

The Maxwell Knight Commemorative Symposium

By John and Margaret Cooper.

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Maxwell Knight (1900-1968) was an all-round naturalist, with vast experience of animals, both in the wild and in captivity. Through his writings and his radio and television broadcasts he influenced tens of thousands of people, especially youngsters.

The Maxwell Knight Commemorative Symposium was held on Saturday 24th November 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of Maxwell Knight's death. It provided an opportunity for those interested in natural history, the humane care of animals in captivity and environmental issues to learn more about Maxwell Knight's life. Held at Birkbeck College (Gordon Square annex) in London, and organised by the British Herpetological Society (BHS), the symposium was also generously supported by the British Chelonia Group (BCG), the Amateur Entomologists Society (AES), the Institute of Animal Technology (IAT), the Frightened Face of Nature (FFON) and others.

There were over 90 attendees, from a variety of backgrounds and interests. Each registrant received a delegate's pack containing information about Maxwell Knight, a copy of the programme and educational material provided by different conservation and natural history bodies.

A whole seminar room was set aside for exhibits. The British Herpetological Society, the British Chelonia Group, the Amateur Entomologists' Society and the Institute of Animal Technology displayed information and wares relating to their work.

Other exhibits included natural history photographs, Haith's literature about their bird food products, a complete set of books written by Maxwell Knight and specimens from the Maxwell Knight Collection, including long-lost manuscripts from his original filing cabinet.

The programme included lectures and interactive sessions. The first session was chaired by Mrs Margaret E Cooper. The initial speaker, Professor John E Cooper, discussed "Maxwell Knight the naturalist", recalling how, as a young naturalist in the 1950s and 60s, he was taught and encouraged by Maxwell Knight. John was followed by Mr Simon King who spoke about "Maxwell Knight the spy-master". Simon pointed out that while to listeners of his BBC radio broadcasts, Maxwell Knight was the avuncular field naturalist and avid keeper of animals including at different times a bear, a baboon, reptiles and parrots, to those within MI5, he was

'M' – "Britain's greatest spymaster." The country owed a great deal to the spy who loved nature.

There were then accounts by people who either knew Maxwell Knight or who were influenced by him; these included a video interview of Mark Rose, CEO of Fauna and Flora International (FFI), written and pictorial tributes from Mr John Burton, formerly of the BBC, who worked closely with Maxwell Knight, and reminiscences from Mr Graham Wellstead and Mrs Norma Chapman. The accounts closed with a short lecture by Dr June Chatfield, detailing the many links between Maxwell Knight and the Haslemere Museum in Surrey.

The next lecture, "The frightened face of nature: challenge facing the planet", by Mr Paul Pearce-Kelly, Zoological Society of London, was the concluding presentation of the first session. He explained graphically the worldwide threats to biodiversity and species' survival, with particular reference to coral reef ecosystems. There has been a succession of coral bleaching events in recent years induced by climate change. Reefs are sensitive to elevated atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂). There could be a viable future for corals; Paul referred to work by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), including field studies in British Indian Ocean Territories.

The lecture by Paul, and subsequent talks, were prefaced by readings, delivered by Simon King, reflecting the writings and thoughts of Maxwell Knight.

During the refreshment break, as at the beginning of the symposium, some of Maxwell Knight's early (1950s) black-and-white films were shown and attendees were able to spend more time looking at the various exhibits and displays.

John Cooper chaired the second half of the programme. The first lecture was entitled "Conservation and captive-breeding projects involving chelonians" and was delivered by Ms Anne Rowberry of the British Chelonia Group (BCG). She gave examples, from different parts of the world, of where the British Chelonia Group has been able to fund and support local people and visiting researchers in a variety of measures relating to land tortoises, terrapins and sea turtles. Such conservation strategies are often not easy to introduce and implement but are essential if some species are not to disappear for ever.

Anne Rowberry's presentation was followed by a lecture entitled "Advances in the health and welfare of captive animals" by Mr Alan Graham, Institute of Animal Technology. Alan outlined his own career in animal care. He trained as an animal technician, has worked at a zoo, and has always kept animals of his own, ranging from snakes to dogs. He stressed how animal technology has evolved in recent years. Those involved in such work undergo both theoretical and practical training and members and fellows enjoy a high professional status; they help ensure that

animals kept and used in biomedical research are properly housed, maintained and used. Many animal technologists are active in other relevant fields, including work in zoos and conservation and education.

The final formal presentation was on the subject of "Engaging the next generation: culture, care and conservation", given jointly by Mr Dafydd Lewis and Ms Victoria Burton, Amateur Entomologists' Society. The speakers outlined the history of the Amateur Entomologists' Society (AES). It was founded in 1935 by Mr Leonard Tesch, a school teacher, who decided that there was a need for a club to encourage and support 'young collectors'; he called it 'The Entomological Exchange and Correspondence Club'. Leonard Tesch subsequently stepped down in order to pursue 'business interests'. It is interesting that Tesch was a friend of Maxwell Knight and that Tesch's wife is understood to have been one of Knight's agents MI5. The remainder of the lecture focused on the educational value of entomology and "bug hunting" and the importance of such pursuits in teaching young people about natural history and conservation. Maxwell Knight was one of many who, through his broadcasts and books, helped nurture children's enthusiasm for insects and other animals.

What was described on the programme as "a dramatic interlude" was entitled "Newts, nadders and neophyte naturalists". This provided entertainment as well as a reminder of the fragility of habitats in Britain, even half a century ago. A team consisting of Simon King, Sarah Pellett, Charles, Rachel and Jonny Foster, Max, Hilda, Margaret and John Cooper re-enacted a scene, a childhood encounter with youths and newts at a Surrey pond that was recounted in Maxwell Knight's unpublished book "The Frightened Face of Nature". This had been written in the early 1960s and was found in his own hand in the filing cabinet. The "dramatic interlude" was an appropriate finale to a day that had recounted and reassessed Maxwell Knight's life and work in the context of the 21st century, with reference to contemporary environmental issues including conservation, animal welfare, captive-breeding of endangered species and public education.

The audience clearly enjoyed the symposium and the organisers welcomed the opportunity, fifty years after his death, to commemorate the life and work of Maxwell Knight, the original "nature detective" and Second World War MI5 agent.

Simon King is collating lecture and other material from the symposium and using other material relevant to Maxwell Knight's work to highlight environmental concerns on the Frightened Face of Nature (FFON) website. See:

www.ffon.co.uk

We are grateful to all who contributed to making the day a success.

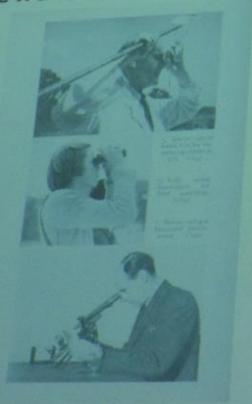
Photos by Margaret E. Cooper





Natural history network

Plate from the field guide



Haslemere Educational Museum

- From 1888 with the founding of the museum and the Haslemere Natural History Society, the town was a focus for natural history in west Surrey
- John Clegg (bottom) Curator from 1949-1962 took photographs for Maxwell Knight's books





