

# Local railways connect people and times

■ Denis O'Shaughnessy reviews Joe Coleman's book on rail, *Falling Gradient* – first locally produced book on the subject

INTEREST in local history in Limerick has never been so high. The city and county is dotted with historical societies, all thriving, with well attended lectures and visits to historical sites.

A far cry from the days of the 1930's when ancient monuments, like the magnificent stone façade of the city's Tholsel was demolished in Mary Street, or the mindlessness of building houses in the courtyard of our ancient pile, that of King John's Castle.

Thank goodness those days of negligence are gone. There have been more books written on the history of the city and county in the past decade than in all the years preceding, with such publications as the *Old Limerick Journal*, along with the Civic Trust, ensuring our heritage is preserved thanks to the efforts of many enthusiasts.

Latest addition to this valuable historical horde is Joe Coleman's *Falling Gradient*, a history of Limerick railway and its connections. With 464 pages and no less than 400 photographs, many never seen before, the publication is a highly impressive work, which will be of huge interest not alone to railway enthusiasts, but to the public in general.

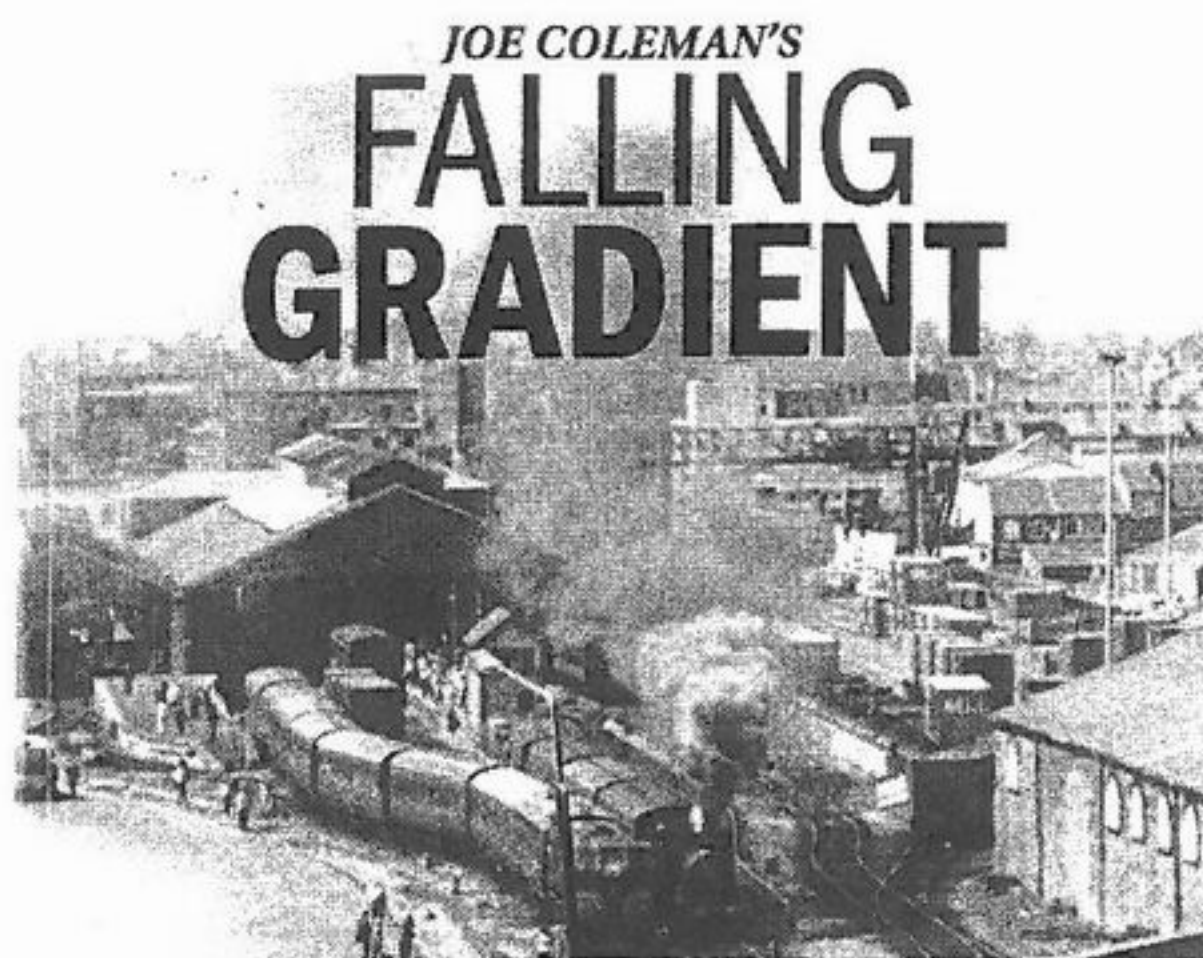
Joe is the author of the best-selling book *House Full*, an affectionate look back at the old cinemas and theatres of Limerick, the people, the stories,

the films and the shows, which he independently published for Limerick's National City of Culture year 2014. Joe comes from a long tradition in public transport from both sides of the family, with his father being a professional railwayman for all of his working life.

Within its pages, the author has faithfully and articulately traced the history of the railway in Limerick and its connections, from its humble beginnings in 1848, when, amidst great excitement and jubilation, the first passenger train left for Tipperary, taking one and a half hours to do so.

Like all great ventures, there were trials and tribulations in the early days, many landowners refusing to let their lands be utilised for the laying of the tracks. Some towns and villages refused stations to be built, maintaining that the train engine might explode. The effects of this can be seen to this day. Some things never change, some landowners attempted to charge exorbitant rates, even the grand jury, charged with assessments, demanded their cut as well.

Railways and trains have been an intrinsic part of our lives and even in this helter-skelter age, the novelty and romance of travelling the iron road still lingers. The railway played a huge part in opening up the country and towns to the populace, hitherto used to horse transport, such as the



The front cover of *Falling Gradient*, a new book by Joe Coleman

famous Bianconi long cars. At a time when our city was developing, especially during the boom years of the bacon factories, and the building of the Shannon Scheme, the railways played a vital part.

Our local railway also, has been bound up with much of the historic moments of our history. During the greatest tragedy our country has known, that of the Great Famine of the 1840's, the building of the railway, despite being omitted from the famine work relief scheme, gave sustenance to starving workers.

And the photographs, all 400 of them. It is rarely such a collection of images accompanying

its subject matter has been put together. Many are being reproduced for the first time: my favourite is the photo of the shaky looking wooden structure, akin to the bridge over the River Kwai, that trains had to traverse over the Shannon at Corbally up to early 20th century. How the rickety bridge must have shook under the weight of the trains. Passengers, of nervous disposition sometimes disembarked at the nearby Long Pavement station and walked to the city rather than risk it. Thankfully, the bridge was replaced in 1909 by the present steel structure known to us as the Red or Metal Bridge.

The main book cover photo

taken by Joe Arthur, depicts Limerick Station on Saturday May 14, 1988.

All the County Limerick stations, nearly all sadly in ruins now, are recalled in nostalgic photographs. Many of these destinations were situated in some of the most scenic parts of our country, ie Foynes, Killaloe, etc., and of course the legendary West Clare Railway, long gone but not forgotten.

As stated, the railway was bound up in many of the great historical events of the past. The royal train with the future King Edward and his entourage on board, stopped here for lunch in the specially decorated terminus on their way from Kilarney in 1897. It was deemed too dangerous for him to parade through the city due to the intense nationalistic fervour then abounding.

Then there were the scarcities of the Emergency years in World War II, when hard pressed drivers and firemen had to contend with low grade coal, and even turf, to drive the engines. Needless to say, delays were frequent and lasting hours.

Thousands travelled by train here in 1979 for the visit of Pope John Paul II, twenty-five special trains carried 400,000 passengers over a period of 72 hours, a triumph of planning and organisation. One particular Special to Knock got lost! In an age when communication was not what it is now, a three hour

delay provided many anxious moments for those awaiting its return at all hours of the morning. Then there were the Sunday excursion trains, at a time when there were very little motor cars, that gave families a chance to frolic at seaside resorts, an opportunity which otherwise they would not have been afforded.

Such a book would be incomplete without mentioning the thousands of employees who over a century and a half have faithfully kept the trains running, and the author has paid tribute, with many group photographs to boot. The unique call boys are mentioned, who at all hours of night knocked on the doors of the train personnel calling them for duty. As Jim Kemmy said one time, that was fine, but who called the call boys?

With more branch lines now threatened with closure, Joe Coleman's narration becomes even more valued. He has done a great service to his city, and indeed country, in conserving the fascinating story of our railway and its connections, that for the best part of two centuries, in good and bad times, has served the people so well.

Denis O'Shaughnessy is a former long-serving employee of, and contributor to the *Limerick Leader*, and *Irish Times*, has published several books on his native city.

## Leader shorts

### Probe after theft of trailer from farmyard

**THEFT:** Gardai are appealing for information after a grey-coloured steel trailer was stolen from a farmyard in Caherconlish. The theft happened at High Park in the town overnight on Sunday into the early hours of Monday morning. Garda at Caherconlish are investigating.

### Vintners counting the cost of insurance

**VINTNERS:** Almost one in four publicans report difficulty insuring their business, according to the Vintners' Federation of Ireland. New research among VFI members has revealed that 88% of publicans have seen their business insurance premium rise in the past two years

### Gardaí investigating damaged crucifix

**INVESTIGATION:** On Monday evening, a man entered the Redemptorist Church, Mount St Alphonsus, South Circular Road, and did "significant damage" to the historic, 151-year-old crucifix. The holy item is now in repair, and it is hoped that it will be restored by Christmas.

### House broken into during broad daylight

**BURGLARY:** Gardai are investigating a break-in at a house at Gortroe, Castletown, Kilmallock earlier this week. The burglary happened between 11am and 3pm on Monday. Two laptops, a power washer and cash were taken by the culprits who forced a back door.

### Night at the dogs for Doon coursing club

**FUNDRAISER:** Where better for Doon Coursing Club to raise some funds than Limerick Greyhound Stadium. The club is holding a benefit race night there on Saturday, November 19. Tickets can be sourced from any club member. All welcome to attend.

## Enterprise Ireland job expansion fund call

PART of the Government's long-term plan for the economy and for addressing the fallout from the Brexit vote is to help Irish-based companies get better at exporting. Research shows that every additional job in the export sector supports another new job in the locally traded sector.

Enterprise Ireland's Job Expansion

the potential to increase turnover by a minimum €350,000 over two years after the award of the grant.

They must be recruiting at least three people into full-time, non-sales positions to qualify for up to €15,000 per new employee.

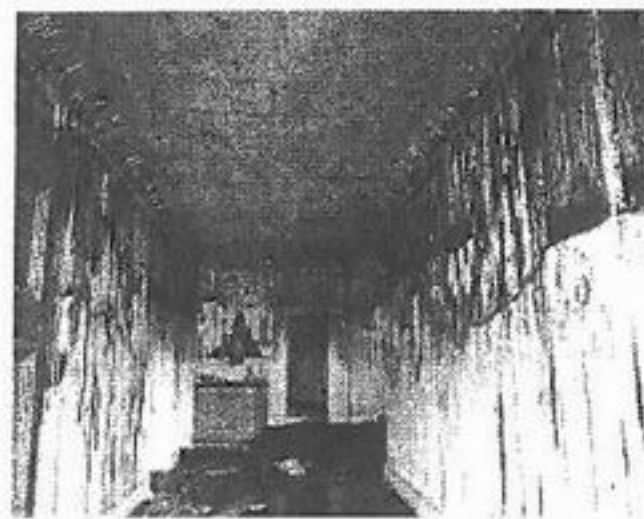
## Fire at landmark city property

NICK RABBITS

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CITY north residents believe the burning down of a landmark property in the city was caused by youths who regularly held "anti social parties" in the vacant premises.

Kilmoyle Lodge at the North Circular Road was badly damaged



added, saying: "It is a pity because Kilmoyle was an iconic building. It was a place which benefited the whole community. Not just the house itself, but the grounds and the trees. They added to the character of the North Circular Road."

Cllr Hourigan said this is one of the many reasons why people like to live and walk around the North