

# The Song of the Scythe



My grass had grow almost untouched for the best part of three years. In places, the grass roots were so densely entangled that pulling on one plant might roll up a whole section like rotting underlay. It had broken my lawnmower long ago. A local farmer with a brush cutter cleared the part visible from the road and tractored the mowings into a heap at the back. He did a good job, but it took several days and the noise was almost unbearable.

I took a lawn rake to the rest, combing it out to less than half its former thickness. Each bare patch revealed was alive with insects and strewn with un-germinated seeds. It was hard work – I could only manage an hour or so at a time – but it was blissfully peaceful, and I had the constant company of a robin eager to see what I would discover next. I noticed that what I collected was mostly grass; the sorrels and buttercups were more deeply rooted. The remaining grass lay flat when I was finished,, all but a few proud, thick tussocks.

I looked at the variety revealed and wondered – what now? I did not want to buy another lawnmower to force it into suburban uniformity. I wanted to keep the clumps of sorrel, the swathes of buttercups, the vetch and cuckoo-pint when it appeared, the cranes-bill and foxglove around the edges. I wanted it wild – but not too wild. And I didn't want a weed-whacker. Not even an electric one.

So I bought a scythe. I'd tried one before – a cumbersome aluminium-handled object well suited for cutting rushes, if you were up to such work. It was the only type available locally. What I needed, the Internet assured me, was lighter and more handy, an Austrian scythe. Older books, from the time of the Ottoman empire, called it a Turk scythe, light and sharp enough to mow a lawn. I found a supplier in Wales that rejoiced in the name of Scythe Cymru.

A scythe is the bicycle of grassland management. It may not get you very far or fast, but it will get you exactly where you need to go and you will enjoy the journey – once you have mastered its little ways. Like a bicycle, indeed like any good tool, it becomes an extension of your body – eventually. And

because each body is different, the scythe has to be adjusted to fit both you and your purpose. The technique, the setting of the blade and its sharpness are all different for trimming grass than for hacking brambles.

It takes time, but when you get it right you can hear the song of the scythe – the quick, clean sigh as it cuts through the grass and lays it neatly in the windrow. Stay upright, let the blade polish the ground, sing forward and back on the same arc, step in time with the swing. Like any rhythmic exercise it can become a dance, a meditation.

There is a longer rhythm too; every five minutes or so you can feel the blade becoming less sharp, so you must stop to hone with a few strokes of the whetstone. It gives you a chance to stop and look around you – to see how far you have come and where you are going. Work and rest, work and rest in perfect balance.

There is no inherent dignity in working any harder or longer than you want to, or you need. The rhythm breaks. You lose the flow. You lose direction. You cut grass and buttercup alike.

There is a saying in competitive sports, “It doesn’t get any easier; you just go faster.” You become a machine, doing one specific, tightly defined job and doing it for one specific purpose – to improve one specific metric. I am not a machine. The older I get, I need than one purpose for anything I do.

I cut my grass to make my house a pleasant place to visit. I cut my grass to give other plants a chance to grow. I cut when it is long and wet because I have better things to do on dry sunny days (like riding my bike). I cut it to notice what is going on in and around the lawn. I cut it for exercise, for time to rest, to get in the flow and to hear the song of the scythe.

**Jenny Brien**

Image: *Scything grass in the Meadows, Nottingham*, by S W Oscroft.  
(© Nottingham City Museums and Galleries; Nottingham Castle)