

# Active Age

*Padraig McGinn*

I WAS SITTING in the garden when the lady from the local Active Age branch drove up. She looked purposeful and determined. I don't normally sit in the garden and, if I do, I see something that must be done immediately. Garden designers say that the first thing everyone should have in a garden is a seat. I have always agreed with the poet who wrote: "What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare", but when you sit in your garden, you see weeds that should be pulled, greenfly devouring your roses or potatoes that need spraying. That's the trouble with a garden. There's always something that must be done.

It was warm and still, a lovely day to watch the bumble bees among the blue spikes of the Ajuga. I tried to count the bees but they kept moving around. Two lines from an Irish poem learned at school, when I was seven or eight, floated into my head. "Nach aoibhinn crónán na mór bheach bhfiáin, Ins na scotha fé bhláth aon lá dea-shín." Those lines about the hum of the bumble bees among the blossoms on a fine day were all I could remember after seventy-plus years.

As the petals from the Japanese cherry floated down, I thought of my mother who gave me a love of gardening. When she was in her

sixties, she asked me to plant some trees behind her house, to screen her from the playground behind. I thought sixty was very old then. My mind said, "Does she think she'll live forever? It'll be ten years before they are any size. Where will she be in ten years?" But I kept my thoughts to myself and planted some trees. They grew quickly and she enjoyed them for several years. The cherry trees were shedding their petals when she passed away at eighty.

I was now over eighty and I had spent the previous few days setting pear, apple and plum trees. Was I mad to be setting trees at my age? Another line from schooldays kept coming into my head. "Maireann an chraobh ar an ailm ach ní mhaireann an láimh a chur." Why did that line keep coming back to haunt me after so many years? Maybe the exertion of tree-planting had taken its toll, for my heart was now beating irregularly and the doctor had arranged for me to go into hospital. While I waited for the car I could sit in the garden, provided I did not work. The bees, the flowers, the whole world looked very beautiful, too beautiful to be leaving for good.

The lady from the Active Age was speaking. "Every Active Age branch is doing something creative," she said. "We haven't seen much

of you lately but you must have some ideas."

"What had you in mind?" I asked.

"Well, someone said you produced plays, years ago. We'd like to do something creative this month. Drumsna are doing a play. Annaduff are doing creative writing and Eslin have art classes."

I didn't tell her that I was going into hospital. "How about you all come out here and do some creative gardening?" I said, just for divilment. She didn't take kindly to my suggestion. "You'll be got dead in the garden some day," she said and headed off to try someone else. I had said it as a joke, but in the silence when she was gone, I thought: "Isn't gardening creative in its own way? You take a piece of a field, set flowers and fruit and vegetables, and create beauty and food for man and bird, butterfly and bee. And wouldn't it be nicer to die in the garden on a warm, sunny day than in a hospital, if the worst came to the worst?" All that happened three years ago. Now I sit here again, on the garden seat, listening to the bees and admiring the blossoms on the fruit trees. Those apple, pear and plum trees are now smothered in blossoms and I'm hoping to sit here in autumn, eating ripe fruit while the juice runs down my chin. At eighty-four, am I an optimist or a fool?