THE LARTIGUE: a review article

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In the early 1880's, Ballybunion, the North Kerry seaside resort, was a small village of less then 200 inhabitants, containing a street (half empty of houses), one hotel, a few public houses, a grocer's shop or two, and no more. It was connected with the rest of the County by a few badly neglected roads with poor transport facilities. It was indeed an Ultima Thule, and reflected all the backwardness of its solitary state.

During the summer of 1883, Fr. M. O'Connor, the then Parish Priest, (a mighty man, still remembered in the Parish), mustered his parishioners and got the Listowel Board of Guardians to pledge "all co-operation in their power towards the institution of a tramway." And the result, after five years of striving and struggling, was a Monorail Railway of a special kind. This Listowel-Ballybunion monorail was the invention of Charles François Marie-Therèse Lartigue, a Frenchman with an inventive mind. The story of this unique railway, which the Kerryman, with his flair for the apt name, quickly popularised as The Lartigue, is expertly set out in a recently produced booklet by A. T. Newham entitled, The Listowel and Ballybunion Railway, and published by the Oakwood Press, Surrey, in 1966. (Price 9/6d).

This book is a genuine labour of love. It is the work of a man who must have fallen under the spell of railways as a boy, and whose love, growing with the years, has impelled him to undertake this formidable task. It will be read with interest by the average reader, and with devotion by all lovers of The Lartigue (and that means everyone in North Kerry and many elsewhere) in whose memory The Lartigue is enshrined. The author sets about his task in a most thorough and painstaking manner, and every relevant fact, from the first effort to obtain a railway, until its sudden and unforeseen end, is noted and recorded. It makes a great story, and shows how a small rural community by a combined effort literally steamed out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, accomplishing economic progress and population growth in the process. The human and social element, so much a part of every Irish countryside, is not neglected, and our author, by story and legend, shows how The Lartigue gradually impressed itself on the local scene.

Perhaps the most interesting parts of the book, from the general reader's point of view, are the eight pages devoted to photographs of the now famous monorail, which is unexampled in the history of the world's railways. The photographs are necessary, because who, but a skilled technician, could understand or visualise descriptions such as these:

Permanent Way:

"The running rail . . . was secured to the apex of a number of 'A' shaped angle-iron trestles (3' 3" high) sited about three feet apart . . . These supports were anchored by angle brackets to . . . sleepers . . . The cross-bar of the 'A' formation was 2' 4" below the top rail, and served to brace the legs. Secured to the outer face of each trestle, at this level, were
lighter horizontal rails . . . the running surfaces of which faced outwards . . . . the inner sides of the engines and vehicles having nearly horizontal double-flanged wheels one foot diameter, which bore against these rails, the carrying wheels . . . . running on the upper rail . . . . ."

**Locomotives:**

"There were twin horizontal boilers, one each side of the top rail, the funnels, steam domes, fire boxes, and controls, being in duplicate, whilst the main brake reservoirs were beneath the boilers; the latter were cross-braced with channel steel, fixed to lugs on the smokeboxes, and a steam pipe connected both domes. The cab and tender were also divided, the latter running on two coupled wheels. The driver occupied the near-side of the cab, having to both fire and drive, his fireman performing the usual duties on the off-side. A large headlight was mounted between the funnels, with its beam focussed on the top rail."

**Carriages:**

"The two halves of each coach were joined with wrought-iron ribs which, forming a horseshoe above the top rail, passed down the inner sides, bending outwards to conform with the shape of the trestles, and ending horizontally as supports for the coach floors. The end bulkheads were cross-braced with angle-iron stiffeners. The coach roofs canted inwards, but guards’ vans had curved full-width roofs, with a ‘birdcage’ lookout. The seating, cushioned for first class, wood slats for 3rd class, accommodated twenty-four passengers (twenty in firsts) and backed against the running rail, thus giving passengers a good view of the landscape. Window blinds were not fitted, but ‘on sunny days a primitive arrangement of calico sheets was suspended from the window frames’. Resulting from the amount of iron and steel in the permanent way, and the running wheels being approximately level with passengers’ heads, the noise in transit was markedly noticeable. As loading had to be equalized the vans had stairways fixed outside an end bulkhead; a variant was a staircase on wheels, marshalled between coaches, and known as a ‘crossover’.

The official opening of this strange railway took place on the 29th of February, 1888, the extra day of the Leap Year, when eight coaches with one hundred selected passengers started from Listowel to Ballybunion (eight miles distant) and reached it non-stop in 35 minutes. A lunch was provided in the Ballybunion Station Waiting-Room, with speeches by Fritz. B. Behr, Managing Director, and a shareholder named Beaumont. Everyone was pleased, and the only complaint was ‘the considerable noise when the train was in motion!’ The return journey back to Listowel took 38 minutes, because of over-heating in the engine axle. Then the party set off to Killarney, where a banquet was given that night in the Railway Hotel by the Lartigue Company. Here, speaking in French, Charles François Marie-Thérèse Lartigue expressed pleasure at the practical demonstration of his invention; at the same time indicating ‘that the site chosen was not ideal for showing the full potentialities of the new system, as the line had to be built within the deviation limits of the originally-intended steam tramway, thus requiring many accommodation, and ‘level’ crossings.’

The first commercial train ran from Listowel on the 5th of March, 1888. It was driven by Engine-Driver Joseph Holyoake, a Cornishman, and it took an hour to accomplish the journey. This set an average time-pattern for all subsequent runs. A remarkable co-incidence, when the railway closed down on the 14th October 1924, the last train was driven by Michael Holyoake, grandson of the first Engine-Driver. This family continuity was a marked characteristic of the railway staff during its thirty-six years of existence. The Lartigue had a happy-go-lucky, buffetting, lurching method of propulsion, and in time it gradually developed oddities and quirks, and many other non-railway characteristics. It never behaved the same from one journey to the next, and something strange was always happening to it, which only endeared it all the
more to its passengers. Thus on occasion, when an overloaded train came to a standstill on the rise of the ground near Ahaford, during the final stretch to Ballybunion, the more active passengers always jumped out and pushed it to the top of the incline, jumping back in again before it once again developed speed.

Perhaps the greatest contributing factor to its popularity lay in its personnel who gave long, sterling and devoted service, and were in many cases succeeded by members of their own family. There was Patrick McCarthy who served the railway for so long as Managing Director, that it was often referred to as 'McCarthy's Railway.' Then there was Timothy Allen, Station-Master at Ballybunion time out of mind, and his son Joe Allen, the Guard; and Jack Reidy, and Paddy Boyle, and Con Reidy, and many others; and last but not least Mike Ryan, who still endears himself to the Ballybunion visitor as the friendly collector at the Church door every Sunday. Indeed, the entire staff occupied a unique position in that they were in constant communication with the passengers during the entire journey, beginning with the preliminary 'tucking in.' At the commencement of the journey, everyone tended to crowd the carriages on the near side and, as balance was the essence of the contract, some of them had to be diplomatically 'winkled out,' taken across the stepover, and put into the carriages on the other side. This demanded constant diplomacy and tact on the part of the Staff, as it was considered infra dig. to be asked to leave one's comfortable and well-chosen seat. Then, when everything was beautifully arranged and balanced, a late-comer of large proportions would almost invariably arrive at the station and push into the nearest available seat, upset the equilibrium, and the balancing act would have to commence again. This time it was two or three youngsters (as many as would balance the late-comer) who were extracted, and taken across the 'stepover,' Then there were the various stops during the journey, at stations and halts, and for wandering animals and the devil knows what! The staff on these occasions would be rushing up and down outside, and the carriages were so placed that any passenger from his seat could put his hand out of the window and grasp guard or porter as they passed and engage him in conversation.

It is related that one day during an interminable delay at Francis Road Halt, a 'heavy swell' put his head out the window and said to a passing employee: "I say Porter. I am Lord so and so, and I have an important appointment with one of the Directors of the Railway, will you see to it that the train leaves immediately or I'll be late!" only to receive the shattering reply: "I'm sorry sir, it can't be done, even if you were the Station-Master's son, itself!"

On rare occasions nerves got frayed, and one day Porter Breen told an old lady to "Go to Hell!" at Liselton Station, but when she was getting out of the train at Listowel, he approached her contritely and said: "You're the woman I told to go to Hell, back the line. Well! you needn't go there at all now!" What could she do, in the face of an elemental apology of that kind, only accept it and walk humbly in the Lord!

The stories about The Lartigue are legion, and were accepted by the staff with good-humoured indulgence. Until one day it pleased an Ulster M.P., when spinning out a speech during a debate in the House of Commons, to embroider it with the following tale. The Lartigue hadn't been long established when a Ballybunion farmer bought a cow at the Fair of Listowel and presented himself, cow and all, at the station. It was the first time that transport was sought for an animal of this kind, and the problem of balance was eventually solved by directing the farmer to borrow another cow, to
enable his beast to be carried to Ballybunion. On arrival, another cow was needed to facilitate the return of the borrowed cow to Listowel. This shuttling procedure continued until the farmer in the end lost the borrowed cow, and paid the price of his own beast in freight charges. Everyone laughed at the incongruous Railway, and the story got so much publicity and credence that it was deemed prejudicial to the railway. Manager McCarthy wrote a letter to the daily papers refuting the story and describing it as baseless, malicious, and untrue. At the same time he pointed out that in addition to carrying a considerable amount of ordinary livestock, The Lartigue carried more prize cattle (Raftery’s and Hewson’s) than any other rail service in the country—and he quoted figures to prove it. But this letter is long forgotten, while the Ulsterman’s story lives on.

The Lartigue was not a success financially. This was in part due to the fact that the entire Capital of £33,000, granted by its enabling legislation, was used in the building of the line and the purchase of equipment; and in part due to the lack of passengers and freight during the winter months. The result was that the working profit was only sufficient to pay a fraction of the interest to the shareholders. This resulted in cheese-paring which was ultimately reflected in the poor condition of the running stock. It is probable, however, that most of the shareholders invested primarily to get a railway established, and were satisfied with the benefits it brought to Ballybunion and the surrounding countryside in the shape of increasing population and prosperity. Whatever criticism may be levelled against the system, one sighs for the old days when one thinks of single fares at 1d. and return fares at 1/3, with all the excitement of the journey thrown in. As against that, however, there is the disquieting thought that the Guards and Porters only received 15/- a week (17/6 during the summer months), with 2/6 extra for Sunday work, while the Engine-Driver only received 25/- a week, the whole year round, with nothing extra for Sunday. There was no such thing as overtime, and the staff did whatever work the day brought, regardless of hours. For example, a record number of 1,500 people were carried on the 15th of August, 1911. It was a ‘Pattern Day’ which happened to fall on a Sunday of blazing sunshine. There were only two trains available, and the first one left Listowel with 200 or 300 passengers at 10.30 a.m., to be followed immediately by the second train. Then, by a system of shuttling to and fro, all the 1,500 were eventually landed in Ballybunion by 2 p.m. The journey back to Listowel commenced at 6 p.m., and by 2 a.m. next morning the last of the passengers had reached Listowel. The only extra pay the staff received was their 2/6 Sunday bonus, but they were well satisfied, not only with the old Lartigue’s impeccable performance but also with the fun and excitement that 1,500 merry-making Kerrymen must have engendered during those 14 or 15 hectic hours!

The end of The Lartigue came quickly during the changing years of the 1920s. First of all there were the depressive effects of World War I, during which the British Government assumed control of the railways and barred all excursion trains. Next there followed the War of Independence (the so-called Black and Tan War), when several attacks were made on the railway and which ultimately resulted in the closing down of the line for a short time by the British Military. And finally the Civil War brought wholesale destruction—trains were derailed, coaches destroyed, engines run off the track, and the Station-House at Ballybunion blown up. The money was not available to meet rising costs of repairs and replacements, and this was painfully evident as shown by the events of the 10th of August, 1924. On that day 860 excursionists from Limerick, en route to Ballybunion, arrived at Listowel. This number
was far beyond The Lartigue's capacity and, as there was only one engine available, it was decided to divide the passengers and make two journeys to Ballybunion. But the old engine gave out completely, half-way to Ballybunion, and the first contingent had to walk the rest of the journey, while the remainder ranged about Listowel awaiting the return of the train, which eventually limped back at 9 p.m. No railway could survive that, and in due course a High Court Order was made closing The Lartigue on the 14th of October, 1924. The obsequies were swift and conclusive, and within a few months Ward & Co., the demolition experts from Sheffield, descended on the monorail, and left not a trace.

Many years after its disappearance, an interesting ceremony took place in Listowel, which revived memories and restored interest in The Lartigue. The first Lartigue engine to be sent to Ireland differed in many respects from its successors. It was a futuristic conglomeration of duplicated metal, that had to be seen to be believed, and it was nicknamed "Coffee Pots" because of its frontal appearance. It had a specially cast bell suspended between the spouts of the 'Coffee Pots,' which served as a bell-wether; and for many years the countryside was made happy by its melodious sounds as The Lartigue puffed carelessly along. Then, when 'Coffee Pots' was retired, the bell was removed and erected in the Ballybunion Station, where its tones gave warning of departing trains, and were the last nostalgic reminder of Ballybunion that holiday makers took away with them. After Ward's demolition, the bell came into the possession of Mr. J. A. Fennell, and about six or seven years ago he offered it as a school bell to the boys of the school at Listowel. A presentation ceremony was arranged by Mr. Bryan McMahon, at which Mr. Fennell presented the bell to the Manager of the School, Canon O'Sullivan, P.P. Many felicitous speeches were made, ballads about the old monorail sung, and stories, the like of which were seldom heard on land or sea, told. And so to the toll of the 'Coffee Pots' bell, The Lartigue lives again, and will continue to live lovingly and laughingly in the minds and memories of succeeding generations of Listowel Schoolboys.