


Edinburgh International Book Festival 2017 : John Lister-Kaye



John Lister-Kaye was born to be wild.



Lister-Kaye's life has come full circle; a childhood spent roaming the countryside of Warwickshire and Somerset set the tone for his current life in the Scottish Highlands, where he's been running the **Aigas Field Centre** for over forty years. In between there was a brief flurry with industry, but the less said about that the better – he hated it. Last week he was at the **Edinburgh International Book Festival** to discuss his latest book ***The Dun Cow Rib: A Very Natural Childhood.***

Born in Wakefield, Lister-Kaye spent his formative years at  his father's family's labyrinthine 13th century manor house in Warwickshire. 'Upstairs' bored him; he loved the servants' quarters that 'bustled with life and ribald laughter.'

'It was like being in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* – you felt as if you had gone through the wardrobe door.'

His much loved mother was an invalid who had had rheumatic fever at the age of 11 and never really recovered. As a young child he roamed free, exploring, tracking foxes, collecting eggs, keeping pigeons and generally being a boy. Owing to his mother's illness his only real supervisor was the housemaid, Nellie;

'I worshipped her, she was a great conspirator'

✘ In those days many children were sent away to school at an age that would now shock us. (I used to know a woman who'd been left with the school housekeeper at the age of *two*, when her parents sailed for India.) Lister-Kaye was five years old when he was packed off to pre-prep boarding school;

'It was an absolute nightmare, and I still have nightmares about it now. My schooling started to spiral out of control from then on.'

Prep school was not much better. After an incident ✘ involving the tail feathers of the Headmaster's peacocks, Lister-Kaye was expelled and ended up at the local village school in Martock. He was still running wild;

'The countryside was different then; it was a paradise in many respects.'

After what he admits was a 'very privileged, isolated childhood' he was shocked to encounter acute rural poverty. Children came to school in rags, their worn-out shoes tied up with string. Some boys were from Travellers' families; at first he kept his distance, but soon he was fascinated by their difference and their familiarity with the natural world. Later, back at boarding school, Lister-Kaye felt like 'a freak' – no-one else seemed to know anything about nature. The boys' careless disregard for animal life saddened him, and when a teacher beat a grass snake to death he was;

'filled with a silent, simmering resentment. I was defending the loss of this lissom young life.'

✘ Lister-Kaye's life was changed when he found a copy of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* in the school library. It was so popular there was a fight over who got it next; Lister-Kaye won. It was, as Virginia McKenna has said, 'a work of luminous descriptive prose.'

On leaving school he already knew he wanted to be a writer,

but to his traditionalist father this was nonsense, and he was persuaded (with the bribe of a car) to take up a management traineeship with a steel company in Wales. After the Torry Canyon disaster in 1967 he walked on beaches strewn with dead and dying seabirds and otters. He wrote an article for a newspaper about what he had witnessed. Gavin Maxwell saw it and wrote to him;

‘I have a project here you might be interested in’

Lister-Kaye was only too willing to answer the call;

‘I fled to the Highlands.’

Maxwell smoked 80 cigarettes a day and knocked off a bottle of whisky before bedtime too. Whether despite his host’s habits or because of them, Lister-Kaye was in heaven;

‘Gavin Maxwell was difficult, creative, wonderful, inspirational.’

When Lister-Kaye confided in him that he’d wanted to write, Maxwell’s reply was ‘Why don’t you then? All you need is a piece of paper and a pencil.’

Unfortunately, but perhaps unsurprisingly, Maxwell died less than a year later. Lister-Kaye was terrified of having to leave Eilean Bàn, but Maxwell had asked him to ‘end my story for me’, so he wrote a book *The White Island* (Eilean Bàn’s English name). It was a huge success.

Maxwell’s zoo project never did come to fruition, but in 1970 Lister-Kaye set up **Highland Wildlife Enterprises**, which was to be the forerunner of the Aigas Field Centre. And the rest, as they say, is history. Aigas offers wildlife holidays for adults, plus environmental education for thousands of children in the form of its **Naturedays at Aigas** project. It also participates in the **Scottish Wildcat** programme in partnership with **Scottish Wildcat Action**, aiming

to protect any wildcats left in the Highlands (it is not known if there are any), and in a conservation breeding programme led by the **Royal Zoological Society of Scotland**.


A part of the centre's work of which Lister-Kaye is particularly proud is its **Ranger Training Scheme**. So far 186 rangers have been trained; most of them go on to work in conservation, both in the UK and overseas.

Asked by an audience member how he thinks Brexit will affect wildlife conservation, Lister-Kaye replies that although he's worried about it, a side-effect has been the coming together of many NGOs to lobby government to keep at least the environmental laws that the UK already has. Before, they would sometimes have been too busy competing with one another to concentrate on 'hardcore conservation issues';

'But we must not take our foot off the gas.'

Thinking about the influences that have guided the course of his life, Lister-Kaye mentions the writing of not only Maxwell but also Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek* ('At the age of 26 I was simply dazzled by it.) and JA Baker's *Peregrine*. He 'adores' Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, then there's Baudelaire, Somerset Maugham, Hemingway...

'Like kippers, they all keep coming back.'

Lister-Kaye says he found *The Dun Cow* a very difficult book  to write. It was 'an emotional rollercoaster', painful in many ways. Lots of the places of his childhood had disappeared into the jaws of development, but more distressing were the memories of his mother. After his birth, she was in an oxygen tent for six weeks;

'I have carried a burden of guilt about this all my life'

He has written this book in her honour.

So what about the title then? Who was the Dun Cow and why are

we talking about her rib? Well, it turns out we are not, not really...but to find out who the Dun Cow was, and what her 'rib' really is, you'll have to read the book.

The Dun Cow Rib: A Very Natural Childhood by John Lister-Kaye is published by Canongate.

To find out more about the Aigas Field Centre visit the website [here](#).

John Lister-Kaye will be appearing at Linlithgow's *Further From* festival in February 2018.

