

**Picking Bilberries, Fraocháns and Whorts in Ireland. The Human Story.** By MICHAEL J. CONRY. Pp. 390, over 400 b/w (old) and colour photographs and maps by GUY MCGRATH. €30 plus p+p. 'Avila', Chapelstown, Carlow, Ireland: Michael Conry Books. ISBN: 0-953-5876-5-7

This self-published book is organized into three main chapters, which will be briefly outlined here: Chapter 1, the general part, takes up approximately one-third of the book. It begins with a general account on the motivations for picking bilberries in Ireland and Europe, mainly attributing them to financial, if not poverty reasons. The author adds a short section on bilberry etymology and general botanical information on the genus *Vaccinium*, devoting enough space to the differences between American blueberries and European bilberries. After another short section subsuming the history of bilberry picking in Ireland, the subsequent sections anticipate the contents of Chapters 2 and 3: a multitude of individual accounts is

given in order to illustrate the people involved in bilberry picking, their everyday life, their views on bilberries, and also the economic ties between Ireland and the UK connected to bilberry export. In this section, the author gives much information on the background of this export trade, accompanied by figures on price development during the first half of the twentieth century.

Some trouble does arise, however, when in Chapter 1 the author steps outside the Irish and British world: apart from awkward misspellings in German (missing umlauts, or blunders like *blaubarren* vs. *Blaubeeren*), and misunderstandings in Polish (*jagody* means ‘berries’ in general, not bilberries in particular), the author seems convinced that only the poor inhabitants of eastern Europe are still picking bilberries ‘the same way that they were picked in Ireland over seventy years ago’. Had he visited some of the mountainous regions in Europe, he would probably have discovered that bilberry picking is all but an exclusive occupation for the poor, and is still done for pleasure and for commerce in many areas where bilberries grow. In Austria, for example, they are highly valued due to their intense taste and colour (in comparison to the American blueberries), and sold for high prices at local markets and even in supermarkets during their season. And I still do remember the joys of picking (and eating) bilberries with my parents in the 1980s and 1990s, although we were far from starvation then. Besides, the tools still used in central Europe (*Heidelbeerenkamm*, the comb, or *Raffel*) are of the same type as those documented for Romania and imply some exclusiveness for this region.

Some criticism may also be expressed concerning insufficient data on the temporal extension of bilberry picking in Ireland (as announced on the rear flap text): McNeill’s book on Lughnasa is referred to, but the matter is dropped shortly thereafter. The trouble is: bilberry picking in Ireland is without doubt as old as the presence of human inhabitants in the region, but the hypothesis on continuous and distinct ties between this activity and the festival of Lughnasa since pre-Christian times will require more evidence than McNeill’s account can currently give. However, critically investigating and assessing the prehistoric uses of bilberry (or, in general, of *Vaccinium* fruits) in their entirety would require a second book to be written: many more archaeological finds would need to be integrated (the ones cited only date back to the Middle Ages), thus hopefully providing some sound evidence on ritual aspects of bilberries during prehistory.

In Chapter 2, which is the largest in the volume, the author reports on Irish bilberry export to Britain. The economic backgrounds and most important outlines for these trade ties are already given in Chapter 1. This section thus focuses nearly exclusively on the bulk of ethnographic accounts which the author recorded in thirteen regions of southern and south-eastern Ireland, roughly extending from the eastern borders of Co. Kerry in the west to Co. Wicklow in the east.

This chapter especially shows that the author is not exaggerating when in the preface he states he has interviewed ‘hundreds, if not thousands of people’ for his book: the number of interviews must have been truly huge in the twenty years of *fraochán* research. The reader, indeed, sometimes gets very distracted from the book’s main purpose — illustrating socio-economic aspects of bilberries, and people’s views on them — due to the colourful and detailed accounts of all the informants interviewed, and a vast amount of photographs from their private treasure chests. But this is definitely rather a very great strength than a downside of Michael Conry’s book.

Chapter 3 then moves the focus away from picking bilberries out of commercial interest, and turns to the many people who gathered them for domestic consumption. This chapter adds very little completely new information on ‘domestic’ bilberry picking, as most of it has already been provided by Chapter 1. Instead, it mainly extends the area of interviews to the northern parts of Ireland, and to Northern Ireland.

In general, when leafing through the book, the reader discovers the author’s habit of adding scientific names for all sorts of animals. However, the utilization of scientific names always suggests an exact identification — which apparently has not occurred. Wasps, for example, vastly exceed the genus *Vespula*, as bumblebees include much more than just *Bombus* species. And it is indeed doubtful that all midges which ever annoyed Irish bilberry pickers were indeed

the Highland midge, *Cuculoides impunctatus*. This is certainly only annoying to the biologist reader and will not bother the main target audience.

How can this extensive work now be summarized? First, the bad news: Michael Conry's book is not very informative on bilberry picking in Europe, and it certainly does not outline 'the history of bilberry-picking in Ireland from pre-Christian times to the present day', as promised on the rear flap text. But, in any case, this does not diminish the topic and contents of the book at all, as its focus lies elsewhere.

So now for the good news: it is a meticulously recorded and thus highly valuable, and also fun-to-read account on the role of bilberries in Ireland from the late nineteenth till the mid-twentieth century. And, apart from the 'poor man's harvest' itself, the book tells us a lot about the ideas and feelings, the economic backgrounds, and the social lives of the people who picked the *fraocháns*. Between the pages and the lines, the reader finds great love for Ireland, for its people, and for the 'small things' that make us human after all. And, however humble, bilberries did and do play their part in that story.

All this makes the book a treasure for all economic historians, ethnographers, and ethnobotanists with a focus on Ireland — an utterly charming record of a country's collective relation to, and its inhabitants' individual reception of a single plant. Being a former inhabitant of the Tyrolean Alps, I can only wish for some comparable ethnographic work on bilberries for my home region, preserving our (great-)grandparents' views on this small yet so delicious fruit.

BOKU University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences,  
Vienna Institute of Botany

ANDREAS G. HEISS