

MIGHTY BEAST

Written by Sean Borodale, soundscape by Elizabeth Purnell, produced by Sara Davies, performed by Christopher Bianchi. BBC Radio 3, *Between the Ears*, 2013. 29mins10.

Reviewer: Mike Ladd

Mighty Beast was first broadcast on the BBC's *Between the Ears* program on January 26th 2013 and it went on to win a Radio Academy Gold Award for best feature the following year. Written by poet Sean Borodale, performed by Christopher Bianchi, with a soundscape by Elizabeth Purnell, and produced by Sara Davies, *Mighty Beast* is a half-hour feature that takes us into the cattle saleyard, and the lives of the auctioneers, animal handlers and farmers that are its denizens.

The genesis of *Mighty Beast* was an earlier work which Sean Borodale describes as 'a documentary poem'. (Borodale 2014) Much of the original poem was written on site at the Taunton Livestock Market in Somerset, which Sean first visited in 2006. I put a few questions to him about how *Mighty Beast* evolved:

ML: Could I ask you to describe your process in researching and writing the work?

SB: The work started out as a film project, one I initiated. The Market ran on Tuesdays and Saturdays. I first went on a Tuesday, when animals are sold for slaughter. And I was very struck by the compression of a dispersed community of buyers and sellers that I encountered inside all that noise, the tension of the sale itself, the delicacy and speed of bidding – which I could hardly discern – the moving of livestock through a brutal system of metal gates and races (as the corridors between pens are called). Hideous levels of noise and the auctioneer's rapid continuous talk cranked up over all that cacophony. And it struck me how like a theatre, the semi-circular theatre of ancient drama, it was/is: between all these people who'd come in to town, a crazy theatre in which spectators participated and through which animals processed, people who just came to watch, a ritual social gathering too, for the far-flung from isolated farms (it didn't take much talking to people there to realise that) – men, mainly, but not all men, who sat or stood about on the stepped benches around the sale ring, people who spent much of their working life alone, marginal aspects of the urban context. It was very much a gut reaction, but I was caught by the place, and given the plight of farming in the UK over the previous years, felt I had to return.

I went about writing on site, talking to people. I raised funds and collaborated with an artist on a 16mm film project, a lyrical documentary, footage shot over the course of a year. The film contained some of the phrases and lines I'd written there but in the end my words just didn't gel with the richness of the celluloid image itself: too aesthetic, too beautiful, it made anything else feel added, or off-key. There was also a nostalgic rendering through the nature of the image itself which bothered me and I wanted to get to the real core of what I felt the energy of the market, for good or bad, was about. But I had attended about twenty markets in all, filming, and had built up a huge archive of material – film, sound, written notes, photos – and above all, had got to know people there. They let me listen, and confided in me too. Some had just got used to me being there and they had begun to carry on as if I wasn't.

I heard a latent music in all the percussive sounds and bangs and steps and tannoys etcetera which haunted me. And a kind of fugue in all that noise, one running out on itself, one I saw processing out of market, out of town. These are the kinds of thoughts that were gathering. The whole project culminated in a screening of the film to the cattle community in the dairy sale ring, which became a 'cinema' for the purpose, after one of the last markets before the place closed permanently for relocation in an out of town site.

Film done, I started to read back through my notes and to write, and what happened was that I found (that) in order to hold all the various observations, recordings, voices, reactions together, I was leaning towards just one voice, one channel, to charge it like electricity charges a single piece of wire, and I wanted to charge it, to make it glow slightly, in the way I had felt charged listening to the auctioneers, and because it is a ritual, a sort of position of conducting the 'theatre' of selling, the voice of auctioneer became the voice of the poem. And the poem a series of sales: a processing plant for all my site-notes and bits of response and snippets I'd picked up and had in storage, literally selling them off: observations on the looks in people's eyes, the shape of a mouth, bits of machinery, voice, stories of suicides on lonely farms, and even the auctioneer's voice itself, knocks, cries, tea breaks, whatever I'd noticed, but also the tone, the sense of big traumas that lurked everywhere in the compound of all those gathered lives at the market. This was what I ended up with, as I edited and rewrote my notes into a long poem in the year or so after finishing the film, and what I developed was what became the radio work.

ML: After the film and before it became radio, didn't *Mighty Beast* also have a brief theatrical life?

SB: *Mighty Beast* was read with a cast of four actors at the Bristol Old Vic theatre, working with director, Caroline Hunt, for the Ferment festival of new work in 2010. Sara Davies introduced herself to me after one of the

two performances and a year later we met up to discuss working together on a radio-version of the poem. Sara put together a proposal based on our discussion, I selected extracts from the poem, and once we'd had the go-ahead from the BBC, we visited the new market together (Sedgemoor Auction Centre), sought out some of the individuals who'd been involved in the film project, and sought interviews: three people, three voices from the farming community. And we brought in the actor, Chris Bianchi, who'd played the part of the auctioneer at the Old Vic. Sara brought in the composer [Elizabeth Purnell] whom she'd worked with before.

ML: Did you have input to how your words were read, and the mix of interviews, sound and music or was that done by Sara Davies using your written contribution?

SB: I had huge input into the radio production, as I had at the Old Vic into its treatment of the poem, too. The whole process has been very open, rewarding, discursive. This involvement was down to the generosity of Sara, and her seeing it as an entirely collaborative project, but also her sensitivity to the role/voice of the poet in a poem; she made it clear that the 'poet' should be able to lead the project. I was present at all recordings and discussions right through to the final edit. Sara and I met with the composer and discussed ideas for the sound/music together. Sara brought in ideas for structure, and of interleaving real voices between the sales; this was really a truncated version of the longer poem. Between us we found the shape and discussed re-scripting elements for the final work. The interviews were Sara recording me in conversation with the auctioneer, cattlemen etc. My voice edited out, of course. But Sara too, became a presence in these conversations. So, it was a real collaboration. I hope we'll work together again; certainly we hope to. (Borodale 2014a)

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The BBC Radio 3 *Between the Ears* website simply calls the radio version of *Mighty Beast* a 'documentary'. (Between the Ears, 2014). But I'd go further than that and describe *Mighty Beast* as a 'radio poem'. So what do I mean by that? Radio poetry is not simply reading page-poetry on the radio. Instead, radio poems use spoken words, non-verbal sounds, music, and silence, to build a poem within the radio medium. Radio poems operate through feeling as much as intellect, and give scope for different interpretations. They are not so much about imparting information or telling a story, as creating an experience. They are more associative than expository, often proceeding in a non-linear way.

Radio poems, like page-poems, may be structured as ‘audio stanzas’. (Ladd, 2011) For example, Jandl & Mayrocker's *Five Man Humanity*, first broadcast on German radio in 1968, is a fifteen-minute journey, from birth, school, military training, to a court martial and death by firing squad, focusing on situations where people are placed in rows, such as hospital wards, schoolrooms, and marching formations. (Jandl & Mayrocker 1968). Using a percussive rhythmic pattern, words and sounds are formed into groups of five, giving the piece a five-lined stanzaic form.

Often radio poems use sounds as symbol or metaphor, and they can employ ‘audio rhymes’ – by this I mean placing sounds that have similar morphology, but come from different sources, next to each other, or merging them via cross-fades. Jane Ulman, the multiple Prix Italia-winning Australian producer [and *RadioDoc Review* Editorial Board member], calls it ‘sound assonance’ and sees it as a playful and musical way of bringing disparate elements together. In her feature produced with ABC sound engineer Russell Stapleton, *Pan, panic in the Australian bush*, which is about the meaning and value of forests, she puts together sounds that are alike, but which conjure radically different visual images. (Ulman & De Jong 1997) A didgeridoo is paired with an aeroplane, a bowerbird ‘rhymes’ with a helicopter. There is contrast here, but also conjunction. The sounds emphasise connectedness; how we touch the environment, and how the environment touches us.

Another example of both stanzaic structure and audio rhyme is *Running the Goat*, Chris Brookes’s 2005 feature on the closure of the Newfoundland cod fishing industry. (Brookes 2005) The feature is divided into ‘eight dance figures’, which could be seen as eight stanzas. We hear a woman tuning up her singing voice, merged with the exact pitch of foghorns, and the stomping feet of the local folk dancers is ‘rhymed’ with the pattering of the fishing boats. The natural poetry of the old fishermen’s names for their fishing grounds is also explored.

The text of *Mighty Beast* spoken by the narrator/auctioneer, has the restless note-taking quality we observe in Sean Borodale’s poetry for the page. It’s the same nervy, hurried, stenography of the day to be found in his book-length work, *Notes for an Atlas*, written whilst walking around London. (Borodale 2003)

Sean Borodale himself says: ‘increasingly, my writing tries to find a voice inside the guise of a character: market auctioneer (not actual but as

if/appropriated); bee keeper (which I became and still am) and the voice of cook/domestic figure (which I have been at “home” and which my next collection of poems *Human Work* is written in). So there’s a pattern emerging and I think in this respect, *Mighty Beast* has exerted an influence over subsequent work. *Bee Journal* and *Human Work* like *Mighty Beast*, which in its own way tries to find a more ‘public’ solution to the problem of the poet’s voice trying to fit in with the context/situation/culture about which it speaks/writes/makes utterances - comes out of this vein of approach, a kinetic approach: these poems, their moments of writing, running about in the chaos of the cattle market, trying not to be trampled on by a panicky cow, etc, working at the hive, or over the stove whilst stirring etc, run in the thick and pressure of time’s events, written in the crowded haphazard medium of life, seeking, that “slight surprise of action” (Bruno Latour) which is the epigraph to my next book *Human Work*.’ (Borodale 2014a)

So this is not poetry recollected in Wordsworthian tranquillity, but catching the ‘potent present’, allowing interruptions and ‘responding to the world live.’ (Borodale 2014a) The auctioneering tradition is a perfect vehicle for Borodale, with its rapid delivery, clipped, compressed grammar, rhythmic repetitions, colourful asides and changes of vocal register. Borodale’s 2012 collection *Bee Journal*, a diary in poetry of his beekeeping, is spiked with metaphor, consonance, assonance and other sound play. (Borodale 2012) So is the text of *Mighty Beast*. He describes a cow as ‘like a born-again tractor’, the soil of a farm as ‘sods of worn-down self,’ and here is his description of a worker spreading straw:

Like this man dropping a bale into the ring
Cutting the twine, pop, the bale relaxes

For sale as disturbed

Lifting it, strewing it, letting it scatter

Stillness, briefly
Is something the matter?

A knot of unlit idea, axis of stopped time

Where his parents farmed and he does not
Very beautiful, can’t explain it

Comes with a suicide, grim tether
Suicide of his mother, death of his father

What's a farm horribly gone wrong? Give me a price
Can you abide, sir? Can you abide sir?

There's a story here of a man forced off his family's farm, but it is evoked, rather than spelt out. Another element of the radio poem (and poetry in general) is ellipsis, so that we feel and intuit the meaning instead of being told it directly. Sean Borodale describes the way he introduces more than the simple selling of animals into the auctioneer's patter: 'The auctioneer works through the sale of livestock, and other things: sales of depression, grief, isolation, catastrophe, human-animal welfare and vulnerability within the tough, shared system of modern agriculture and economics.' (Borodale 2014) The theme of rural suicide is also picked up later in the piece, when the auctioneer says, 'Sale of a suicide, can I broach it?' There is a strong sense of social history in *Mighty Beast* as the interviewees discuss the impact of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the area, quarantine and isolation, and the subsequent closure of the market which was always such an important social as well as economic gathering, an antidote to the loneliness of the farm.

Mighty Beast is structured around four elements: Borodale's poetic auctioneer; edited interviews with the market workers and farmers; beautifully composed music which echoes and expands rhythms within the spoken word and the location sounds of the market; and finally the sounds themselves, such as gates, cows bellowing, bells and winter wind. The feature has eighteen sections, or cantos, divided by the acoustical punctuation devices of the gavel and the gate. Including a prelude and a postlude by the narrator/auctioneer, these sections alternate between the actuality of the interviews and extracts of Borodale's poem performed by Chris Bianchi.

Although beginning with the opening of the market in the morning and finishing with the sense of the end of the day:

Got to be gone ... Got to be gone

Guaranteed in difficulty, guaranteed as I say

Away for this then.

Away for this then.

Fancy a bite?

I could do with a bite to eat.

the progression of *Mighty Beast* is essentially non-linear. Between the narrator/auctioneer and the interviewees the topics covered include: reading animal behaviour, suicide, rain, fear, the mechanisation of farms, loneliness, the craft of auctioneering, the quality of meat, foot and mouth disease, winter, the companionship of the market, the sensitivity required to be a slaughterman, the washing of cattle, and so on. But these topics don't link in a straight line; rather the effect is cumulative and we are left with the impression of being in a circle of voices, a radio sales ring, just like the original 'semi-circular theatre' of the market that captivated Borodale. In this way, the form of *Mighty Beast* embodies its subject. This is another aspect of the radio poem.

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Mighty Beast sits within a long tradition of radio works that explore the poetic and musical elements of everyday speech, particularly the languages of labour. *Running the Goat* by Chris Brookes is one example already mentioned. Another is *A Requiem for St Kilda*, a feature by the Scottish poet, Kenneth Steven, and producer Julian May. (Steven & May 2005) It was recorded on location in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. The program weaves together Steven's poetry and archival voices of the bird-hunting, tweed-making islanders with the sounds of the island itself.

In 1990, sound engineer Stuart Hall and I produced *Cries and Calls* for ABC Radio. (Ladd & Hall 1990) This feature collected recordings of individuals who cried out in public for one reason or another, including rag and bone men, newspaper sellers, greengrocers, bingo callers and auctioneers. We were looking for members of the public who used performance elements in their work without necessarily seeing themselves as poets or musicians. The selected recordings were then combined with composed music that mimicked and extended the cries.

Mighty Beast most strongly reminds me of the famous *Radio Ballads* series produced by Charles Parker in collaboration with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. (Parker, MacColl & Seeger, 1957-1964) The eight radio ballads broadcast by the BBC between 1957 and 1964 were so successful that several of them were later released on vinyl by the Argo

label. At that time, they were revolutionary programs for the BBC, with a heady mix of original music, location sound and the voices of the actual subjects. As Seán Street points out in his chapter on the *Radio Ballads* in his book *The Poetry of Radio*, while they were not the first features to do this, the ballads still broke from the common practice of transcribing interviews and then having them read by actors in character voices and accents. (Street 2012) In a curious way, Sean Borodale revisits this practice in *Mighty Beast*, transcribing and re-interpreting the words of actual auctioneers and livestock handlers into his own poetry, which is then performed by an actor.

The first of the radio ballads was *The Ballad of John Axon*, about a 1957 train crash that claimed the life of the train driver John Axon. Axon had stayed on board a runaway train, so he could warn the station ahead of the impending crash. Producer Charles Parker asked Ewan MacColl to write songs to illustrate his feature on Axon, but MacColl wanted to know more about railways in order to make his music more authentic. So, armed with Parker's new EMI five-inch portable tape recorder, they went to the Edgeley Railway Yards to gather background material. They spent two weeks there – imagine persuading the bureaucrats to give you that much time these days! – and realised that the real voices were so much richer and more expressive than cleaned-up transcripts read by actors. Parker was worried about the heavy accents, but MacColl persuaded him to use the recordings, with MacColl and Seeger adapting phrases and stories to folk ballads threaded through the actuality.

Other radio ballads explored particular occupations: *Song of the Road* (1958) was about the workers who built the M1 motorway, *The Big Hewer* (1961) focused on the coal industry and *Singing the Fishing* (1960) was a tribute to the herring fishing communities of East Anglia. The ballads, at least the sung elements, were sometimes criticised for sentimentalising working life by manipulating the interview material too heavily in converting it to folk music, but what can't be denied is that they were entertaining, and they represented a breakthrough in revealing the worlds of the workers to a wide audience.

Never sentimentalising, musical, complex and evocative, *Mighty Beast* represents a fresh and inventive iteration of this tradition.

AUDIO of MIGHTY BEAST can be found [HERE](#).

Please note the clip is provided for LISTENING ONLY – it may not be downloaded or used for commercial purposes.

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MIKE LADD is a poet and radio broadcaster. He is the founder and series producer of *Poetica*, ABC Radio National's long-running poetry feature. He has published eight books of poetry. The most recent is *Karrawirra Parri* (Wakefield Press, 2012) written as he walked the River Torrens in his home state of South Australia, from source to sea. In 1995 he and his long-term collaborator Stuart Hall were awarded a special commendation at the Prix Futura Berlin for their radio feature, *Tracks and Traces*. Mike's most recent poem for radio is *South American Sound Diary*. Written and recorded in various locations in South America and inspired by Neruda's *Canto General*, it was broadcast on ABC Radio National's 360 Documentaries in September 2013.

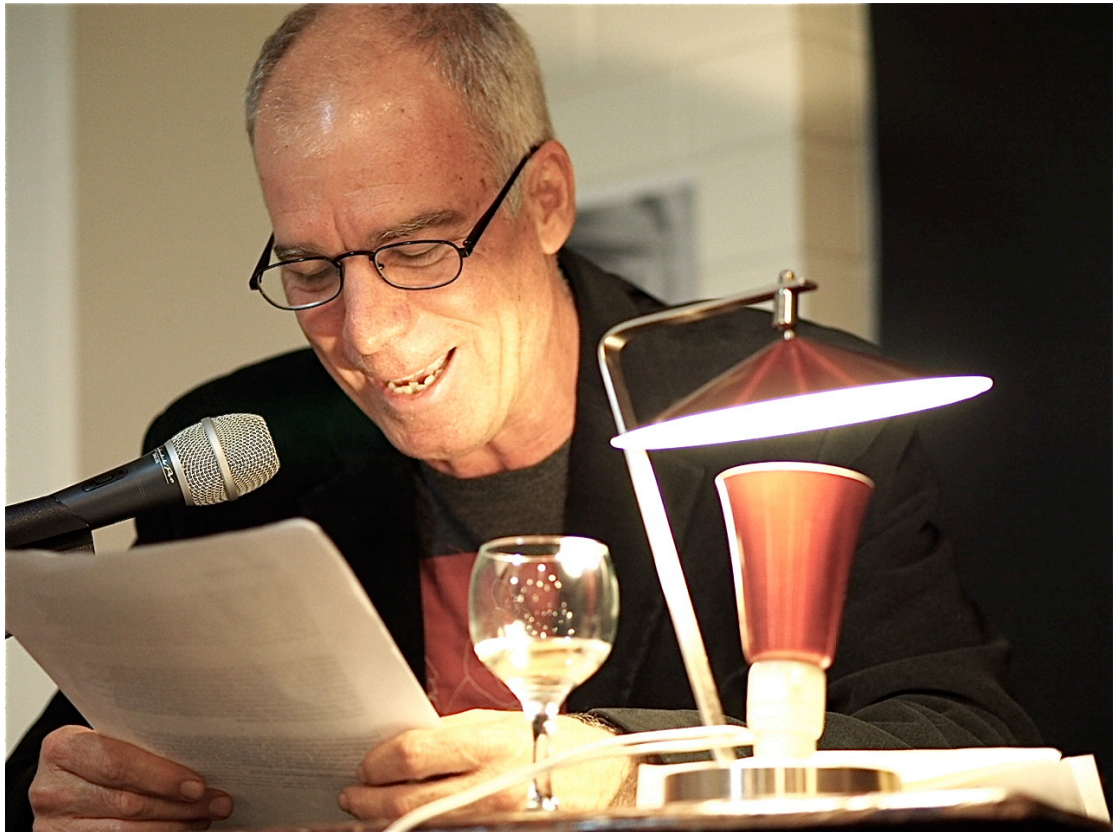


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