

THE LAST OF ENGLAND

*Extract from a Radio Play based on Ford Maddox Brown's painting:
"The Last of England"*

By

David Calcutt

The play interweaves the fictional voices of the characters in the painting with fragments of real commentary by members of the public viewing the picture in Birmingham City Art Gallery, and the curator.

FADE UP THE SOUND OF THE SEA, WAVES WASHING AGAINST THE SIDE OF A BOAT, THE TIMBERS OF THE BOAT CREAKING. A SAIL SMACKS IN THE WIND. THE ARTIST SPEAKS OVER THIS. NARRATIVE VOICES WEAVE IN AND OUT.

ARTIST: See the boat as it draws away. The long voyage ahead. Outward bound...

VOICE: This picture is about people leaving...

ARTIST: Wind. Water. A grey sky with clouds...

VOICE: We went by boat and it was The Last of England and it was cold...

ARTIST: The light hard and sharp on the waves...

VOICE: A long voyage to Australia in the middle of the nineteenth century...

ARTIST: And illuminating their faces, these two, the man and the woman...

VOICE: We're looking at a middle-class, Victorian couple...

ARTIST: ...gazing out, not looking back. The eye holds them, fixed, framed...

VOICE: It's the oval format which is so startling, really...

ARTIST: ...sailing away, leaving everything behind, leaving England forever...

VOICE: A friend of his, Thomas Woolner, left for Australia in 1852...

ARTIST: We saw them off, standing on the dock at Gravesend, calling out to them until they couldn't hear us anymore...

VOICE: Woolner decided to make his fortune in the Australian gold-rush...

ARTIST: ...then simply standing and watching as the boat took them out to the ship. A dark shape on the horizon, where sky meets sea...

VOICE: A boat that's called El Dorado...

ARTIST: I'd thought of going myself. Take Emma and the child, escape from the mouse-trap, the hell of poverty...

VOICE: He was living near Hampstead Heath, he had rather impoverished lodgings there...

ARTIST: And what if I had? What if those two were us...?

VOICE: Self-portraits...

ARTIST: Their faces ours...?

VOICE: Ford Maddox Brown and his wife, Emma...

ARTIST: The wind in our faces, salt on our lips, the sound of the waves beating in our ears, as we hunch forward, backs turned on England...

VOICE: Setting off for a new life ahead...

ARTIST: That light in my eyes...

VOICE: The artist uses himself...

ARTIST: A dark light on that glowering, insufferable face...

VOICE: Every picture tells a story...

ARTIST: With all its anguished past and its obscure, imagined future...

VOICE: Emigrating to Australia...

ARTIST: Gazing back at me, as out of a mirror darkly...

VOICE: El Dorado, the city of gold.

FADE UP THE SOUND OF THE SEA. THEN, HARD CUT TO THE SOUND OF A FIDDLE PLAYING. BRIEFLY, WE HEAR A NARRATIVE VOICE, UNDER THIS.

VOICE: I think there's music being played...

VOICE FADES AGAIN UNDER THE FIDDLE, AND WE HEAR THE RUFFIAN TAKE UP THE TUNE, SINGING

RUFFIAN: As I walked out one morning fair
Heave away! Haul away!
It's there I met Miss Nancy Blair
And we're bound for South Australia

*Heave away, you rolling king,
Heave away! Haul away!
All the way you'll hear me sing
We're bound for South Australia!*

THE FIDDLE FADES A LITTLE BUT CONTINUES UNDER THE FOLLOWING NARRATIVE

VOICE: I think it's the oval format which is so startling really... You can see it's not quite a perfect oval, it's slightly flattened on the left and right, and then you get the circular sweep top and bottom, which is echoed immediately by various curves throughout the composition, most obviously the line of the umbrella, the line of rope on the bow of the ship, then the circular chain of linking hands and hands hanging on to things, there's the husband and wife in the foreground, there's the marvellous detail of the mother's hand cradling the little baby son's hand, just visible through the shawl. But if you look to the left of the composition, you'll see lots of other hands hanging on to things...hands are touching each other...there's this sort of chain reaction going on, a sort of human interconnection in the composition...

FADE UP THE FIDDLE AND THE RUFFIAN SINGING

RUFFIAN: There ain't but one thing grieves my mind
Heave away! Haul away!
It's to leave Miss Nancy Blair behind
And we're bound for South Australia.

*Heave away, you rolling king,
Heave away! Haul away!
All the way you'll hear me sing
We're bound for South Australia!*

ONCE AGAIN, FADE FIDDLE A LITTLE AND FADE UP NARRATIVE

VOICE: We're looking at a middle class, Victorian couple, who are emigrating and they're on the packet boat that's taking them out to the ship. It's a one class boat and they are obviously middle class, uncomfortable people...over his right shoulder is a riot, it seems, going on, of people smoking and it looks rather a loud, raucous crowd –

VOICE: - a kind of crush of people from all different backgrounds and walks of life –

VOICE: It's all classes together –

VOICE: Rather disreputable characters, petty criminals, that kind of thing, seeking their fortune in Australia –

VOICE: - . All this is going on around them, but there's a sense that what you're looking at are these two people who are lost in themselves.

FADE UP THE FIDDLE AND THE RUFFIAN SINGING. AS HE SINGS THIS VERSE, WE BRING IN THE SOUND OF THE BOAT ON THE SEA, THE SINGING AND THE FIDDLE PLAYING TAKING PLACE IN THE BOAT, AT SOME LITTLE DISTANCE.

RUFFIAN: I run her all night, I run her all day
Heave away! Haul away!
Run her before we sailed away
And we're bound for South Australia.

*Heave away, you rolling king,
Heave away! Haul away!
All the way you'll hear me sing
We're bound for South Australia!*

THE FIDDLE CONTINUES AS WE HEAR A SNATCH OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ARTIST AND HIS WIFE

WIFE: Should we not look back?

ARTIST: What for? We've said our farewells.

WIFE: It may be the last time we see England

ARTIST: Then let it be. I've no wish to see it again.

WIFE: Do you fee no regret?

ARTIST: At the moment I feel nothing but this damned cold!

WIFE: If you will leave your collar undone. Here. Let me button it for you.

SHE BUTTONS HIS COAT COLLAR. AS SHE DOES, SO, FADE UP NARRATIVE VOICES OVER.

VOICE: And so the husband and wife fill the centre of the story, fill the centre of the composition. Your eye travels all over the detail of the picture, but it comes time and time again, I think, back to those two faces.

And I think this oval format is so clever because it's a precursor of the effect of the camera lens –

VOICE: You're looking at these people under a lens –

VOICE: The cinema lens moving in to a close-up shot...

CROSSFADE TO ARTIST AND WIFE AGAIN

WIFE: There. That should keep some of this wind out.

ARTIST: Thank you.

WIFE: And I expect you're right. Let us not look back. England is behind us. Let it remain so. We shall only look forward and to the future.

CROSSFADE TO NARRATIVE VOICES

VOICE: Our human interest is always with other human beings, how they feel about it, in the way you talk to a person in reality, you look at their faces –

VOICE: It is hard, at times, to put into words, the looks on their faces–

VOICE: They just want to make their passage, get it over and done with, and start afresh –

VOICE: And it's exactly the same with this painting, you come back and you read what they're thinking through their facial expression.

VOICE: - bleak, tragic, forlorn, lost, bewildered –

VOICE: This is a self-portrait of the mind of the artist.

FADE UP THE SOUND OF THE FIDDLE AND RUFFIAN SINGING AGAIN. THIS TIME, FADE UP TOO THE SOUND OF THE BOAT AT SEA, SO THAT NOW WE HEAR THE RUFFIAN SINGING AND PLAYING FROM THE BOAT ITSELF, AS HEARD BY THE ARTIST.

RUFFIAN: And as you wollop round Cape Horn
Heave away! Haul away!
You'll wish that you had never been born
And we're bound for South Australia.