



Dartford warbler and chick on Richard Kearton's hand; from *The Keartons*

Stuffed Ox, Dummy Zebra

The showmanship of early nature photography

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John Bevis

THE KEARTONS

Inventing nature photography

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The Kearton brothers, Richard and Cherry, “invented” nature photography not only as a discipline – then, as now, a satisfying compromise struck between natural history, technology and art – but also as an object of observation in itself; photographs of the Keartons at work are today at least as well known as the brothers’ pioneering photographs of birds, nests and eggs.

John Bevis’s inquisitive, discursive and comprehensive study of the Keartons’ lives and work foregrounds the charisma of the showmen brothers without neglecting their considerable technical and creative accomplishments, or overlooking their flaws. The Keartons lay claim to both a documentary first – the first photograph of a wild bird’s eggs in the nest (a song thrush, 1892) – and, perhaps, an artistic one: a picture of “Primroses photographed in first moments of the twentieth century”. Of the latter, Bevis observes: “Either it is light reflected from nineteenth-century primroses, exposed on a photographic plate, a nanosecond later, in the twentieth century; or else it is nothing much”.

This notion of photography as object as well as medium informed the showmanship that Bevis identifies in the results of the Keartons’ field expeditions. For the first of these, the brothers betrayed “a way of thinking that is at once go-getting, stubborn and foolhardy”: Richard pledged to document by camera the nest and eggs of every British

breeding bird. The statement of intent (Bevis calls it a “vow”) has itself something of the tone of a stunt, but the Keartons were sincere. Cherry – Richard being hampered by the effects of a dislocated hip suffered in childhood – took classes in swimming, running, wrestling and ropework in preparation.

There’s no doubt that the lengths to which the brothers went in order to secure the pictures they needed were necessary, given the inaccessibility of the nests of such birds as kittiwake and golden eagle. What’s also certain is that they knew the value of their daring (Bevis likens a photograph of Cherry, with camera and tripod, dangling from an overhang, to Yves Klein’s deceptive photomontage “Leap into the Void”, 1960). A little later, we see that they knew, too, the value of absurdity.

The Keartons’ famous Stuffed Ox, a life-like mimetic hide for photographing birds without causing disturbance, was one in a sequence of related innovations that included the Stuffed Sheep and the Artificial Rock (in later years, Cherry had to be talked out of deploying a Dummy Zebra on the African savannah). Bevis writes that, to a modern eye, the pictures of these novelties in use, “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”; to me, they suggest a hipster photoshoot. Either way, self-consciousness is part of the production.

Bevis notes that the mimetic hide remains a popular tool in the popularization of nature photography (again, the presentation of photography as object): the BBC series *Spy in the Pod* and *Spy in the Huddle* made use of the *Spy Tuna* and *Penguin-cam* to Keartonesque effect. He goes on to explain, however, that

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the use of the mimetic hide is based on a misunderstanding of bird behaviour: “the assumption that unfamiliarity was the key alarm trigger”. “Birds have, in fact, no such reflex”, Bevis writes. “What does arouse suspicion and alarm is sights and sounds that are abrupt or indicative of predation.” What the Keartons had achieved with their stuffed animals and fake rocks “could be achieved as well by canvas”.

The idea of photography as performance shades into a discussion that dominates part

of Bevis’s book: the question of “nature fakery”, and how the functions of the Keartons’ photography – defined by Bevis as “documentary”, “revelatory” and “pictorial” – interlock. Bevis is a subtle and insightful guide to the moral and technical intricacies. He is able to contextualize the “gardening” – pushing aside foliage, or even moving a nest into better light – that the brothers sometimes felt necessary; he describes the results as “super-reality”, “not so much nature as found but its epitome”. Further along the

spectrum, he offers a thoughtful chapter on the Keartons’ tendency to “tame some of the wildness they found; to advance the more domestic and civilised aspects of what they observed; and to demonstrate, explicitly or otherwise, moral values”. Finally, he is robust in scrutinizing what appears to be outright fakery, as in the case of film of a lion hunt taken by Cherry in 1910.

Throughout this well-made book – it is handsome, solid and intelligently illustrated – Bevis deftly balances biography with analysis

and wears his expertise likeably lightly (while remaining unafraid to slot in the odd well-informed aside: he contrasts Richard Kearton’s unadorned writing style, for example, 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”). *The Keartons* is a fine introduction not only to the brothers and their work, but also to a broad range of fundamental notions in nature, photography and the interactions of the two.