

CHAPTER 14

Boxing Clever

The Fight Game



The problem of the artist is to direct the audience to the heart of the contradiction in its inhuman brutalising ... while asserting the positive virtues of the individual boxer's victory over adversity ... Boxing – damnable; Boxers – admirable.

EWAN MACCOLL, PRELIMINARY NOTES FOR THE FIGHT GAME, 1963

I heard the referee saying six, seven, eight. I thought, well, I'm going to get a right drubbing if I get up. But I get up.

PETER KEENAN, EX BRITISH COMMONWEALTH BANTAMWEIGHT CHAMPION, THE FIGHT GAME, 1963

Stung by the comparative failure of *On the Edge* with the critics, in early 1963 Ewan MacColl collects a small group of people together to listen to each Radio Ballad again. He then steps back and writes a thorough critique. He concludes that only the first four can be called ‘ballads’ in the strict sense of the word; he decides that *The Body Blow* and *On the Edge* can best be described as documentary radio features with incidental music conceived in the folk idiom. To succeed, he decides a Radio Ballad needs ‘a carefully worked-out musical structure in which the actuality is set like the dialogue in a novel.’ He wants *The Fight Game* to have an almost continuous musical line as in the *Fishing* and *Axon*.

Within a fortnight of the broadcast of *On the Edge* he and Charles put together an ideas paper on a programme about Boxing. Charles and Peggy hadn’t been at all keen, but Ewan wins them round. He said:

We had chosen professional boxing as a subject in an effort to escape from the huge canvas of industry and the intensely private world of the sick and the adolescent. I think we imagined that we were embarking upon a Radio Ballad which, for a change, would be gay and light-hearted. How naïve we were! It soon became apparent that we had entered a world inhabited by people who regarded the prize ring as a symbolical representation of the larger world in which we all live. Boxers, managers, trainers, sports commentators, all stressed this point over and over again.

Here was a sport coming under increasing scrutiny because of the number of boxers suffering from severe pounding in the ring, with an effect extending from minor brain damage (for which punch-drunk was the euphemism) to coma and worse. The death in the ring of Davey Moore soon after they began their interviews made it particularly topical. Since 1900, 450 boxers had died after fights, 200 of them in the 18 years since World War II, one a month. In Britain the doctor and Labour peer Baroness Summerskill was leading a campaign to ban the sport, which in her view exploited and damaged the most deprived in society to satisfy something little better than blood lust. Boxing since the days of Lord Byron had become entirely a poor man’s ‘sport’, and one with little appeal to the middle-class spectator. A manager described the boxer’s motive as:

Economic necessity. I never met one in my life that went into the boxing game for the sheer love of it. It’s always that drive to get some money. Or perish ... All fighters have got to come off of poor families. Before you become a boxer you’ve got to be poor, you know, off a big family, or a poor family. But you don’t get a doctor’s son coming to be a boxer because he’s, he’s been spoiled, he’s had a good upbringing, he’s never wanted.