassell. To appeal directly to the imagination of the public, and jump on any opportunity.
For his part, Cherry had some experience as an amateur photographer, having bought his first camera a few years earlier at the age of eighteen or nineteen in a shop in Fleet Street. He does not identify make or model, but his description of a "small hand camera, made of bright metal"; the detail of the outfit including two plates "in black rubber bags"; and the remarkably cheap retail price of six shillings, all point to the *Demon Detective Camera*, introduced in 1888. This was a stylish, futuristic sculptural object, with its clean lines and bright nickel plating. It is easy to see the attraction for the young Cherry Kearton, who would later proudly recall a remark made by a colleague on the daily commuter train into London: "Kearton, you'll always be twenty-five years before your time!"²³

Despite the camera's stamped back proclaiming it "The Wonder of the World", and the somewhat prophetic advice that "the movement is too rapid for it—the racehorse at greatest speed, the flight of birds, even the lightning flash itself!" the camera with its crude elastic-band powered mechanism would have been of little use for nature photography indeed. Cherry enjoyed such slight success in securing photographs of anything, moving or static, that he "nearly abandoned photography for ever!"²⁴ But in 1889 he was unable to resist the bargain of a guinea box camera, a Eastman Kodak, which one of his work colleagues was selling second-hand, and shortly "began to perpetrate all sorts of weird atrocities in

portraiture and landscape photography!"²⁵ This was the camera he used on the song thrush's nest at Enfield.
The first Kodak celluloid film camera had arrived in 1888, and with it the age of the snapshot. This had the effect of establishing the distinction between amateur and expert photography, while normalising the acceptance of the photograph as an evidential tool. Forensic-looking—not yet understood—orthodoxy was beginning to insist that if you wanted to know what a thing looked like, a photo-

Above: "The Ox!"
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CHAPTER THREE
The Kearton partnership

I can see them now... walking along a woodland path on the way to the pool, the tall athletic figure of my Uncle Cherry, in dark-green tweeds and cap, striding ahead eager to get to the scene of operations, a willow, yewward, magpie personality. My father, Richard, who was partly crippled, shuffling along behind, the indomitable and infinitely resourceful originator of nature photography and most of the methods since used in its pursuit... from *Nature Memories*, by John Kearton

The Kearton partnership was from the start an informal agreement, initiated seemingly spontaneously in 1893. Its original purpose was to see the publication of one volume, *British Birds' Nests*; in the event, the active collaboration lasted off and on for around sixteen years. Besides still photography and books, the years of the partnership saw work produced in the media of film and sound recording. The last record in Richard's diaries of the brothers working together is the field dates from June 1908, when they "got a good lot of film of Songthrush, a bit of Whitewater and a bit of Butcher-bird!" After this, the "Richard & Cherry Kearton" brand name continued to appear on books and films written and edited by Richard. Cherry's contributions being taken from 1902, or shot on solo outings. They were of course not only partners, but brothers and friends. In print, Richard was never less than generous in his estimation of the younger sibling with "the love of adventure in his blood" and "never-failing sense of humour in positions of danger and disappointment"; revealing in the phenomenal good luck that blessed him "while engaged in all kinds of perilous work!" The tale of how Cherry narrowly missed death from rock-falls, landslides, drowning, poisonous snakes and charging animals, how he was prevented by business from taking the berth he had booked on the *Titanic*, and by officiousness from travelling in the USA on a train that was wrecked in a wash-out, were rehearsed and published over time, giving colour

Left: "Method of photographing birds" was illustrated in high budget.



facts to make a more enthralling story, and the evidence is strong that in this he was abetted by Ada Kearton who typed up his verbal dictation, was substantial author of some of the books published in his name, and contributed to parts of others. What is frustrating is that this leaves the perfectly candid majority of his recollections tainted with doubt and suspicion, and the unhappy legacy of the key to writing his work being that the duties the writing, the more likely it is to be authentic. If this appears unfair, there remains a puzzling gulf between the qualities of penmanship found in, for example, the three after-dinner chapters of my Woodland Home and the laboured Cherry Kearton's Travel; and what to make of the unexpected fable in the Land of the Zoo, with its sudden access to more metaphor and simile than all his other books together?
This raises one other possibility for the origins of the "fable" records of following times described in the start of this chapter: that the tales were adjusted by Ada, perhaps to heap as much credit on the shoulders of her deceased beloved as they would take. Cherry Kearton himself makes no claim to have made such records, and even quotes Richard's original observations—with times unaltered—in *My Woodland Home*, written at about the time (1927–30) Ada described him making his "interesting experiments." It would surely have been futile for him to have attempted the harmless deception on Ada, as suggested above, while simultaneously publishing the truth. How and why the suspect tale was likely created is not to be written, and by whom, is likely to remain a mystery; but we know it was done candidly. Ada's account recording murder in 1931 a.m., the pre-dawn light savings time, uncorrected from Richard's original.
Cherry was at times impatient of the writer's obligation to plain fact, excusing himself with, for example, "Kearton is too well known now for me to attempt to describe it" in *Wild Life Across the World*,²⁶ while his reliance on lengthy quotations from other authors, in for example the *Walden* (and of *Agnon*), is noted above. Cherry's fastidiousness at crediting his sources proved short when it came to his own brothers: suffice to say, examples of his unacknowledged borrowing from Richard's writing are not hard to find. On the subject of bird's nests, for example, Richard wrote "some feathered builders are misers, others gluttons, carpenters, weavers, cobblers, weavers, scaffold makers, and a few do not trouble to make any kind of home at all." Compare this to Cherry's "amongst the feathered builders there are the equivalents of masons, plasterers, carpenters, weavers,

Right: "Yonah yellowthroat feeding young."