

When Limerick led the railway boom

"ONE HUNDRED and fifty years of Irish Railways" is a rather long title for an historical account which makes far from tedious reading.

It is a highly readable text, just published, and generously illustrated. It is not without its lost opportunities, too, of which more anon, but Leitrim author Fergus Mulligan has filled in a single volume a void left in Irish literature: the history of teams up to the present day.

There is plenty of material about Limerick or, rather, the lines which branched out from that terminus into its hinterland.

Overall, a worthwhile buy, with Christmas coming, but one would have hoped for a better grasp of the atmosphere of the railways, as evinced by personalities.

The Lartigue

There is no lack of reference to the unusual, and the Lartigue railway between Ballybunion and Listowel is lavishly covered in picture and penmanship. This was the nine-mile stretch on which a train ran on a monorail from 1888 to 1924, although relatively early in its life-story the railway ran into receivership.

The rolling stock was "split" right down its middle by wheels for the monorail, necessitating passengers to face outwards on either side.

Says author Fergus Mulligan: "Inevitably with such an unusual railway, there are numerous stories of its eccentricities. Many centre on the balancing problems of the rolling stock."

"One lady wanted a piano delivered to Ballybunion, causing consternation in that there was unlikely to be a second piano on the same train! The solution arrived at was to place the piano on one side of the wagon with two calves on the other. For the return journey, one calf was placed on either side."

"There is also the tale of a farmer who bought a cow at Listowel, and borrowed another for the train trip to Ballybunion. A second animal was then needed to return the first one borrowed, and so the business went on for most of that day until he had lost his own cow, acquired two he did not want, and owed the company a small fortune in freight charges."

Of what little survives today of "the queerest railway in the world", as writer Bryan McMahon describes it, there is the bell which was once rung at Ballybunion Station: this is now in a place of honour at Listowel National School.

The First

There is another stirring account closer to home and the heart: "The first railway authorised for construction in Ireland was the Waterford and Limerick Railway, which received parliamentary approval in 1826."

"South from Limerick was the Foynes branch and the North Kerry line. Prominent among the shareholders was Dargan, who saw great potential in the port of Foynes. When the railway reached the town in 1858, he ran a steamer



A scene to evoke nostalgia in many a Limerick heart: the platform at Ennis with passengers transferring from the train from Limerick (left) to the West Clare railcar (right). The time would be the late 1950's, to judge from passengers' dress — the line closed in January 1961 — and the time of day would be about 3.45 p.m., to judge from timetables and the afternoon shadows. The West Clare train used to reach Kilkee about 6 p.m., after the improvements with the introduction of diesel train in 1952.



The unusual Lartigue train, on its monorail at Ballybunion station: the turntable can be seen in front of it — the line closed in 1924.

there, the 'Kelpie', from Killarney and Tarbert.

"Dargan hoped that Foynes would one day be the American packet station, but this never came about. After a few years, the 'Kelpie' was sold off and became a blockade runner in the American Civil War, then at its height, and was sunk while engaged in that dangerous occupation."

The book could have made

reference to other colourful incidents connected with railways in the Limerick region, such as the Great Clare Flood when the line to Ennis was being built in the 1850's — this was a flood made not far north of Cratloe when an embankment was being cut: much of the ancient Irish gold artefacts were sold off and melted for ingots.

But the text is no less anecdotal for that, particularly in its refer-

ences to the extension of the Limerick line from Ennis to Athlone.

"The line opened in 1869," it recalls, "with a ramshackle collection of worn-out rolling stock. The public had little faith in such vehicles and, within a year, financial problems had come to a head. So great were its debts that the County Clare sheriff seized an entire train and would only let it

depart with the bailiffs riding on the footplate, which must have been a great nuisance for the drivers and firemen."

"Not to be outdone, the County Galway sheriff did the same thing at Gort a few days later. It is a fact that you cannot take possession of a train twice over, and an unscrupulous 'contests' arose between the two forces of law and order, each claiming prior right of ownership."

"While the bemused passengers and crew looked on, a fight developed in which the Galway officers triumphed. They took over the train, but would not allow it to proceed (for fear it would slip back into clare, no doubt!)."

Nor did confusion end there: different companies, including the Limerick one, had different lines through Athlone. A passenger looking out one window saw a platform sign reading "Athlone and Tuam Junction"; looking out the opposite, he saw another "Athlone and Ennis Junction."

Weather

As if rivalries were not enough, there was the weather, and the much-loved, much-unloved, West Clare railway of 48 tortuous miles to Kilkee ("Little Limerick" to us) suffered much from storm and tempest. This is certainly noted in the book, as much is the consequent lack of punctuality of the trains. But, although Percy French's musical satire, and the subsequent libel action it drew, is recorded by way of mere mention, the outcome of the action is not given.

Certainly, the volume of text — and particularly the photographs — is of generous proportions, but surely the reader deserves better than this bone-dry commentary:

"Outside the spring and summer, the spectacular scenery of north Clare was subject to fierce Atlantic storms, and the risk of one of the trains being blown away was a constant worry. Heavy ballast was placed in most vehicles and, when the wind reached 60 mph, only those carriages and wagons could be used. At 80 mph, all trains stopped running, an anemometer at Quilty being used to record wind speeds..."

The book, selling at £12.95 and published by Appletree in Belfast — a city so beloved by railway enthusiasts for its transport museum — is worthwhile for its comprehensive and systematic coverage.

It has achieved, in 192 pages (slim enough for the price) what it set out to do, but one cannot help feeling that the atmosphere of the Permanent Way, and the branch lines, could have been better caught by further research into the years that are still alive among the retired employees.

The time is short to capture those days in print; one earnestly hopes that a stouter volume, with wide appeal, will help us smile at an Ireland that once thrived on colourful personalities. Steam and iron are fine, but as the poet put it, "better human flesh and blood!"

(P.M.)

Loretto explains Glenard project

By LEADER REPORTER

A NEW university centre catering college is to be established at Glenard University Resid in Dublin where Ms. Loretto O'Connell from Newcastle West directress.

Dr. Maeve Hillery, wife President, recently attended launching of the new b project at the residence in Knock in Dublin.

Ms. O'Connell told the press: "The new Glenard investment in the future investment in youth and I say one of the best."



Loretto O'Connell

preparing for the third annual."

Generations

She said that providing coming generations of facilities which would enable them to get the most out of student years was one of the aims of the project.

Glenard was set up as a residence and student c 1961. Spiritual activities trusted to Opus Dei.

The new university will provide academic facilities, a library, tutorial rooms, auditoriums for over 200 from Belfast and other areas.

The new university will offer a two-year diploma in home management at work. The course has been in operation for some years.



The famous Brendan boat on display in a gaunowen museum.



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