

Silver at the Ploughing
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The Greek hero Odysseus was ploughing his field on Ithaca when the recruiting sergeant enlisted him for the expedition against the Trojans. Lucius Quinctius, a retired Roman statesman, was following the plough when a delegation from the Senate arrived to plead with him to return to defend the city against the invader. Victory achieved, Quinctius returned to his farm, declining all honours and accolades. He was known by the sobriquet Cincinnatus, “the curly haired”. He recently became a Google celebrity when name-checked by Boris Johnson. Cincinnatus’s reputation for selfless public service was legendary. In 1783 a society was formed by American officers, called the Society of the Cincinnati, whose aim was to preserve the ideals of the American Revolution. In 1790 a town in the Northwest Territory of Ohio was named Cincinnati in honour of the Society. Today a sculpture stands prominently in the city, showing the Roman statesman with curly hair and beard, one hand returning the *fascēs*, a bundle of wooden rods which symbolised his power as dictator, the other resting on his plough.

When Irish ploughmen gathered for the National Ploughing Championships in Co Laois last week, I was in Cincinnatus’s city of Rome. I was, however, able to summon to the inner eye of memory the ploughing fields of Ratheniska, because it was there I spent the happiest of childhood years. Spelled “Ratheniska”—but pronounced “Rathineska”—, the Irish name, “Raithín an Uisce”, means “little rath of the water”. The fairy fort was in the field behind the house where I grew up.

During the Fifties my father was the schoolmaster in Ratheniska. The teacher’s house was located between the school and chapel, which stood at a fork where three roads converged. The countryside gently sloped away, presenting a panoramic vista of serene and varied beauty. Irregular fields of every shape and size were framed by a network of ditches and hedgerows; clumps of woodland punctuated the landscape. The panorama changed with the seasons: the brown earth and rotting winter stubble turned to delicate green in spring and a brighter tone as the harvest ripened. The mood could change hourly as light and shadow played against one another between earth and sky. To the east you could observe a lashing cloudburst, while the sun flashed through rifted clouds in the west. Shadow and sunburst, wind and light, clouds ominous or luminous, the elements fused in dramatic beauty. Rainbows frequently adorned the vaulted expanse; thunderstorms brought fascination and terror.

One of my earliest memories is of our neighbour Denis Drennan ploughing the field below the school at Ratheniska, his giant Clydesdales frothing at the mouth, hooves stamping as they strained against the creaking harness and heaved into the tearing earth. With the reins balancing the stronger horse against the weaker, Denis guided the ploughshare as it sliced the sod into gleaming ridges. At the end of the furrow he turned on the headland and in an elaborate manoeuvre aligned horses and plough in the opposite direction. By evening the field was a glistening spectacle of perfectly parallel lines.

Free-range children, there were no limits to where we could roam. On Sunday afternoons as my brothers, passionate about our national games, listened to the commentator's screeching on the battery-powered wireless – to me the acme of boredom – I crossed ditches and walked grassy headlands, gathering hazel nuts, sloes, rosehips, vetches and berries. The hedgerows were a self-contained ecology of growth, with blackthorn, ivy, honeysuckle, ash, sycamore, elm and elderberry all tangled and enmeshed. They were home to the speckled wood and orange tip butterfly, honeybee and a host of insects. In those days one heard the corncrake, cuckoo and curlew; the countryside buzzed with wildlife.

One of my most pleasant memories from those Sunday evenings is of the Raidio Éireann programme, *Ceol do Pháistí* (Music for Children). “The Shepherd’s Song” from Beethoven’s Pastoral was frequently played, the perfect mood music for an idyllic rural childhood. By contrast, I have just one unhappy memory from those carefree afternoons. After Mass on a Sunday in mid June, my godfather’s widow, Mrs Rankin, who never forgot my birthday, gave me two half crowns, a small treasure in 1959. It was the first time I had not just one but two of those prized pre-decimal coins exquisitely decorated with a silver horse. After dinner – in the middle of the day – I set out on my usual adventure, through a gap in the fence into the meadow behind our house. I wandered through the budding corn and scraped my way through brambles and briars. Lying on my back in the sun I put my hand in my trousers to take out and admire again my shiny pair of horses, and the words *leath choróin* in the old Irish spelling. Both pockets were empty. I retraced my steps in vain. The coins with the silver horses are still somewhere in that field.

As they ploughed the field in Ratheniska last week, I wonder did one of the ploughmen catch a fleeting glint of silver perhaps, as he turned the sod.