SAVING THE RAILWAYS. PART 1.

The end of the line?

'Many feel that the end product of the rationalisation process of Irish railways will be a railway system comprised entirely of the Dublin to Cork line.' In the first of a three-part series, **John Waters** (left) talks to those who work on the railways, many of whom feel they're rotting away from neglect.

HAVING a railway in the town, says the stationmaster in Claremorris, is a bit like having a clock in the house. Michael O'Reilly always has a few clocks in the house: he collects and restores them as a hobby. When he started first, the noise of the chiming and ringing kept him awake at nights; but now he finds that it helps him to sleep. There is something reassuring, he says, about the noise they make, and the dependability of its rhythms.

So it is with trains. Whenever a new train is added to the night schedule, he has noticed, they get complaints from people along the line that the noise is disturbing their sleep. After a while, the complaints die away. Then, one night when the train doesn't run, people ring in to ask what has happened. They couldn't sleep, they say, because they didn't hear the train passing.

Michael will acknowledge that he is a sort of honorary railwayman rather than the totally genuine article. Like most stationmasters, he came in as a clerk, anwering an advert in the Railway Circular shown to him by a railwayman over 35 years ago. The genuine article is getting harder and harder to locate.

A railwayman was a special sort of man, a man with a fierce love of something that few outsiders could comprehend, an almost obsessional pride in "the job" that made him seem like a crank, a language and folklore all of his own, a social life that jarred with those of other workers, and an odd propensity for looking as unsuited to unform while wearing it as he looked uncomfortable without it. Railwaymen were not just men who worked on the railways — they were the railways; they brought the railways to life and earned their own livings in return, and the lives and fates of the railway and its people intertwined and became as one.

They spent their days and nights alongside the permanent way, in the shadow of signal cabin, amidst the roar of locomotive engines, breathing in that unique railway concoction of yeast and grease, their hands always black from the newsprint of that morning's papers. They lived alongside the engineering miracle of rail on sleeper, and grew towards it like climbing roses to a trellis.

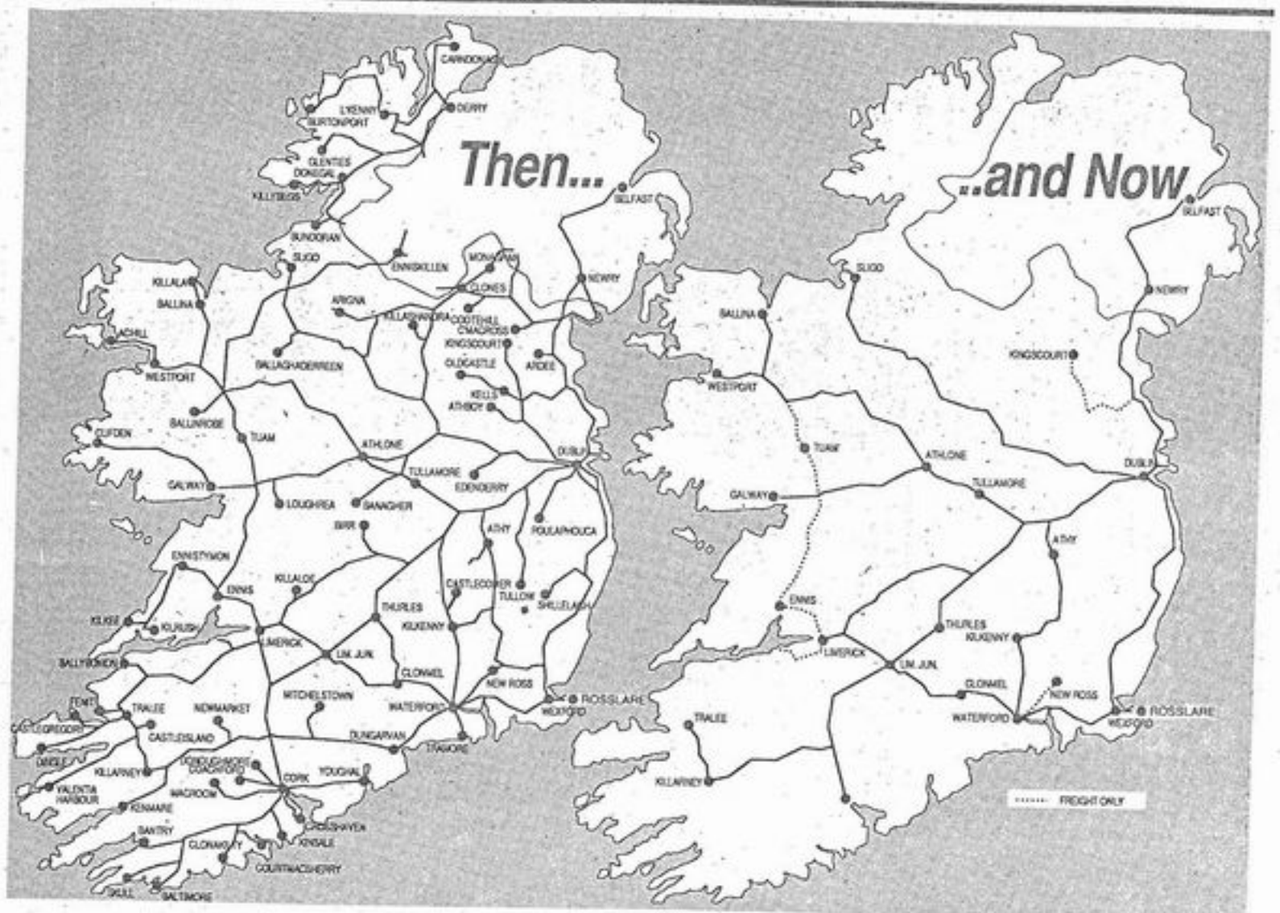
The railways tended to run in families, with sometimes the entire male complement of brothers, uncles and sons belonging to one or other division of the standing armies of drivers, shunters, signalmen, porters, guards, milesmen, gatekeepers, checkers and other workers who combine, minute by minute, to make the trains run on time.

There was something uniquely distinguishable and unmistakeable about a railwayman, something about the way he moved in time — conscious of its passing but fully cognisant of its dimensions — which made him both the child and the prisoner of his calling. But even if you did not belong to the elite corps of warriors who operated the railways (and I, too, was for a time an honorary railwayman), it was impossible to live close to a station or a line and remain oblivious to its mystery. You did not understand quite how the clock functioned, but you could not escape its incessant tick and tock and its unerring ding and dong.

Railways were — are — more than methods of transportation; they are both a way of life and a metaphor for it. They snake through the countryside like arteries, propelling the lifeblood from the centre to the peripheral regions. They throb through the night while the country sleeps. They provide the assurance of normality but are not boring.

Close your eyes and see again the steam cloud up from the leaky heater hose as the guard sweeps open the doors of the paper train, the bales of *Presses* and *Independents* piled up high inside with the rolled bundles of *Irish Times* balanced perilously on top. The driver tall in his engine as Clint Eastwood in the saddle, above the frenetic order of the next two minutes.

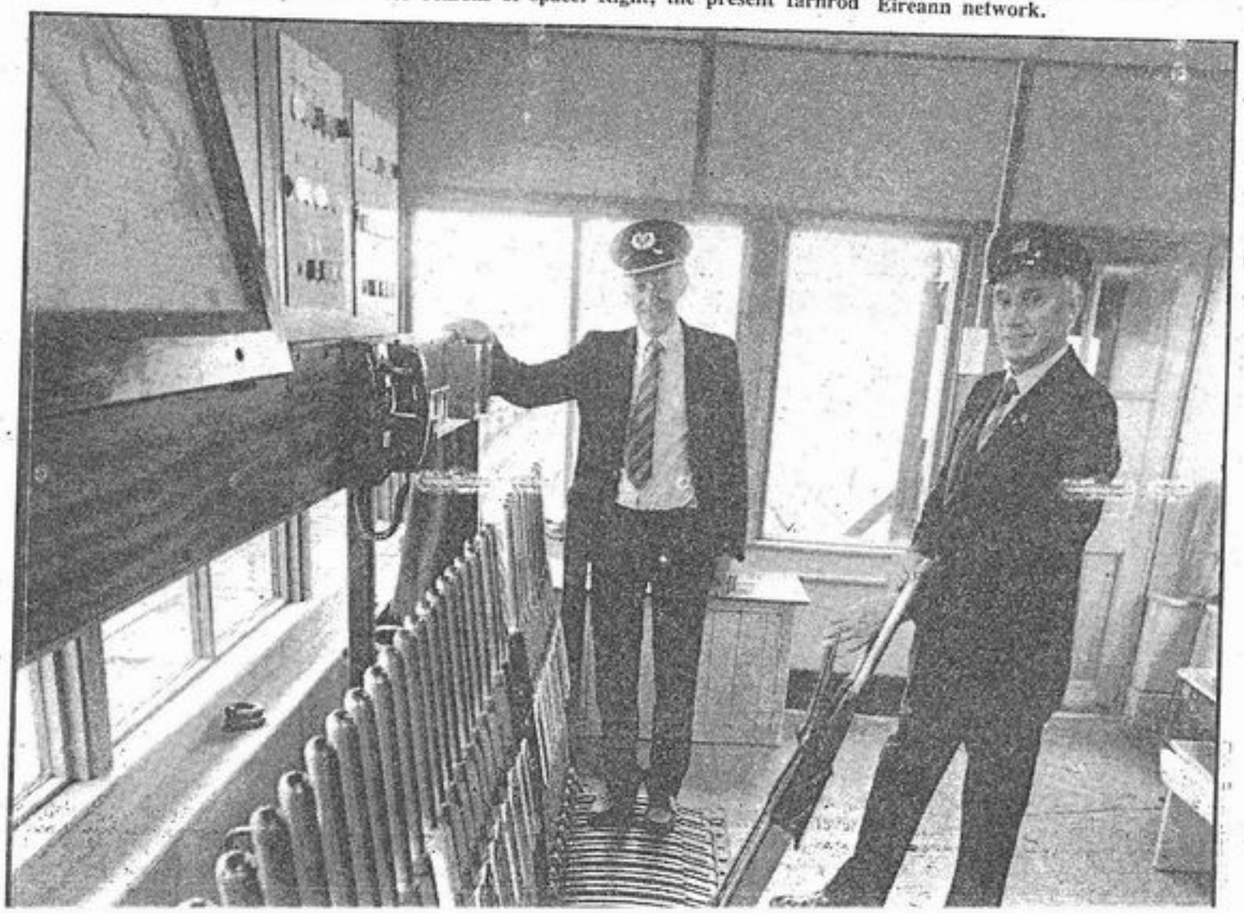
Two minutes of unloading, swift but unhurried; haste making no concession to carelessness as the papers are thrown out to be sorted on the platform. The talk of politics or football as the labels are scrutinised and the bales cast this way and that with the facility



IRISH TIMES STUDIO

The map on the left gives an impression of the extent of the rail network in the Free State in 1924. A number of smaller lines are not included for reasons of space. Right, the present Iarnród Éireann network.

The future of the Sligo line



The long goodbye . . . a regular sight at any railway station. — (Photograph: Joe Shaughnessy.)

MR Ted Nealon, Fine Gael TD for Sligo-Leitrim, is adamant that the line from Sligo to Dublin is under imminent threat of closure unless there is a radical change of Government policy towards the upkeep of the railway network. "Unless the Government provide CIE and Iarnród Éireann in particular with sufficient funds to renew the track, it is destined to go," he says.

Mr Nealon says that, earlier this year, Iarnród Éireann began a major renewal programme on the Sligo line, laying a welded track over a distance of 1½ miles between Sligo and Boyle, at an estimated cost of £600,000, but that operation was aborted without warning three months ago.

This, he believes, is a clear indication that the company has earmarked the line between Mullingar and Sligo as the next target should further rationalisations prove necessary. As a consequence of its condition, he says, trains travelling on the line are currently restricted to observe a maximum speed of 50 miles per hour. As a result, he says, it takes an hour longer to travel from Dublin to Sligo than from Dublin to Galway. Despite this, passenger traffic on the line is holding up, but he does not believe this situation will continue indefinitely. Next year, he says, the speed limit will be 40 m.p.h.; the following year 30. At that point, he says: "The line would close itself."

Mr Nealon believes that the problems facing Irish Rail cannot be solved by the company itself, but require a change in Government policy. It is now Fine Gael policy, he points out, that the permanent-way network should be maintained from exchequer funds, in the same way as the State is currently responsible for the upkeep of roads. "You don't make private lorry owners responsible for the state of the roads," he says: The Government should now make representations within the EC for structural funds to meet the urgent needs of the national railway network.

Mr John McCarthy, Galway regional manager of Iarnród Éireann, agrees that the Sligo line is "in need of investment". He does not deny the speed limit figures mentioned by Ted Nealon, but asserts that there will be no run-down of services on the Sligo line for as long as the public wishes to travel by train. "We will continue to operate a safe railway. As the line gets older we will reduce the speed."

Ted Nealon . . . adamant that the Sligo line is under threat of closure.

Mr McCarthy maintains that there is widespread ignorance about the level of expenditure necessitated by routine upkeep of the railways. The storm of outrage which greets the announcement of the level of the exchequer subvention to CIE is a reflection of this.

Of the £80 million designated to Iarnród Éireann each year, he says, £45 million goes on upkeep, £20 million on interest repayments, and the remainder on day-to-day running costs. The company, he says, cannot win. "We get assaulted because of the subvention we get, and because of the economies we make."

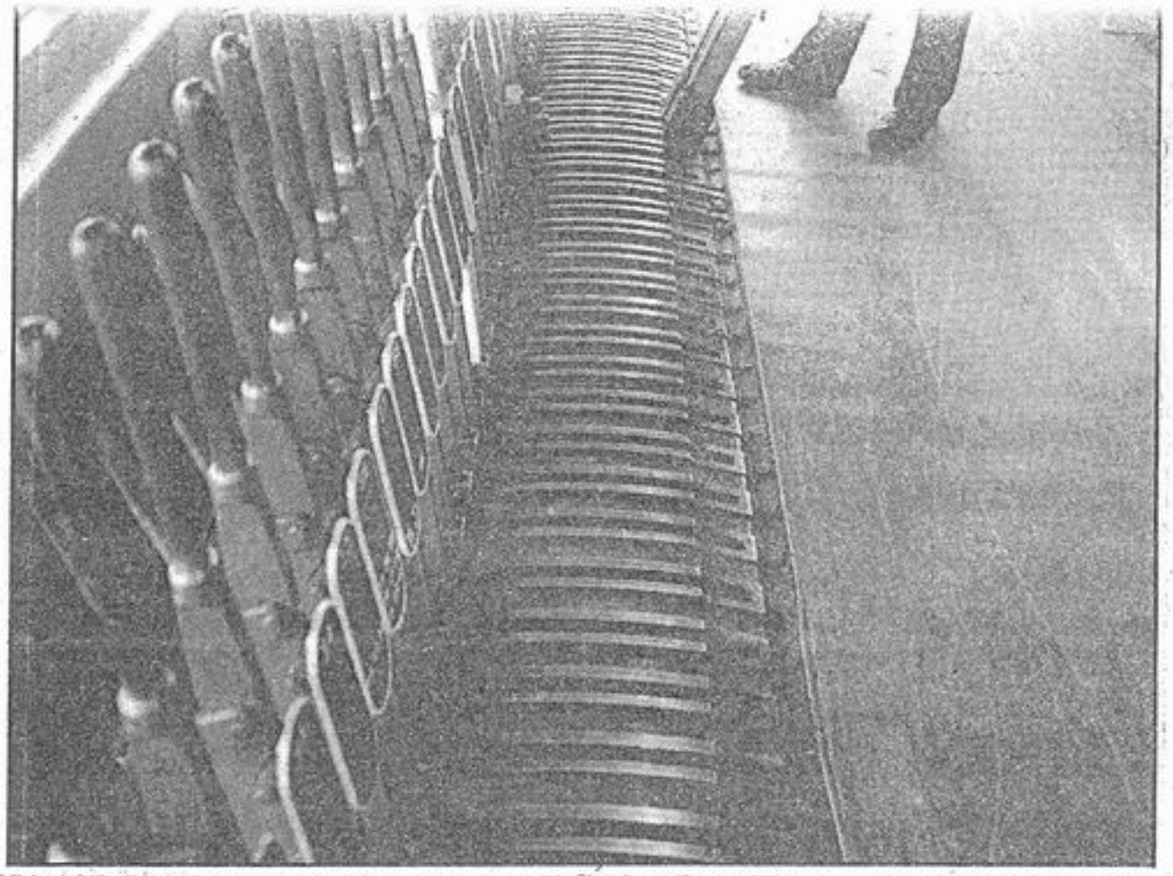
"We spend a lot of money in maintaining the railway just to stand still. That £45 million a year goes on maintenance; but what is needed on the Sligo line — and other lines as well — is more than basic maintenance. What's needed is renewal, not refurbishment. What we're saying is that we should go out and buy a new track."

He also agrees with Ted Nealon's assertion that government should be attempting to obtain EC structural funds for this purpose. There does not appear to be any difficulty, he points out, with obtaining such grants to build roads, flyovers and bypasses. "We have to repair our own potholes," he says. "We have demonstrated that we have a cost structure now that is very competitive. We're giving very good value for money. And having done that, we feel that we should get a fair crack of the whip in investment and so on. Every company needs investment to continue to survive."

Asked what the implications might be if such investment is not forthcoming, Mr McCarthy lapses into a more enigmatic mode of reply. Iarnród Éireann have no wish to close down railways, he says. But, yes, they will undoubtedly lose business should the speed limit on the Sligo line decrease any more. The trouble is that because the Sligo line has fewer passenger journeys than other lines (it has roughly half the number of journeys as the Westport line, and a quarter of those on the Galway line) it requires a proportionately greater level of maintenance financing than the traffic would justify.

Yes, he admits, there is "a direct relation between passenger numbers and journey time". Although he stops short of saying so, the only way out of this vicious circle is government intervention.

But, he insists, "we won't close the line in people's faces". While there is sufficient demand for the line, it will continue to operate. "We won't ever close the Sligo line. It's the public who will close the Sligo line."



Michael O'Reilly, stationmaster in Claremorris, Co Mayo, with Signalman Tommy Whelan . . . Michael O'Reilly is one of just six stationmasters remaining in the west where once there were 20. — (Photograph: Pat Langan.)

the papers are thrown out to be sorted on the platform. The talk of politics or football as the labels are scrutinised and the bales cast this way and that with the facility of basketball players. The ritual telling of legends of great railwaymen, spoken as though of battlescarred warriors: the milesman who never went home, but lived in a sleeping-car in a siding at the station; Dostoyevskian stationmasters who stalked their platforms in the early hours looking for someone to report or sack.

Railwaymen know what to say to one another no matter where they go. The railways are at once a universal village and a closed universe.

"The railways," says one railwayman — Eneas MacNally, a depot man at Westport Station — "are an octupus-shaped town, its tentacles spread all over the country. No matter where we come from, we all belong to the same place."

But here in the fiscally-conscious Ireland of the 1990s, a more malign metaphor asserts itself. The railway town, like many more conventional towns, is dying — of financial starvation and economic neglect. Though Iarnród Éireann management are anxious to put a confident gloss on what they describe as the "rationalisation" of the railway, talking up their stewardship in the hope of a few more crumbs from the political table, the evidence of decay is everywhere: slimmed-down services, closed goods stores, silent yards, speed limits because of reduced maintenance, railwaymen who talk more and more about the good old days.

As with so many things, the decay is most visible in the west of Ireland. Many western towns, of course, like Ballaghaderreen, Tuam, Kiltimagh, Swinford, Charlestown and Athenry, have long since been taken off the railroad network — for many years now — with only the Ballina branch along with the main lines to Galway, Sligo and Westport remaining. But the fiscal tightening grows ever more insistent — and much of the talk around the remaining stations has to do with how much longer can their stations go on.

Over the past 20 years, most stations in the west have been reduced to the status of halt, with no functions other than as stopping points for passenger traffic. Michael O'Reilly is one of just six stationmasters remaining in the west, where once there were 20. Many feel that what is happening in the west offers a glimpse of the future of Irish railways, and that the end-product of the rationalisation process will be a railway system comprised entirely of the Dublin to Cork line.

The cutbacks in some stations have stopped only just short of total closure. In Westport, once a thriving freight depot, with enormous traffic throughflow, nothing remains except the passenger service. Most of the remaining freight is delivered by road from Ballina; Guinness deliveries are made from Claremorris. The liner train, which ran nightly to Westport carrying unit-load containers for the several factories around town, has been diverted to Ballina.

In Castlebar, Mayo's county town, only one man is now employed at the railway station, all operating functions having been transferred to the Manulla Junction down the road. The "loop" line through the station, which allowed trains to be turned and crossed there, has been taken up for use as spares for much-needed repairs in other parts of the rail system.

Eneas MacNally has worked on the railways for almost 22 years. His brother, Willie, also works at Westport Station. They belong to a railway family. Their father before them worked at the CIE garage on Westport Quay. In his two decades on the job, says Eneas, the railways have declined "to the point of extinction". Twenty years ago, they were carrying the bulk of the freight traffic in and out of Westport serving the town and its hinterland, from Tourmakeady to the south to Achill in the north-west: cement, fertiliser, Guinness, oil, cornflakes, leather for the local shoe factory, new cars on flat trucks, cigarettes, live chickens . . . Today, he says, hardly anything remains.

Eneas carries out seven distinct functions on the railway. He is a trained guard, signalman, shunter and checker, but he also functions as a station porter and cleaner, and has the overall title of senior depot man. He works six hours and 40 minutes per day, six days a week, on various shifts. He has to submit himself to examination on the company rulebook once a year. His basic pay is £154, plus a shift allowance of £22. The only overtime now available is four hours on a Sunday, which means that, to make a decent living, he must work without a break for months on end.

He has always loved working on the railway; but with each new "rationalisation" wonders if he did the right thing in giving up his job as head porter in a Castlebar hotel all of 22 years ago. "If I had my time over again, I wouldn't be working on the railways," he says. He blames government who have "screwed CIE to the wall", forcing the company into more and more cutbacks and closedowns while operating a bias in favour of road transport.

Like many of those railwaymen in the "rationalised" stations, Eneas MacNally holds that the changes do not make economic sense. The company abolishes jobs in Westport and Castlebar and must pay overtime to men in Ballina and Claremorris to do the same work. Iarnród Éireann management repudiate this argument; district operating manager Gerry Glynn says that while, for example, the company abolished three jobs in the most recent rationalisation of Castlebar, no extra jobs were required by the transfer of functions to Ballina.

Dave McKeon, the now-retired chief clerk at Westport Station maintains that this is a red herring. Because the increasingly centralised service is less efficient and lacking a personal touch, the volume of traffic diminishes with each round of cutbacks, he says.

Since the introduction of containerisation for sundry traffic in the mid-70s, followed shortly afterwards by a system of caged pallets organised centrally from the North Wall, says Dave McKeon, the reduced flexibility and carrying capacity, allied to the high levels of pilferage at the central depot, have caused this form of traffic to all but disappear. "That was the start of the rot," he says. Twenty years ago, he recalls, there were over 40 people employed at Westport Station; today there are 15. "The only way they seem to be able to make money nowadays," says Dave McKeon, "is by laying off staff and reducing services."

The more benign among railwaymen speak about the lack of a national policy on transport as being the root of the problem. Others believe the cuts have been imposed for political reasons — to debilitate the railways so as to reduce their ability to compete with private transport. CIE management, most workers acknowledge, has been caught between a rock and a hard place: they must continue to "rationalise" in order to placate their political masters; but each round of cutbacks, while making moderate savings in the short term, only further reduces traffic and the company's overall ability to recover lost ground. The approach, they point out again and again, is doubly uneconomic: the roads disintegrate because of the volume of traffic, while the railways rot away from neglect.

Although staff speak of a much improved relationship between themselves and the new generation of management since the split-up of CIE into three different companies, there are widespread fears that the iron horse may already have bolted. For years there has been profound demoralisation at practically every level of the national transport company. What is regarded as the disasterous management policy, implemented over many years by a petty and vindictive middle-management, has resulted in many workers losing their sense of identification with their source of employment.

The close bond which once existed between railway workers everywhere has been fatally weakened. There is no longer the same pride in belonging.

"There was a time when you would go out and proclaim that you belonged to the railways," says a clerk in Galway. "It was more than a job: it was your life. But not any more. Now you go out and when someone asks you where you work you hum and you haw. You come in to work and put in your time, and count the months to your pension."

> 'The railways are at once a universal village and a closed universe'

TOMORROW
The railway fanatics

SAVING THE RAILWAYS — PART 2

A header with the railways in his blood

'In a hundred years' time, our descendants will curse the dead generations — that's us — for what we did to the railways'. Continuing his series, **John Waters** talks to the system's best supporters — the railway fanatics.

MOST, but not all, railway enthusiasts are male. By no means all railway fanatics are themselves railwaymen, though, as often the enthusiasm is simply the adult manifestation of the boyhood fascination with train-sets, there is the blood-bond linking them to the railroad.

Sean Browne became interested in railways as a boy, helping his uncle, a carter in Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, who delivered freight to the town in the good old days when the local station still had a goods store. His pub in Castlerea, once the Castle Inn, but recently renamed "Hell's Kitchen", is an unofficial railways museum, its walls and ceilings lined with railway memorabilia: obsolete tools and equipment, lamps, posters, books, photos, tickets, signposts, a bell from one of the trains that Jesse James robbed on the Philadelphia line.

Outside the pub he has installed a genuine railway signal, some 20 feet in height. When he opens every morning, he puts the signal at green; at closing time, he switches it to red.

There appears to be nothing about railways that Sean Browne does not know. He is a member of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, and of the Tuam-based organisation, Westrail, formed to revive the recently-closed Athenry section as a steam railway.

When he and his wife, Ann, began courting she used to call him "Five-foot Three", because that is the distance between the lines of the Irish railway. If he detects an interest, he will bombard the customer with information and anecdotes, delivered in loco-mouth style, between runs in and out to a storeroom to dig out old photographs and books to illustrate his remarks.

"I'm a header," he declares, without apology. "You think I'm mad . . ." He loves the railways and the people who work them. He has a visitors book behind the bar for railwaymen to sign when they call. "I've found that all sections of railway people were some of the finest individuals I've ever met. They were a community among themselves, like an order of monks. The railways are a vocation. People have it in their blood. I was in Maynooth for years, and all over the place, but I never found a crowd like them."

He understands his own fanaticism, but cannot explain it. 'It's something to do with those two bits of metal that go down along the sleepers. Even when I go to places where the railway line is long gone, my wife is afraid that I'll go off looking at where the lines used to be. It's something to do with the fact that the railway had a right-of-way . . . A road can be put anywhere, but a railway has to have rails, signalling, bridges, engineering. I count it as a disease. It's something that grabs you. It's not tangible.

"You have fellows who are mad about coaches; others about signals, others about engines. It's a mystery to outsiders. If a fellow is going to a match around here he's a great fellow, but if he's going to look at a train he's considered a bit of a head-the-ball."

If such enthusiasm were to be found amongst CIE management, he says, there would not today be a doubt hanging over the future of the railways. "For the railway to run properly, the head men have to love it, to come out and meet the people who work on it and live off it."

He will tell you that there were 1,900 people working on the building of the Mayo line, over 130 years ago. "To build a line across bogs was a great feat," he says, examining the face of his listener to observe whether the enormity of the achievement is appreciated.

He tells of drivers during the blackout who could tell where they were on the darkest of lines by the sound of the line. He tells of the legends of the Achill branch long since closed — which featured in the prophecies of St Colmcille which foretold that an iron horse would leave Achill for the first time at the end of the last century, laden with dead bodies, and would return for the last time in the same manner.

The prediction proved accurate on both counts: in 1895, as the line was about to open, a ship overturned in the harbour as passengers stampeded to catch a glimpse of the iron horse, and several tourists were drowned. Their bodies left by the first train out of Achill.

Forty-two years later, the line closed, apparently defying the second part of the prediction; but, a week later, a disastrous fire in Scotland resulted in the deaths of a group of tatie hoker emigrants from Achill and the line was reopened to the funeral train which brought the bodies home.

The driver of that last train to Achill was Pat Dawson, whose son, Hughie, was himself later a driver for many years in Claremorris. Hughie's son, Frank Dawson, although he does not himself work on the railway, is founder of Westrail, the Tuam body set up in 1985 to preserve railways in the region.

Like Sean Browne, Frank had been a member of the Railway Preservation Society in Galway, but was moved by the imminent closure of the Tuam line to approach the railway authorities and ask them to put aside plans to dismantle the railway infrastructure in Tuam. He found the company most co-operative and encouraging, and before long had moved in several items of rolling stock and a diesel engine for restoration. They relaid sections of the station yard which had been uplifted, and succeeded in having their engine and rolling stock passed to run on the line, now otherwise falling into almost total disuse.

In June 1986, they ran a day trip to Claremorris, the first ever privately-owned diesel-hauled passenger train in either Ireland or Britain, with Hughie Dawson driving.

Nobody took much notice of the diesel train, so they acquired a steam engine — No. 90 — which cost them £40,000 to restore. This summer, Westrail will be running steam specials between Tuam and Athenry every Saturday until the end of August. The trip includes a stop at Ballyglunin Station, which featured in "The Quiet Man". In the future they hope to be able to have steam trains running regularly between Galway, Limerick and Claremorris.

Is this, then, the future for Irish railways, to be recreated by dedicated enthusiasts as kitsch reminders of a past which was despised while it was happening? Sean Browne says: probably. "Soon there will be more railway equipment in my pub than under Iarnród Éireann control in the west of Ireland."

Frank Dawson does not demur. The logical outcome of present Government policy will be to reduce the railway system to a curiosity. He believes that Iarnród Éireann is doing "tremendous work" in keeping railways going in spite of the apparent antipathy or disinterest of politicians. But, he believes, while the lines remain in place, there is still hope.

"I think that the saving of the railway might be in the fact that Europe is now taking a more active interest in how we develop our infrastructure. Public opinion is coming around again to the notion of railways, as in the talk about a light-rail system for Dublin. Railway systems are being expanded all over Europe, while ours is being wound down. I hope that Ireland is going to look again and see how we might be able to benefit from the overall change in climate. If Iarnród Éireann are given the road, they'll rise to it."

Sean Browne, however, is not so confident. He believes that the railways are being closed down by a process of stealth, and that this process is the result of a positive political decision. Stations, he points out, no longer get closed with the sudden, short, swift shock of the '50s and '60s, but they are closing just as surely. The last Iarnród Éireann train travelled on the Tuam to Athenry line a few months ago, and nobody noticed.

"I see it all going without any outrage. One time they had to put up closure notices, but now it's gone before you know it. What they're doing with the Sligo line, for example, amounts to the same thing. They're closing it by stealth. It's erosion.

"I've had a fear of them closing since I was a child. But now it's so subtle. I often wonder who makes these decisions, or how they are made. It seems to work like a chain of command — nobody can pin down who's responsible for the decision. It's marvellous, really, how they are doing it without anyone noticing. I'd love to know who 'they' are."

He has no confidence in the present Government to do what is necessary. Having Seamus Brennan responsible for the railways, he says, is "like putting a fisherman in charge". That fellow, he says, "would close his granny's house".

"What's being allowed to happen is a disgrace. It's only when we are dead and gone that the decisions that are being made now will be regretted. In a hundred years' time our descendants will curse the dead generations — that's us — for what we did to the railways."

Sean Browne . . . "Soon there will be more railway equipment in my pub than under Iarnród Éireann control in the west of Ireland"—(Photograph: Pat Langan.)

The early days

THE HISTORY of Irish railways may contain the blueprint for their future development, if the 1990 report of the European Commission-sponsored study group, Transport 2000 Plus, is implemented.

The report advocates the creation of a standardised and integrated European network, accessible to private operators working alongside the existing companies on a competitive basis. Irish railroad travel began not as a State-sponsored activity but from the initiative of the private sector, which built railways whenever and wherever there was a demand for them.

The first railroad in Ireland was the Dublin and Kingstown line, which opened in 1834. This was followed by: the Dublin and Wicklow Railway, which amalgamated with the D & KR in 1856 to become the Dublin and South Eastern Railway; the Great Southern and Western Railway, which reached Cork in 1849; the Midland Great Western Railway, whose lines reached both Clifden and Achill by 1895; and the Great Northern Railway, which linked Dublin to Belfast in 1855.

In addition, there were innumerable smaller railways, all independently owned to begin with, some of which, like the Co. Donegal Railway, the Cavan and Leitrim Railway and the Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway, operated on a narrower gauge track than the larger companies.

Over the years, many of the smaller companies were absorbed by the larger concerns, in particular by the GS & WR and the GNR. In 1924, the Free State Government amalgamated most of the country's railways as the Great Southern Railways. During the second World War, coal shortages all but brought the railways to a standstill, and in 1945, the Government decided to dissolve the GSR and Coras Iompair Eireann was created with a monopoly of all railway transport in Ireland.

In 1987 CIE split up into three separate companies, Dublin Bus, Bus Eireann and Iarnród Éireann — all still under the CIE umbrella.

The steam train — symbol of a bygone era.

TOMORROW

The future of the railways.

SAVING THE RAILWAYS—PART 3

Getting out of a spiral of decline

'Every office grouch and bar-room bore has a tale to tell of a missed connection, a fare anomaly or an afternoon spent seething with thirst on a buffetless train from Tralee,' writes **John Waters,** continuing his series on the railways by talking to the managing director of Iarnród Éireann, David Waters.

CIE has long been one of the great national punchbags. The indolent, strike-happy public transport employee is one of the great stereotypes of modern caricature, here in Ireland as much as elsewhere.

Over many years, the newspaper headlines have painted a consistently similar picture: "TDs complain about condition of trains"; "Inefficiency linked to lack of competition"; "CIE to report loss"; "CIE losses of £100 million revealed"; "CIE's losses even worse at second look"; "No extra money available, Minister tells board"; "Tough line on aid for CIE".

Every office grouch and bar-room bore has a tale to tell of a missed connection a fare anomaly, a testy exchange with a company employee or an afternoon spent seething with thirst on a buffetless train from Tralee.

The conventional wisdom is that CIE in general, and the railways in particular, constitute a massive drain on the state resources. Iarnród Éireann employees may have a point when they say they carry an unfair burden of public opprobrium. They also justifiably complain about the fact that they get tarred with the same brush as Dublin busworkers; in fact, the industrial relations record among railway workers is far better than in most other sectors.

Moreover, the performance of the railways, in terms of service, productivity and traffic, is improving all the time. Last year, according to Iarnród Éireann managing director, David Waters, the company carried more passengers than in any other year in over a century and a half of Irish railways.

The root of the problem facing the railways lies in the malleable topsoil of public opinion. The media regularly reports "huge", "massive" or "astronomical" losses by the railways, and the public is obligingly "shocked" and "appalled". There is little

It's the end of the journey for these passengers, but Iarnród Éireann still has a long way to go.

port, Seamus Brennan, again altered this arrangement, so that the taxpayer "could see what it was paying for", which had the effect of turning the company back into a paper lossmaker overnight, with a renewal of all the attendant problems of public perception and staff morale.

Iarnród Éireann is caught in the classic double-bind of the semi-State company. It must provide an essential social service in areas that private transport will have no truck with, and yet show willingness to abide within the laws of

The company points to the revolution which occurred in private transport, in both the passenger and freight sectors, over the past few decades, placing the railways in a highly competitive situation on the proverbial uneven playing pitch.

David Waters stops short of stating baldly that unless the Government steps in to relieve the pressure, more railway services will shortly have to come in for the chop. Nevertheless, such an eventuality can perhaps be detected between, as it were, the lines of his responses. He says that, in addition to its current outlay, the company requires a capital investment of between £5 and £7 million per annum in order simply to renew its assets.

"We have got to the stage on certain lines where increased investment in the infrastructure is essential. I'm not talking about operating; we're cutting down the operating costs all the time. But we've got to renew our assets, and there is a requirement for additional funding to do that. And I suppose why I feel a bit sore is that I felt that in the EC structural funds the railways were very, very badly treated, insofar as the roads got slapped £600 million, while public transport got £30 million — mostly in the Dublin area — and not one yard of track, not one yard of track — has had any structural support outside the Dublin area." This, the managing director concludes, with exquisite understatement, "is a pity, really".

Mr Waters is reluctant to speculate as to the root cause of this failure. "Maybe we haven't been good enough at getting the message across. Maybe people feel that a road investment is better than a rail investment. I can't speak for government or ministers. One has got to acknowledge that our roads need to be improved, but I would maintain also that the rail does as well.

"I had to answer to Sligo Corporation quite recently on this issue of investment, and I said to them around the table that I hoped the next time they as politicians are discussing struc-

Seamus Ratigan, a passionate defender of Irish railways, takes encouragement from the success of the DART. — (Photograph: Joe St Leger)

Does DART signal the way?

SEAMUS RATIGAN has been with CIE for 20 years. Before that he worked for British Rail. The railways were in his family, although the bug had skipped the generation before him. Some of his grandfather's generation worked on the railway at Broadstone, and a granduncle on the construction of the Dublin to Kingstown Railway in the 1830s. Seamus currently works as a supervisor on Dublin's DART.

He has long been a passionate defender of the Irish railways, as much from a philosophical viewpoint as that of an employee and trade unionist. Working on the railway is not an ordinary job. "There's more *belonging* to the place, the whole railway premises, the track, everything. And *it* belonging to the fellows that work there. You don't get very many negative attitdues towards the thing itself, that you might get in a factory, for example. I think it's because of the way it started, in the 19th century. It was a huge undertaking.

"A lot of families got involved in the building of it. It was a focus of attention for everybody. The novelty of it. The power that it unleashed. The whole country being dug up, the track being put down, the steel rails, the steam engines. It had a deep psychological effect and a benefit to everybody. The railway was responsible for the standardisation of time all over the country."

The problem for the railways, he says, has been that, except in a small number of locations, they are no longer profitable, so private capital is no longer interested in being involved. "Anything they're not interested in tends to get shunted, or degraded as being out of date or obsolete, because they always project themselves as being interested in the new technology. But there is new technology on the railway too, and it can adapt very easily to new technology.

"But there's no way they can get over the principle of steel wheel on steel rail being the easiest thing to move along the surface of the earth. That never goes out of date. That's a fundamental physical principle. It's still going to be more economical to do that, if you have a certain load. Now, commercially, the loads are not going on the railways to the extent they used to. There are other interests now, operating the road system; the trucks, the hauliers, the road builders. So there's a clique, if you like, of building contractors, commercial vehicle producers and users, who obviously get something out of the road system and want to reduce the competition as much as they can.

"The railway has a strategic national value. It has a benefit to the environment that we can't get any other way. The environment can come right up to the edge of the railway and it doesn't get damaged. It can come in through the tracks. You'll see grass growing on the tracks. That doesn't happen on a motorway: the fumes deaden everything on either side. The railway knits in."

Seamus Ratigan believes that there has been in this country what amounts to a subversive attempt by vested interests to destroy the railway system. Civil servants and politicians, he says, have colluded with private interests to debilitate the railways. Newspapers, ideologically hostile to railways, promote the same anti-railway economists and hype up each announcement of losses by Iarnród Éireann. It is still going on. "The idea that you don't spend money on maintenance must be subversive. We don't see Seamus Brennan as a minister who is committed to railways. The Minister for Transport is supposed to be taking care of the railway for the public."

The destruction of the railways, he says, is part of the modern obsession with private ownership, and has been deliberately fostered to undermine our social consciousness and simultaneously limit individual freedom.

In a world where freedom is to have a car of your own, we have allowed ourselves to be convinced that to depend on public transport is a badge of both failure and slavery. "It allows *them* to dominate more. They have everybody on a mortgage, and everybody on a car loan, and everybody individual and fragmented. This is Thatcher's idea that there is no such thing as society. That was just code for saying that they atomized everybody. There is society all right, but they keep control of it.

"The financial institutions, the City of London, the banks — they're the ones with the real power. In the 19th-century it was the manufacturing frontier of industry that was pushing development forward. Now things have switched around so that the financiers dominate by switching stocks and shares, gambling on the stock exchange, corporate radar and all that sort of stuff."

But Seamus Rattigan takes encouragement from the success of the DART system, which has transferred thousands of Dubliners from their cars back to the railways. Popular opinion is veering back towards the railway. Shortly we will arrive at a crossroads, he says; or, more correctly, at a crossing, where decisions will have to be made unambiguously and in full view of the public. Everything now rests with the gatekeeper.

"massive" or "astronomical" losses by the railways, and the public is obligingly "shocked" and "appalled". There is little ground for the alternative analyses which might question whether the annual subsidy Iarnród Éireann gets represents all that much of an investment in a service which, were it allowed to function to its potential, might overwhelmingly alter the country's economic fortunes. CIE has long had to keep mum and endure the jibes of its detractors among the hired economic bootboys of the private sector; but now that years of enforced cutbacks have slimmed the company down to within an Nth of fatal dismemberment, it is beginning to broaden its defence argument beyond the narrow parameters of transactional economics.

A lack of public sympathy resulting from the company's negative profile has created a spiral of decline from which Iarnród Éireann must now propel itself. David Waters agrees that there is a problem with the public perception of the railways, and believes that this has a lot to do with the way the company's accounts have to be presented.

Iarnród Éireann currently receives about £80 million in a government subsidy, about £45 million of which goes into routine maintenance of the permanent way, the national rail network. Mr Waters points out that, with a fleet of 800 buses, their sister company, Dublin Bus, pays road tax of just about £250,000 per annum. In the past four to five years, he says, there has been more public money spent on road renewal in Co Mayo alone than for track renewal of the entire national rail network. "There has been a tendency in Europe of late to accept that there is an imbalance there, and that the responsibility for the infrastructure — certainly from an accountancy point of view, and I wouldn't advocate it other than from an accountancy point of view — should be separated out and become the responsibility of the State. I do believe that an EC directive will come out shortly on that particular issue.

"One has got to recognise that the Government has supported the railways over the years with the level of subvention we get. But I do believe in people's perceptions and how our accounts are presented. It does give the impression that this is an awful drain on State resources. It's our job in the railways to give the best possible value for money, and that's what we're about in all our management strategies."

Mr Waters concedes that the current approach has contributed to morale problems among railway staff. Some years ago, he points out, when the Government agreed to treat the company's accounts in the manner of other European countries, and the accounts began to show a profit for the first time in years, staff morale immediately perked up. "It's amazing that such a simple thing in accountancy practice made such a difference. We did make a profit, and it was a genuine profit, and suddenly the railways, and railway people, could feel good again about themselves."

The present Minister for Transport ... State company. It must provide an essential social service in areas that private transport will have no truck with, and yet show willingness to abide within the laws of the competitive marketplace. Its employer — the public — constantly makes demands which are mutually contradictory and ultimately self-defeating of one another. The company is unable to be either private fish or public fowl; is constantly being squashed between conflicting demands.

> 'By and large we've got an excellent catering service'

State subventions, begrudgingly given and loaded with restrictive conditions and ultimatums, serve largely to exacerbate this dilemma. A sort of economic lagging jacket, they serve only to have the inevitable brought about in a less direct, more ambiguous manner. Rather than have the public make a choice between a service ceasing or continuing on its own merits, they allow the service to atrophy to the point where nobody notices when it finally expires.

In a sense, State subventions, particularly those that are insufficient and lacking in goodwill, are merely smokescreens for politicians and the public to hide from the consequences of the lack of a proper social policy. Meanwhile, the direct consequences of such policy as exists are, from a social point of view, highly questionable at best.

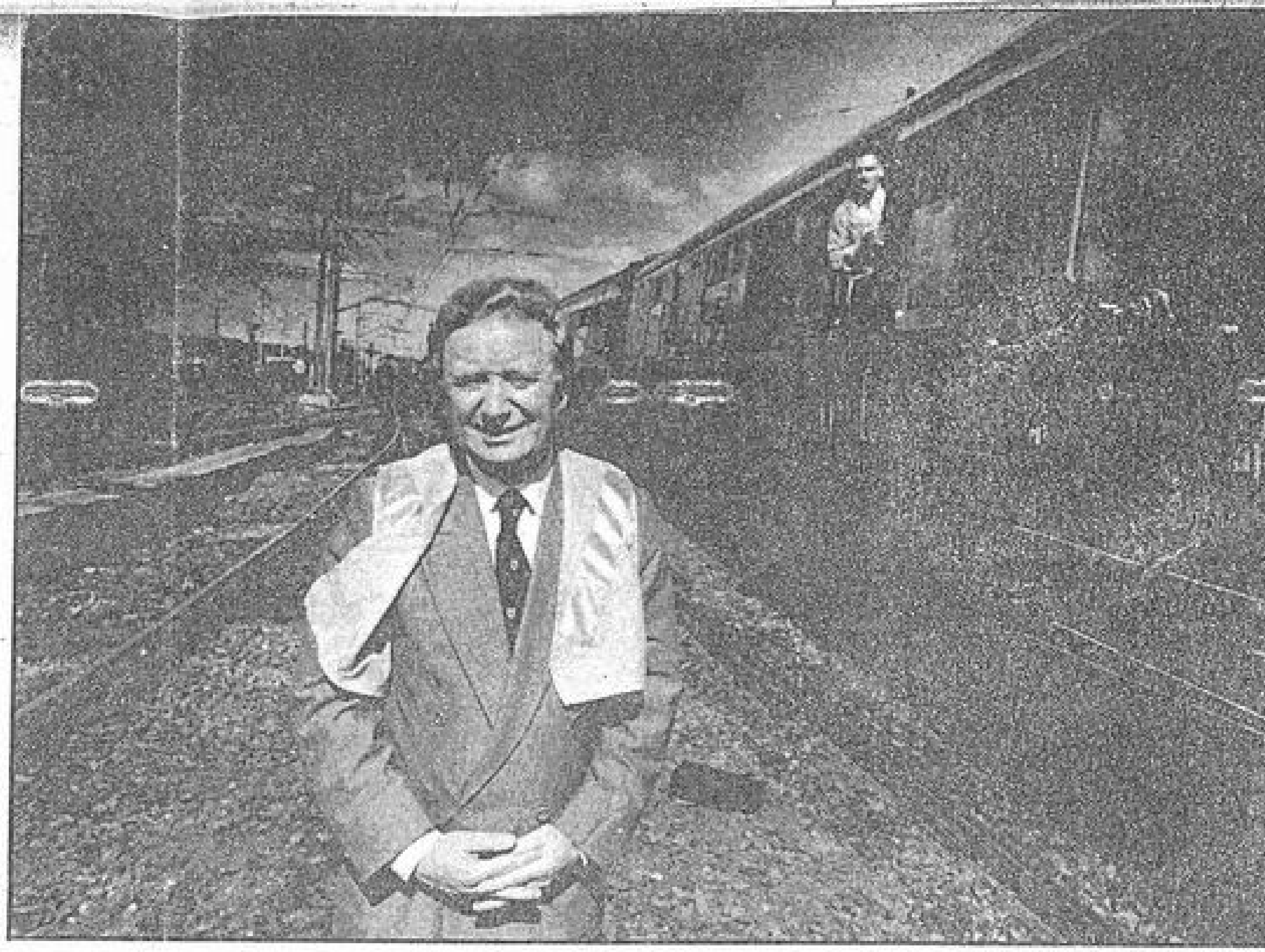
Managers of the national transport company must trumpet the efficiencies which led to their discarding over half their workforce — more than 10,000 people — since the mid-seventies, while the same politicians who insisted on such measures scratch their heads and wonder why we have such a "shocking" and "appalling" unemployment problem.

... Corporation quite recently on this issue of investment, and I said to them around the table that I hoped the next time they as politicians are discussing structural funds that they'll remember that there's a second road out of Sligo, and that's the railroad. People tend to forget that — to say, 'That's Iarnród Éireann's problem'. But it's part and parcel of the infrastructure and of the life of the people. The Government have rightly, over the last number of years, required us to improve our performance. And I must say that the railway has performed — and I'm not taking credit for this because it was before my time as much as during my time — much, much better than a lot of people appreciate.

"In the four years since we became a separate company, we reduced our staff numbers by 1,300 people. That's not generally known. Since 1984, our dependency on the State has been reduced by over 23 per cent, which is a hell of a performance, and has been done without any major disruption to the workforce, and while maintaining the basic infrastructure. By and large, and working within the constraints that we have to work within, we give a pretty good service."

There has been, he acknowledges, a problem in conveying to the general public the extent of the improvement. That, for instance, about 93 per cent of trains now arrive at their destinations within ten minutes of their scheduled time. That the Cork line is still the most efficient mode of land transport in the country, with an average speed of 300 kilometres per hour.

Other problems are also being slowly and carefully ironed out. Fare structures are constantly being examined with a view to maximising passenger numbers with due reference to both profitability and public service. One apparent anomaly is that it costs approximately 50 per cent more to travel from Dublin to other locations as to go in the opposite direction. This may be contributing to a situation whereby about twice as many people use the train to travel from most provincial towns and cities to Dublin as there are travellers in the other direction. The company has in the past attempted a more equalised fare structure but has, says David Waters, "been badly burned". They will, however, be making further attempts to address the imbalances.



David Waters . . . "In the EC structural funds the railways were very, very badly treated." — (Photograph: Pat Langan.)

As to the vexed question of missing dining facilities, the managing director maintains that such incidences are now rare. "By and large we've got an excellent catering service. We don't have dining cars on every route, but our ambition is to have a meal service on every route. Where we don't have dining cars we have a trolley service."

The saving of the railways may come down eventually to the increased awareness of environmental factors. One locomotive pulling a train carrying 500 passengers has the same level of toxic emission as a car with one passenger. A railroad takes up only a fifth of the space required by a road with similar capacity and is four times as efficient as road freight transport in terms of fuel consumption. Within the European Community, road transport causes approximately 50 times more deaths than rail accidents each year.

Even to keep the argument an economic one: each pound of public money invested in road renewal adds also to the drain on public funds for hospitals, whereas investment in rail transport would greatly reduce such expenditure.

Iarnród Éireann rightly points out that such "external" costs of road travel are never allowed into the equation. If the State wishes to continue its insistence that railways be made to compete equally with road operators, a much more sophisticated system of measurement, both qualitative and quantitative, is required. This growing environmental awareness has achieved what years of lobbying by railway evangelists failed to impress.

With the looming change of emphasis in European thinking, and perhaps even a shift in public opinion towards railways here in Ireland — as evidenced by the

> 'In the past four to five years there has been more public money spent on road renewal in Co Mayo alone than for track renewal on the entire national rail network.'

growing support for a light railway for Dublin — Iarnród Éireann believes that railways may be an idea whose time has come again.

Mr Waters says that, contrary to the view promulgated through the media, there is a great deal of public support and appreciation for the railways. Recent speculation about downgrading of railways has, he says, created "mayhem" all over the country. At the request of town councils and local authorities, he has recently attended upwards of a dozen meetings in various parts of the country where concern was expressed to him about the future of the local railway services.

"I have been able to reassure them, as I reassure you now, that there's a total management commitment to the upgrading of a railway system in this country. Having said that, it makes sense to also say that it really depends on the level of funding. It goes without saying that if you don't have enough funding to renew your assets in any business a problem arises. I wouldn't deny that.

"I don't think," Mr Waters acknowledges, "that in the past we have been good enough at telling people what the railways were all about, how they're funded. To a certain extent all of this hullabaloo about possible downgrading has given us the opportunity of putting the railways' point of view across. It's up to the public to decide whether they're worth supporting or not."

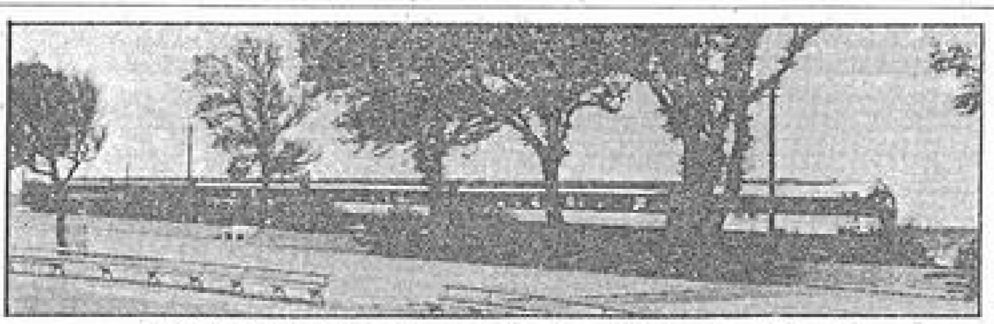
As David Waters says, it is, or should be, up to us, the public, to decide. Would it not be a great pity if we were to allow the process of economic atrophication to fatally immobilise further sections of our railway network at the very time when there is a growing worldwide feeling that part of the answer to escalating transport problems of congestion, energy consumption and environmental deterioration lies in a shift back to an improved mode of railway transport?

Even in Britain, which in the 12 years of Thatcherism almost neglected its railway network out of existence, the Tories under John Major have recently effected a total reversal of policy towards rail. A recent report of the working group, Transport 2000, set up by the European Commission to review transport policy, identified a looming crisis in European transport "which can only be avoided by immediate and decisive action". It recommended, inter alia, increased international co-operation between railway corporations, and the development of "a harmonised, standardised and integrated European railway system".

The report also advocated the abolition of the old state-bound monopolies and the opening up of the rail infrastructures to new operators, the splitting up of transport and infrastructure functions and the development of integrated policies in both areas to "avoid, or at least reduce, the negative effects of the present emphasis on road transport".

"Transport is not an independent area," the report noted. "It cannot be understood outside the economic, political and social entity which it is partly responsible for structuring, and by which it is itself structured."

(Series concluded)



The Department "has no proposals from CIE for line closures."

What the Department says

THE following statement was received from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Communications, in response to the points arising out of this series of articles.

"The Department of Transport, Tourism and Communications has no proposals from CIE for line closures. The Government provides CIE with a generous level of financial support to provide essential transport services.

"This level of support is currently running at over £2 million per week (roughly £110 million per annum). Nearly 80 per cent of the subvention goes to the provision of support for the railways, including maintenance of the permanent way and railway services.

"The allocation of resources to CIE has to be considered by the Government in the context of the many other competing and pressing demands on it for funding. The closure of the Sligo line is not on the agenda. Recent major road developments present a challenge to the railway to win more passengers."