In 1871, four years after the line to Newcaste West was opened, the Sisters of Mercy were granted a first class rail pass at third class fares from Limerick with permission for breaks of journey at either Adare or Rathkeale. But this concession was to last for only one month.

The same year a telegraph line was laid beside the Limerick to Foynes railway track (opened 1858), with telegraphers at the stations at Limerick, Ballingrane and Foynes. This was in response to complaints about the lack of such communications made by the captain of one of two naval warships to have visited Foynes four years previously.

As early as 1870, the Earl of Dunraven, a board member of and significant shareholder in the Limerick and Foynes Railway, had volunteered Adare Manor and grounds as a tourist attraction to boost traffic on the line. These initial excursions were successful and up to a thousand people travelled. However, “one party conducted themselves so badly, trespassing on his demesne, that further trips were cancelled. The earl complained to the (railway) company, but they said they were not accountable for the behaviour of their patrons!”

A new book, simply called The North Kerry Line, with the tag-line “a history of the Limerick-Tralee railway and the branches to Foynes and Fenit” runs to more than 270 pages and is the product of half a lifetime of dedicated research by an academic whose professional field is in neither history nor transportation studies and who has no direct connection with the Limerick or Kerry parts of Ireland, his relations having originated in the midlands and west. Dr Alan O’Rourke has been fascinated by Irish railways as a result of visits to relatives in Galway, Roscommon and Offaly and is a lecturer in public health at the University of Sheffield.

The book is remarkable for one thing: it fills a huge gap in our understanding of Ireland in the century which immediately followed the Great Famine. While one might not be overly fascinated by the fact that, to complete the Ballingrane-Rathkeale-Ardagh-Newcastle line”Martens of Dublin accepted a contract for 4,000 sleepers at three shillings and eightpence each, the book gives a seamless narrative of the various attempts at the restoration of the economy and tells how Ireland, and especially the south west, had a genuine world outlook at a time when it might otherwise have had reason to abandon all hope.

The book opens with a very valuable look at the state of the region at the termination of the famine and at the sudden and continuing depopulation of even the cities. An economic salvation was seen in the maritime use of the Shannon Estuary, and Foynes in particular. Steam power had replaced sail on most short-haul shipping throughout Europe and America well before 1850, but sail was still the most common form of propulsion on the long Atlantic crossings themselves. But bigger and far faster and more reliable coal-fired steamers were being built which could traverse the ocean in a fraction of the time of the uncomfortable and weather-dependent sailing vessels. Foreshadowing a concept of trans-shipping which is frequently revived for commodities such as oil and coal even today, the view was that the Shannon Estuary would be the major Atlantic seaport for oceangoing liners with onward connection by rail from Foynes to Irish cities, but also to ferryports, such as Waterford and Roslare, and thence by convenient railway connections on the Welsh side onward to London. Despite the severe depopulation and economic exhaustion in Ireland, which, on the face of it, would render the extensive railing of the country unsustainable, the putting of a rail link along the southern shore of the Shannon Estuary was seen as an infrastructural element which could transform the economy of the region and which attracted willing investors, mainly from the ascendancy landowners. This link was to continue to Tarbert and south to Listowel and onwards to Tralee, but costs soon favoured an inland route to Kerry, leaving the Limerick to Foynes line at Ballingrane just north of Rathkeale and proceeding by Rathkeale, Newcastle, Abbeyfeale and Listowel to Tralee, with various minor halts, such as at Barnagh and Devon Road along the way. Some of these halts, such as Ardagh and Devon Road, were created mainly for the traffic in dairy products and some livestock, while of course facilitating passengers too.

The whole line from Limerick through to Tralee opened in time for Christmas 1880. By that time its oldest portion, that to Foynes, had lost the dream of serving a major transatlantic liner terminus; a dream ironically to become reality for a few years from the late 1930s when all flying boats on the northern Atlantic crossing perforce transited there and the railway fulfilled in a small way the logistical purpose envisaged for it ninety years before.

Dr O’Rourke’s book gives an exhaustive account of the fact that elements of the line were built by four separate railway companies and manages to unravel the often bewildering relationships between and within each, along with the equally mesmerising dealings regarding the Board of Trade, the Westminster Parliament and its constituent parts, and various landowners, engineers, architects, inspectors, contractors and material suppliers. Intercompany rivalry often turned opportunity for co-operatoion into jealous intransigence, such as why the line from Listowel was not initially allowed to enter Tralee to link up with the existing mainline station there.

But the opening of the North Kerry Line, including its port branches to Foynes and (in 1887 after shockingly long delays) Fenit for fish, did confer one immediate benefit: speed. Prior to its arrival only major post roads were maintained by the Grand Juries (precursors of the county councils). Travel from Limerick to Tralee was generally by water to Tarbert and overland thereafter. West Clare was accessed similarly, via Kilrush. The railway could easily compete with the pre-existing arrangements which were tide and weather dependent on the water and lumberingly slow overland, a full day or more having been needed for the Limerick to Tralee journey.

When the railway opened, it took just three hours and 45 minutes to get from Limerick to Tralee and, because of the gradient of Barnagh bank, slightly less to come back. Newcastle West was an hour and 45 minutes from Limerick and Listowel was within 50 minutes reach of Tralee.

But fares were by no means cheap. To Limerick from Newcastle West, first class, cost five shillings. That was fully a week’s wages for a porter or clerk on the selfsame railway. Third class was half of that—still beyond the purse of the common man.

The railway did, in fact, regenerate the economy and major livestock fairs were held in all the principal towns along the route. The big October fair at Listowel could load as many as 250 wagons, stretching the ability of the station and those nearby to handle the rolling stock. Newcastle’s December fair was of a comparable magnitude.

Everyone of a certain age also remembers the specials for Listowel races—not just for racegoers. Specially designed horseboxes, with panelled-off accommodation for riders and grooms, came through with bloodstock from Kildare and other equine centres.

The book is not, as mentioned, simply an academic narrative of the origins, foundation, development and workings of a stretch of line. It contains many vignettes of social observation which add to our knowledge of an age gone by. For example, at a time when fertilizer still arrived by train (1950s), merchants in and around Newcastle West didn’t bother to collect their consignments and merely gave dockets to their customers who then went to the station and unloaded the appropriate number of bags directly from the wagons, while the merchants availed of the free storage and the labour of the station hands. This held up the turnaround of rolling stock by as many as six weeks, whereas it should have taken no more than two days. Also given prominence are the exceptional tasks performed by the line, such as the very specialist handling of ore for export at Foynes over a couple of decades. The line from Limerick to Foynes remains laid and is capable of restoration to serve the port should the opportunity and need arise.

The book, The North Kerry Line, is published by Great Southern Trail, the voluntary company which has developed the defunct bed of the line from Ballingrane to the Kerry Border as a walking and cycling recreational amenity and which proposes to extend all the way to Tralee. There will be two launches; this Sunday at the Lartigue Railway Museum, Listowel, at 7pm by Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan, and at the library, Newcastle West, next Tuesday, 26th, 7pm, by former Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Eamon O Cuiv.

The book was printed by Fitzsimons Printers, Shanagolden and contains a wide selection of photographs, many of which have not been displayed in public before.

The launch of the book has also prompted a further project. Maria Leahy, a student of oral history at UL, is commencing a compilation of recordings of the lives and recollections of the railway families and of those who lived along the line. She will attend both launch evenings or may be contacted directly at 086 4033707.