

Mirrors Windows Walking

Gus Wylie HonFRPS looks at *Cumbrian Coast Revisited*, by Keith Launchbury FRPS, and discusses the relationship between it and the work of the late Ray Moore on the same coastline.

I first met Keith Launchbury FRPS nearly a decade ago, when I attended a meeting of Lancashire Monochrome. It was the name of that group – suggesting something deeply felt and honourable – that had first stimulated my imagination. Having traversed the M6, I found myself among a gathering of enthusiastic and garrulous photographers, who had posted their work on the walls and easels all around the room. After my talk, largely based on my Scottish essays, we took a break, and I could then see what a fine and wholly committed gathering they were, with impeccable printing of the highest order, at such a level that I felt in awe of their darkroom abilities. Further, in conversation, I came to learn that, at that time, there was usually an annual Easter pilgrimage to the Isle of Lewis, to spend some days around the standing stones at Callanish, where often I had been myself – truly, we had an immediate affinity and I thought of them often after our meeting. Subsequently, I had notes from Launchbury on various things via email but, save a return visit to Lancashire Monochrome in 2008, we didn't meet again. That is, until I opened my inbox and noted the distinctive surname in the margin of the message. "Ah, Lancashire Monochrome", I thought. "Another meeting perhaps?" But in fact, that was not the case. "I don't know if you remember me ...", his email began, in a self-deprecating manner, "but I wondered if you would like to look at some of my latest work. It's on Blurb, and you can call it up any time you like." I brought it up on screen without delay, to see images of that windswept stretch of Cumbrian coast so beloved of Ray Moore, the names of which still resonate in the subconscious: Allonby, Maryport, Silloth, Harrington. I felt a slight pang of disappointment, for I have little time for imitative work based on that of other fine photographers, especially when they're no longer living. Nonetheless, I went to the title of the book and pressed Open. From that moment, I sat there for an hour at least, engrossed in what I had assumed would be derivative, plagiaristic and of little value. It soon became obvious that it was I who was misguided, and not Launchbury Now, why was this so? And why did I change my mind for, at first sight, the similarities with Moore's work do exist. As I viewed Launchbury's work, I was struck by the fact that, while perhaps superficially akin to Moore's, it is nothing like it.

To prove this point, it is probably best to look at Moore himself, and trace the origins of his influences. Like me, Moore was never taught as a photographer, and originally came from the Painting School of the Royal College of Art, and I am sure that he had no difficulty in thinking of 'The Photograph' as a singular and very particular kind of expressive art form. Nor does it surprise me that Henri Cartier-Bresson – the master of The Decisive Moment in miniature photography – also started with a fine art background, and was greatly influenced by Surrealism. Thus it is that the inherent reserve in this country with regard to considering photography as an 'Art', did not diminish its importance in any way for Moore. Accordingly, it was only natural that, in time, he would lean toward the work of American practitioners like Harry Callahan and Minor White, and that he was able to feel – in the early 1970s – comfortable in America.

A retrospective in 1971 at George Eastman House, followed a year later by a showing at the Art Institute of Chicago, served to establish Moore's reputation across the Atlantic. On returning to England, and within a decade, his first major British retrospective took place in 1981, at the Hayward Gallery in London. It should be remembered that Moore did much more than simply photograph within a particular strip of the Cumbrian coast – his subjects included Pembrokeshire, Cardiff, Nicosia, Alderney, Ayr, Galloway, Eire, Wiltshire and Reading. In fact, it is Launchbury by far who could be said to be the Photographer Laureate of Cumbria, but in no sense as a mere disciple of Moore. To fully appreciate just what it is that makes the two men apparently so similar in many ways, and yet in reality so different in others, you have to remember their histories and influences.

Firstly, within a decade of Moore's two American exhibitions, John Szarkowski, Head of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York at the time, produced, in 1978, *Mirrors and Windows*, the major exhibition of American photography, that spoke of the movement away from public to private concerns. Szarkowski felt that, in metaphorical terms, the photograph is seen either as a mirror – a romantic expression of the photographer's sensibility to the things and sights of this world; or as a window – through which the exterior world is perceived in all its presence and reality. Szarkowski alluded to the role of Minor White, and his contributions to *Aperture* magazine, in which he said, "There are four kinds of photographs: documentary, pictorial, informational, and The Equivalent." This final expression was first coined by Alfred Stieglitz, who said that it stood for, "... a feeling he had about something other than the subject of the photograph." And it was White who, when meeting Moore in his Arlington home, simply took one of his prints off the wall and gave it to him. Harry Callahan did likewise in Chicago. So it is not entirely a coincidence that White should subsequently come to England and, at Trent Polytechnic [now Nottingham Trent University], where Moore was then working, take part in a debate about the very thing of which Szarkowski had spoken. So there is no denying that there was a link from America being felt in England at this time, and that there is an ongoing respect from English photographers for those values that White espoused. I consider that, through Moore, Launchbury is one of them. However, if this is true, let us consider the working methods of the two men, their similarities and differences, for Launchbury simply does not work in a similar way to Moore – quite the contrary, in fact. In place of Moore's almost haphazard way of working, Launchbury is ever watchful, shutter cocked, finger ready, lucid, quick, instinctive. Whereas he uses the same type of Leica M rangefinder as Cartier-Bresson, he does so more in the manner of White's plate camera, and with a fixed tripod. 'But, for heavens sake, why?', I pondered on our first meeting. Yet, with the camera fixed, camera shake eliminated, the finest of film can then be used. Launchbury uses Technical Pan 25 and a fine grain compensating developer. In fact, his technique is not at all akin to that of Moore, but rather resembles that of Lewis Baltz and the New Topographics'

"Photography is about attitude. It's the 'feeling' of a place, or a conjunction of opposites, that concentrates the mind"

Bernard and Helga Becher, together with American photographer Robert Adams. But photography is not about technique. It's about attitude. It's the 'feeling' of a place, or a conjunction of opposites, that most concentrates the mind. Launchbury is similarly disposed, but not so happy about definitive answers, and prefers less to speak and more to write about his innermost thoughts. Like Schubert and Moore, he is a wanderer, walking deep in thought, gathering images like truffles – hard to find often, but well worth the search. As it was for the title of Richard Else's film portrait of Moore, it is *Every So Often*. In perusing this latest collection, spanning some two decades, I have come to admire what Launchbury has achieved with his long silent walks, not unlike those of Richard Long or Hamish Fulton. His total commitment to the medium requires this kind of dedicated solitude.

In Robert Adams' book of twilight work along the Colorado Range, he paraphrases it as Summer Nights, Walking, and for Launchbury it could be *Mirrors, Windows, Walking*. Seldom mentioned is the importance of actually looking. Launchbury, above all else, is a looker, and it shows: quietly distilling images in his little optical viewfinder, standard lens at the ready. Throughout this piece, I have said little about the work itself, and there is a very good reason to leave to a slightly later stage. Through conventional materials, Launchbury produces his own prints, meticulously and with deep affection for the process, and then transposes each print through digital technology. Through the added bonus of electronic book templates, he then has countless ways of juxtaposing and editing the images to his preferred feeling on layout, and the potential of various sizes and scale of individual frames. And what does he do? The answer is very simple – nothing. He merely orders the

sequence and presents every image in a similar fashion and to the same scale. The images 'breathe' within a white surround, and there are no tricks to be found, not one. He is saying, quite simply, "Just look at the pictures please ... that's all", and therefore I similarly ask the same of you. For me, the images are less about other photographers, and more especially about other influences, in support of a notion of 'a feeling' about a place. I am reminded of Dylan Thomas, and his description of the village in *Under Milk Wood* as being one within which, 'The Post Office sells treacle'. In Launchbury's walks and sensitive observations, you find signs, messages and graffiti, underpinned by a genuine sense of kinship. They are an English equivalent of that disciple of Walker Evans, William Christenbery, and his perennial documentations of the American South in Hale County, Alabama, returning again and again to watch and record the changing landscape and iconic barns, churches and outbuildings. Within this oeuvre can also be seen echoes of Tony Ray Jones and James Ravilious FRPS.

An older man walks his dog past a rickety shed bordering an allotment; a television set's fascia rests windblown on a barbed wire fence; a small unoccupied seat in the scene looking to sea is fenced off by plastic tape in the breeze; a man cranes forward from his bench to read the small notice before him; at a local carnival day, two young girls in grass skirts help another to limbo dance. These are images of quiet serenity, touching and human. At no stage in all of this is there a trace of the easy option of the patronising snigger or smirk. In their stead, are affection and respect. The origins of the influences may well come originally from an American ethos, but here they remain uniquely English. The flags of St George appear in some of the images. They are in the same tradition as that enlightened piece of documentation of the late 1930s that was begun as the Mass Observation Project, and should now be equally treasured for what they record and represent.

Gus Wylie HonFRPS

- Keith Launchbury FRPS
Cumbrian Coast Revisited, 243pp
PB, £39.67; HB with dust jacket, £54.70;
HB with imagewrap, £57.08.
<http://tinyurl.com/qj76uum>

First Published in the RPS Journal April 2014