

Ryan, Thady

by Terry Clavin

Ryan, Thady (1923–2005), fox hunter and horse breeder, was born Thaddeus Francis Ryan in Hatch Street nursing home, Dublin, on 25 September 1923, the eldest son of John Ryan (see below), of Scarteen House, Knocklong, Co. Limerick, and his wife Anita (née Purcell). He was the sixth, perhaps the seventh, generation of his family to act as master of the Scarteen hounds, the oldest private pack of hunting hounds in Ireland, and one of the oldest in the world, reliably dating to the early eighteenth century.

Their dogs, distinguished by their black and tan coating, were Kerry beagles (a misnomer). This breed was created in the early modern period by crossing an ancient Irish hound with the Gascon-Saintongeais (or possibly the Grand Bleu de Gascogne) hound from the south-west of France, the continental strain predominating. The English foxhound supplanted the Kerry beagle among the Anglo-Irish gentry, but the Ryans, as well-to-do catholic tenant farmers with Jacobite antecedents, were patriotically loyal to the more indigenous article. By 1881, Scarteen hosted the only kennelled pack of Kerry beagles in Ireland, though west Munster was home to a number of packs scattered in ones and twos over different farms and used for hunts on foot. The Scarteen hounds were known as the Black and Tans – an appellation subsequently given to the infamous British auxiliary police forces dispatched to Ireland during 1920–21.

Thady's father, John Ryan (1871–1954), fox hunter, was born at Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, on 25 March 1871, the eldest son of Major-General Thaddeus Richard Ryan (1837–1906) of Scarteen House, Knocklong, Co. Limerick, and his wife Gwendaline (née Power), daughter of the whiskey magnate James Power (qv). He was educated at Oscott College, near Birmingham, England, excelling in track and field athletics. His father inherited the Ryan estate but, as a career soldier in the Royal Artillery, delegated responsibility for the farm and hunt to his brother Clem (John's uncle).

On finishing school, John spent two years in Glasnevin Agricultural College before returning to Scarteen in 1892 to assist Clem, whipping in for him on the hunt. The Scarteen hunt was an unglamorous and obscure affair, albeit one capable of drawing large crowds of local spectators. Fields rarely exceeded twenty, mainly the Ryans and affluent tenant farmers, though officers in the nearby British garrison at Tipperary were keen participants. They hunted the hare, the fox and the carted stag, with a growing emphasis on the stag; they soon stopped hunting hare. John was an outstanding horseman, honing his skills on a landscape minutely dissected by ditches, flanked by towering banks. He won various point-to-point races, notably the

1896 Munster Plate at Kilmallock. For the 1899–1900 season, he was master of the prestigious County Limerick Hunt.

During 1900–01, he fought in the Boer war, enlisting in the Imperial Yeomanry. He succeeded as master of the Black and Tans in 1904, returning the pack to Scarteen after their fourteen years with Clem at Emly, Co. Tipperary. In 1906, he purchased the 700 acres on which he grazed store cattle. His sporting activities were distracting and costly, but buying and schooling hunters for profitable resale alleviated his financial difficulties.

An astute breeder, he disregarded the prestige English foxhound strains in favour of unfashionable Irish bloodlines, scouring Clare and Kerry for suitable infusions. He denied the presence of any foxhound blood in his dogs, stressing they were a breed apart. In contrast to the submissive and subdued foxhound, the Kerry beagles were affectionate, excitable, independent and disheartened by excessive discipline. Not as fast as foxhounds in the open, they were better adapted to the bank-strewn countryside, boasting superiority in nimbleness, drive and nose. Their most celebrated trait was their long, melodious yowl, resonantly communicating the thrill of the chase. Ryan handled his highly-strung pack subtly, largely permitting them to hunt for themselves, and intervening only to keep them from overrunning.

With Scarteen country denuded of foxes, Ryan planted coverts, enticing mountain foxes down from the overhanging Galtees. The pack hunted foxes and deer on alternate days, the fox to kill. Spectacular chases were common: the Scarteen fox was very wild, which meant it left a strong scent and travelled far in a straight line. Moreover, Scarteen country was the finest hunting ground in Ireland: rich pasture with little wire, no woodland, and clear ditches and banks, though the terrain became thickly fenced as the century progressed. By 1914, the social profile of the Scarteen hunt had risen considerably, its fame attracting visitors from abroad, mainly Britain and America.

John enlisted in the 16th Lancers at the start of the first world war in September 1914, serving on the western front as a second lieutenant; off duty, he led hunts behind the lines. He was based near Ypres when on 21 February 1915 the Germans mined his trench, burying him for three hours. Overrunning the position, the Germans spotted his feet sticking out of the ground and dragged him free. He spent the next three years a prisoner in a camp near Dänholm in Germany until the Red Cross brokered an agreement whereby prisoners were located to a neutral country; he spent the war's closing months in the Netherlands.

In 1919 he was elected to the Irish Master of Foxhounds Association, an indication of his hunt's heightened prestige. As his patient efforts in establishing coverts and in building up a band of fox keepers and earth stoppers bore fruit, fox numbers rose, reaching a level sufficient to allow the hunt to stop chasing deer in 1929. He could no longer afford to maintain the hunt independently, so in 1926 a Scarteen

hunt committee was established and an annual subscription was imposed on hunt members. The Scarteen hunt ball was instituted to raise funds, becoming an occasion of wild revelry.

A collapse in agricultural prices in 1929 precipitated a crisis, and the hounds were spirited out of Scarteen for fear that creditors might seize them. Ryan's uncle Sir Thomas Power agreed to continue providing financial assistance but demanded that Ryan curtail his spending on hunting. Accordingly, Ryan resigned as master and loaned the hounds to the Scarteen hunt committee, which appointed a succession of caretaker masters. The hounds were soon returned to Scarteen and remained his property. He followed the hunt occasionally, but always left early as it distressed him to see someone else directing his hounds. In 1938 he exercised his right to reclaim the mastership, sharing this position from 1939 with Claud Thompson, a future son-in-law. Suffering from heart trouble, Ryan retired in 1947. By then the Scarteen hunt was the most celebrated in Ireland, regularly attracting distinguished visitors from far afield.

Ryan married (1919) Anita Purcell of Burton Park, Co. Cork; they had two sons and two daughters. A popular member of the local farming community, he served on the national executive of Muintir na Tíre, and was for many years a judge at the Dublin Horse Show and a member of the ground jury, a team of judges for national and international jumping competitions. He died at Scarteen House on 16 December 1954 and was buried in the family vaults at Emly, Co. Tipperary.

His eldest son, **Thady Ryan**, was first educated at Killashee preparatory school, near Naas, Co. Kildare, and then at Ampleforth College in Yorkshire, England, where he served as master of the college beagles (1940–41); classmates included the future grand duke of Luxembourg and Basil Hume, future cardinal archbishop of Westminster. On their finishing Ampleforth, much of Thady's year enlisted in the British army, but his father insisted that he return home. Somewhat guiltily, Thady obeyed, and helped his declining father in farming and hunting.

He assumed the mastership in 1946, withstanding the opposition of certain hunt committee members who contended that he was too young. His early years were difficult, but in time he blossomed into a deft hunter and nerveless horseman. Lean and vigorous, he proved indefatigable in, and obsessively dedicated to, perpetuating the hunt and providing good sport, persuading rather than directing his hounds in the manner of his father. While his competitiveness occasionally got the better of him, he was solicitous in subsequently apologising and making reparations for a destructive chase. He treated farmers with overt civility, always dismounting when speaking to them.

Aside from a few quickly abandoned attempts to develop an outcross with foxhounds, he avoided the deleterious effects of inbreeding through recourse to the Kerry beagle foot packs of west Munster. Suspecting that these infusions diminished

his dogs' killing instinct, he indulged young hounds that strongly exhibited such tendencies, sparing them if they killed sheep or hens. He bred primarily for nose and voice, and less for speed, holding that a hound was only as fast as its nose.

In early 1949, he met Anne Peter, a New Zealander visiting relatives in Ireland, and embarked on a courtship rendered fraught by distance and her anglican religion. Love prevailed, and the couple married in 1953. They had four sons and two daughters, the youngest girl, Claire, dying of cancer aged 12. To commemorate her, Thady stopped drinking, and later joined the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association, a decision that also reflected his strong catholic faith.

He farmed store cattle, helping to establish the Golden Vale Co-Op Mart at Kilmallock, before switching to dairying; he was president of the local IFA branch. Elegantly attired and courtly, he was every inch the country gentleman, yet enjoyed an easy rapport with neighbours of humble farming stock. Maintaining the hunt imposed financial strains and precluded him from giving due attention to the farm. He made ends meet by selling 125 acres for £9,000 in 1959.

Early in Thady's mastership, Scarteen drew an influx of upper-class English hunting enthusiasts, fleeing the socialism and austerity of their post-war homeland. He encouraged the arrival of foreign visitors and took in paying guests, proving tolerant of facetious interjections and questions from neophytes. Initially the visitors were mainly British and North American, but continental Europeans began arriving in the 1970s. On behalf of Bord Fáilte, he conducted two tours of America in the 1960s and one tour of Europe in the 1970s to promote fox hunting in Ireland, but dissuaded the tourist board from encouraging mass tourism linked to hunting, believing this would undermine the sport's charm.

In the post-war period, the Scarteen field swelled in numbers to one hundred, putting pressure on Ryan as he tried to prevent riders from damaging farmers' property. Believing that the hunt had to become smaller and cultivate firm parochial roots to maintain the forbearance of landowners, in 1971 he and the hunt committee decided to limit fields to forty and give priority to locals. Furthermore, nearby farmers benefited financially from a ruling obliging visitors to hunt with a horse stabled within the area. To compensate for the reduced income, Ryan invited Bill Hobby, Semon Wolf and Ian Hurst, all men of means, to share the mastership with him from 1971. Over time, hunting in Scarteen country became problematic, as barbed wire and electric fencing proliferated, as impenetrable thorn bushes grew on banks in the absence of hand labour to prune them, as coverts were reclaimed, and as the intensification of dairying and greater recourse to artificial fertiliser and slurry disrupted scenting conditions. The quality of the sport was further reduced by the semi-domestication of the foxes, causing them to become parochial in their habits and to run in circles over a small area. Conversely, Scarteen's hazardous reputation conferred a certain cachet and attracted hunters with a taste for adventure.

From 1950 Ryan served thirty-seven years on the committee of the Irish Masters of Foxhounds Association, being elected chairman in 1966. As president of the Irish Field and Country Sports Society, he defended traditional country pursuits and denied that fox hunting was cruel, maintaining that less controversial culling methods, such as shooting, trapping and poisoning, entailed an agonising and lingering death.

Highly regarded as a rider and schooler of horses, he bought horses for breaking in and onward sale, and unearthed a number of renowned showjumpers and event horses. As a young man he rode in point-to-points, but only on non-thoroughbred horses running over banks, and ensured that the Scarteen point-to-point was the last to run across open country over natural obstacles. Although he did not participate in three-day eventing, he engaged in its organisation, serving on the council of the Irish Olympic Horse Society, and as chairman of the selection committee for the Irish Olympic three-day event team, allowing early horse trials to be held at Scarteen. He was joint *chef d'équipe* for the Olympic event team at both the Tokyo (1964) and Mexico City (1968) Olympic games.

Active in the Royal Dublin Society (RDS), he became a member in 1946, and also succeeded to his father's seat on the ground jury. In 1967 he was elected to the equestrian committee, which was responsible for the Dublin Horse Show. He drove a reorganisation of the horse show's timetable and of its arena, and instituted the performance championship and the breeders' championship. Perceiving that the specialisation of showjumping had marginalised hunters, in 1983 he devised the inter-hunt relay, a team competition for hunters, which proved popular and spread to England and New Zealand. He was also commentator in the horse show's grand parade of champions. Appointed to the council of the RDS in 1979, he became a life member of the society in 1987. A man of exacting standards and definite views, he was a highly respected judge at horse shows throughout Ireland, England and America, and never shirked unpopular decisions, controversially marking down Prince's Grace, the popular multiple champion, at the Horse of the Year Show in England.

He devoted himself to the conservation of the Irish Draught horse – in steep decline following the mechanisation of farming in the mid-twentieth century – identifying it as the unappreciated mainstay of the high international reputation enjoyed by Irish sports horses. A dual-purpose type, capable of light farm work and of riding cross-country, the Irish Draught when crossed with a thoroughbred yielded a half-bred that combined the speed of the latter with the soundness of the former. Through his involvement in the RDS and the Hunter Improvement Society, he helped develop grants and competitions designed to encourage breeders to persevere with Irish Draught mares.

In 1971 he was appointed a director of Bord na gCapall, a newly founded state body created to assist the non-thoroughbred horse industry. He was chairman

of the marketing board and promoted Irish non-thoroughbreds abroad. When in 1974 Bord na gCapall drew up a register of non-thoroughbred horses approved for breeding, he argued for strict criteria, but was thwarted by opposing interests who cautioned against deterring breeders. Believing that an overemphasis on marketing was undermining breeding standards, and dismayed by alleged irregularities relating to travel privileges and to the inclusion of a board member's stallion in the register, he and four other board members resigned in October 1982.

Thereafter, Ryan criticised Irish breeders for exporting a rapidly diminishing trove of Irish Draught mares and for importing continental warmblood stallions, practices that reflected, in his belief, a myopic obsession with quality over the plainer virtues of the indigenous horse; though an anglophile in other respects, he was a convinced 'Irish-Irelander' regarding horse and hound bloodlines. He acknowledged that it took two crosses, resulting in a three-quarter bred, before an outstanding Irish Draught-derived horse was likely to emerge and that few breeders were so patient.

Stricken with angina in 1986, though the ensuing heart by-pass operation was successful, he relinquished the mastership to his son Chris and emigrated with his wife to New Zealand in spring 1987, settling on a nine-acre farm in Temuka, near Timaru, South Island. The American film director Damon Sinclair shot an unreleased, 75-minute documentary on the Scarteen hunt, entitled *The last hunt*, depicting Thady's retirement in an elegiac light.

Upon visiting New Zealand in the 1950s, Ryan had concluded that the horses there would benefit from an accretion of Irish Draught blood. Accordingly, in association with two leading New Zealand equestrians, John and Jacque Cottle, on his emigration he established a stud syndicate, and imported to New Zealand an Irish Draught stallion, Kingsway Diamond, progeny of the celebrated Irish Draught sire King of Diamonds. The operation flourished: Kingsway Diamond was crossed with an average of seventy mares per year, mainly by artificial insemination, and his crop quickly made their mark on the local equestrian sector. Ryan tirelessly promoted the Irish Draught, and in 1989 helped found and became chairman of the Irish Draught Horse Society in New Zealand. He also imported and bred Connemara ponies, and was active in the Connemara Pony Society of New Zealand.

He hunted in New Zealand and Australia, but regarded the only available prey, the hare, an unworthy adversary in comparison with the fox. In 2002 he published his memoirs. He died in his Temuka home on 8 January 2005 and was buried in Nelson.

John Ryan:

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Thady Ryan:

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