

Book reviews

Farming in Ireland - History, Heritage and Environment. John Feehan. Layout and Design, Bernard Kaye. Printed by Walsh Printers, Roscrea. 605 pp, €80, hardcover. ISBN 1-902277-597.

The first thing (and perhaps the most important thing) to say about this book is, that it is an extraordinary work, which not only covers many of the historical, heritage and environmental aspects of agriculture from the Ice Age to the present day, but also includes amazing arrays of information on geology, archaeology, ecology, meteorology and mythology. All of this is woven by the author into a tapestry of Ireland's natural history, interspersed with poetry, anecdotes, tables (32), plates (8) and figures (272). Much of this is drawn from an estimated 1033 published papers, books and reports. It is an astounding compilation in which the depth of knowledge of the author shows on every page. I find it very easy to believe him when he writes in the Preface and Acknowledgements: "I think this book started when I was nine or ten years old..."

In the opening chapters, (Chapters 1 to 6, pages 1 to 136) Feehan traces the development of farming in Ireland and Europe from the retreat of the glaciers until Ireland's entry to the European Economic Community (EEC). These are followed by chapters on Agricultural Education, Farming Practice, Trees and Woods on the Farm and Field Boundaries. There are also chapters on the animals and plants (domestic and wild) commonly found on Irish farms through the centuries. In these latter chapters, the author has used his very extensive knowledge of ecology to produce a fascinating account of the evolution of agriculture in Ireland. In addition, there is a chapter (Chapter 12) dealing with the imprint of agriculture on the rural landscape, which includes sections on such diverse features as ringforts, traditional farmhouses, steam engines and cultivation ridges. Surprisingly, the history and management of field boundaries is presented in a separate chapter. Chapters 15 to 18 are quite different in style and content to the earlier ones. While they have a historical flavour, they are much more botanic and/or scientific in nature. The ecology and biological diversity of a range of habitats (The Burren, Callows, Turloughs, Eskers, Arable Land, Freshwater Habitats, Mires, Heaths and Coastal Land) is described in general. These chapters and sections contain significant tables of botanical terminology and substantial figures detailing relationships such as food chains and ecological classifications. A central theme in these chapters is the very adverse impact of agricultural intensification upon the diversity of the flora and fauna of the countryside. The author attributes this to loss in diversity of habitat. In the final chapter this decline in diversity and the consequent shrinkage of the genetic base is further elaborated. An alternative system of "Integrated Mixed Farming" is outlined. The author proposes that this system would enshrine all of the best values of rural landscape and rural community and would be sustainable in the long term.

Given the enormity of the work undertaken by Feehan in producing this book and the wealth of knowledge he displays in so doing, it may seem churlish to carp about certain aspects of the work. However, the uneven treatment of topics should be mentioned. Thus, the early chapters seem eminently suitable for a general readership with an interest

in history or farming in ancient Ireland. By contrast, much of the material in Chapters 15, 16, 17 and 18, such as that contained in Table 15.11 on “The plant communities of lowland cultivated grasslands” or the details of the biological monitoring of freshwater biota (Table 17.3 page 483), is certainly beyond the capabilities of most general readers, farmers and students, and may tax the technical expertise of many scientists. The Burren is mentioned at least 25 times in this book and aspects of the ecology of the area are covered in two separate sections. On the other hand there is not a single mention in the entire book of the Drumlin belt or of farming in this huge area. In the chapter on animals on the farm, the Shorthorn breed is barely mentioned, while its contemporary, the Rhode Island Red, which was virtually synonymous with farming for many decades, is not mentioned at all. However, while these and other inconsistencies are disconcerting, the major disappointment with this book lies in the poor standard of editing and proof reading. Serious editing would have reduced the size of this book significantly. In this context, one wonders about the contribution to the book of a number of the figures and certainly many of the tables, notably Tables 8.1 and 9.1, could very easily have been presented in synopsis form. There are far too many errors in the book. The quality of English is sometimes colloquial and tenses are often mixed. Apart from the typographical and other errors throughout the text (e.g. “... after accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963 ...”), there are errors in the referencing, some references are not given, the cross-referencing sometimes breaks-down and metric and imperial units of measurement are used interchangeably. Some tables have no captions or incorrect ones. All of this is a major distraction to the reader.

Notwithstanding my disappointment with aspects of this encyclopaedic tome, this book constitutes a major contribution to agricultural education in Ireland and will be proven to be indispensable to many agriculturalists. It will awaken curiosity and inspire younger generations to seek the wisdom and courage necessary to confront the complex issues which have developed in modern Irish Agriculture as outlined in this book. All serious students of agriculture should study it.

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