



Maxwell Knight Symposium – commemorating the original “Nature Detective” and Second World War MI5 agent

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Maxwell Knight (1900-1968) was an all-round naturalist and friend of AES founder Leonard Tesch. Maxwell Knight's writings and his radio and television broadcasts influenced tens of thousands of people, especially youngsters. The Maxwell Knight Commemorative Symposium was held on Saturday 24 November 2018 at Birkbeck College in London, and marked the fiftieth anniversary of his death. The symposium was organised by the British Herpetological Society (BHS) and generously supported by the AES, the British Chelonia Group (BCG), the Institute of Animal Technology (IAT), the Frightened Face of Nature (FFON) and others; 90 people attended.

A seminar room was set aside for exhibits from symposium supporters, including the AES (figure 1). Other exhibits included natural history photographs, a complete set of books written by Maxwell Knight and specimens from his collection. Also on display were long-lost manuscripts from his original filing cabinet. The first session was chaired by Mrs Margaret E. Cooper and began with Professor John E. Cooper who spoke on *Maxwell Knight the naturalist*. In 1954 John was encouraged by his father to join the



Figure 1. Part of the seminar room display illustrating Maxwell Knight's wide range of interests.



AES, and it was at our Annual Exhibition the following year that he attended a lecture by Maxwell entitled *Insect study as a necessity*. John later wrote to Maxwell who became John's natural history mentor in the 1950s and 60s.

After Maxwell's death in 1968, his role as an MI5 spymaster and inspiration for Ian Fleming's 'M' in the James Bond novels came to light and so followed the next talk *Maxwell Knight the spymaster* by Mr Simon King. The discovery of documents, including an unpublished manuscript entitled *The Frightened Face of Nature*, in Maxwell's filing cabinet in 2015 provided the inspiration for this symposium. There have been books written about Maxwell Knight the spymaster but a book on Maxwell Knight the naturalist is sadly lacking. It is interesting to note the parallels between spy work and natural history; his book *Be a Nature Detective* (Knight, 1968) emphasises working in the field, close observation, detective work and avoiding hasty conclusions without proof.

There followed accounts from those who knew or were influenced by Maxwell. These included Mark Rose (CEO of Flora and Fauna International) via pre-recorded video and June Chatfield in person who recalled links between Maxwell and the Haslemere Museum and Haslemere Natural History Society.

The next speaker, Mr Paul Pearce-Kelly of the Zoological Society of London, was introduced by a reading from *The Frightened Face of Nature*, the title of which he used in order to develop Maxwell's idea in his own talk: *The Frightened Face of Nature: the Challenges Facing the Planet*. In this he developed Maxwell's idea, describing his work with the IUCN on wildlife threat assessments, arguing that many important systems, such as coral reefs, are not included in policy documents issued by the relevant governments. Much of this was foreseen in Maxwell's original manuscript, including a chilling warning that there is 'not much time left to find a solution' and how nature and human security are intrinsically linked. I could not help feeling that if Maxwell Knight was still with us he would be disappointed by our progress. Further talks were by Ms Anne Rowberry on the work of the BCG and Mr Alan Graham on the health and welfare of captive animals and the work of animal laboratory technicians.

The final formal presentation of the day was on the subject of *Engaging the next generation: culture, care and conservation* given jointly by Dafydd Lewis and me. We outlined the history of the AES and our continuing work engaging young people in entomology and natural history. Given the revelations of Maxwell Knight's career it is interesting to speculate what the 'business interests' were that caused Leonard Tesch to step down from the newly-hatched AES, at the time called the Entomological Exchange and Correspondence Club! Tesch's wife is now understood to have been one of Knight's MI5 agents.



Figure 2. Delegates re-enacting Maxwell Knight's first encounter with newts at a local pond.

The afternoon concluded with an entertaining re-enactment by Simon King, Sarah Pellett, Charles, Rachel and Jonny Foster, Max, Hilda, Margaret and John Cooper of a young Maxwell Knight's first encounter with newts at a local pond, as recounted in *The Frightened Face of Nature* (figure 2).

Simon King is collating the lectures and other material from the symposium on the Frightened Face of Nature (FFON) website. See: <https://thefrightenedfaceofnature.com>. The poster presented by the AES can be downloaded from the members' area of the AES website: <https://www.amentsoc.org/members>.

I must admit I had not heard of Maxwell Knight before the AES became involved in supporting the symposium. But I was struck by how many people that influenced my natural history childhood, for example mammologist Dr Pat Morris, were inspired by Maxwell Knight, so I have been influenced indirectly. I hope the AES and I will long continue to cultivate nature detectives.

References and further reading

- Hilliard, R. D., 1955. The Annual Exhibition 1955. *Bulletin of The Amateur Entomologists' Society* **14** (180): 97.
- King, Simon, 2015. *Spectre of destruction: the lost manuscript of the real-life 'M'* <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2015/oct/28/spectre-of-destruction-the-lost-manuscript-of-the-real-life-m>
- Knight, Maxwell, 1968. *Be a Nature Detective*. F. Warne, London.