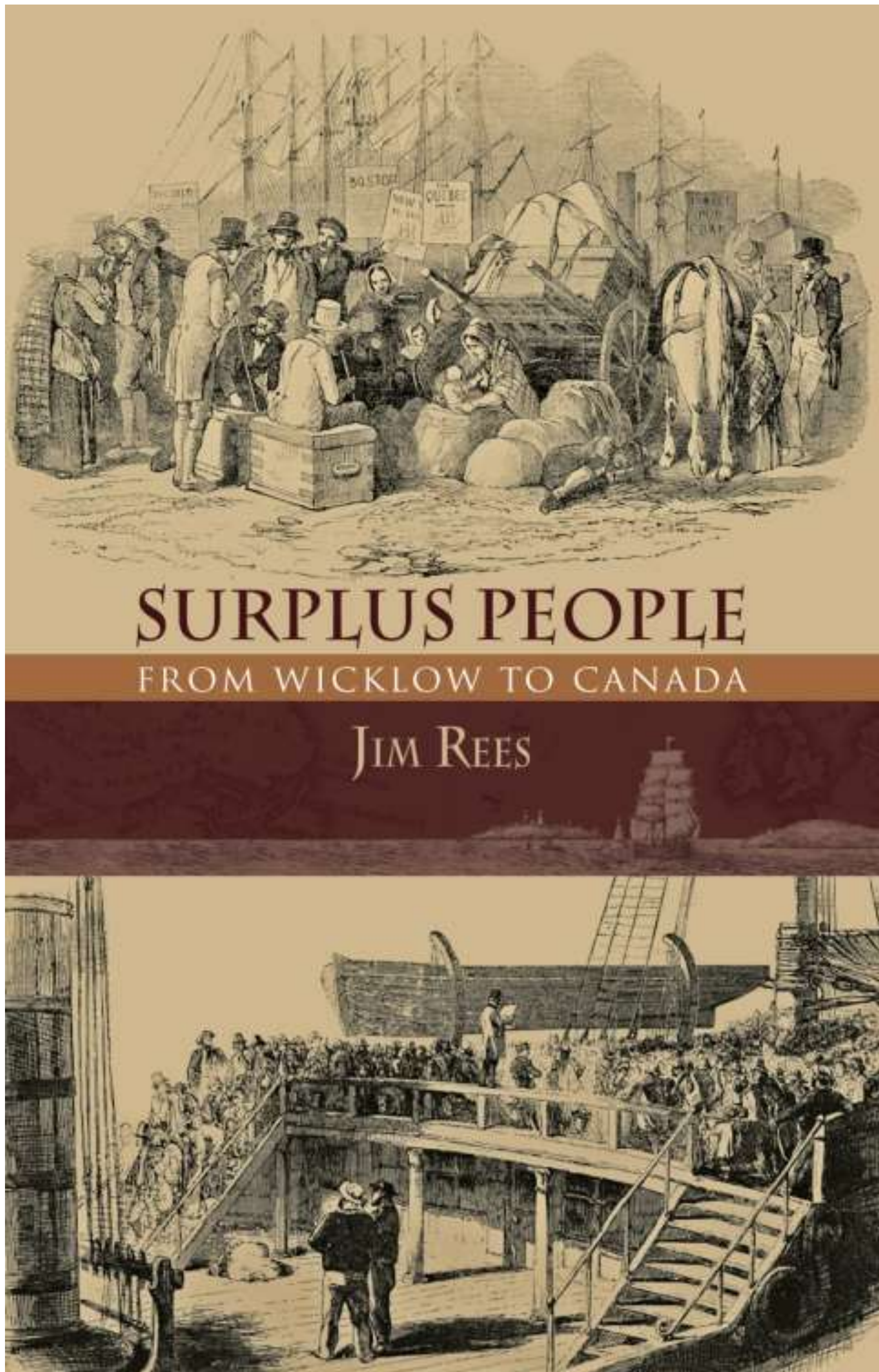

Surplus People – from Wicklow to Canada by Jim Rees is available from all good bookshops and on-line from http://www.collinspress.ie/surplus-people.html at €12.99.

The Surplus People

Jim Rees

"(There are now) eighty-seven in various stages of sickness, and quite a number of bad cases ... There were two more deaths yesterday, making in all, up to the 7th, eleven deaths ... There are now several widows and quiet a number of children for whom I shall make provision. There are also seven orphans, the father having died on the passage and the mother yesterday..... The surgeon who came out with the passengers has taken the fever...."

So wrote James Boyd, Acting Emigration Officer for the New Brunswick port of St. Andrews, in a letter to John Saunders, the Provincial Secretary. The date was June 1848 and the unfortunate people of whom he wrote were destitute refugees from famine-stricken Ireland.

A series of potato crop failures in the previous three years deprived the vast majority of Irish rural dwellers of their staple diet, and created a situation in which emigration was for many the only alternative to starvation. In the ten years between 1845 and 1854 over 2,250,000 Irish people crossed the Atlantic in the most primitive conditions. Less than 500,000 of them sailed to Canada, the rest went to the United States. Most had no idea what to expect on their arrival in either country. Some, such as the 383 passengers of the *'Star'*, however, were more fortunate. They had been promised three months' work on railroad construction in New Brunswick, after which they might be kept on. Even if the work period was not extended, they would have money in their pockets to help them further west to pursue their modest dreams. In comparison to the vast majority of famine emigrants, they appear to have been in an enviable position. Things did not go according to plan.

How did this group of poor tenant farmers and landless labourers make contact with a railroad project on the far side of the Atlantic? How did their dream turn into a nightmare?

The story begins in the small town of St. Andrews-by-the-Sea in the south-west corner of New Brunswick. Founded in the 1780s in the wake of the establishment of the United States, it prospered from its fishing industry and timber exports. By the 1830s, however, both trades had shrunk and it was clear that, if Saint Andrews was to have a future, something would have to be done to halt the erosion of its commercial importance. The favoured proposal was a rail link with the city of Quebec. For all its many advantages as a trading centre, Quebec had one major drawback. The annual icing-up of the Saint Lawrence closed the port for several months. Saint Andrews had no such problem and if a rail link were made with Quebec trade could continue all year round.

At a public meeting in 1835 the Saint Andrews & Quebec Railway Association came into being. Within a year it had the backing of the New Brunswick authorities and widespread support in Quebec and Nova Scotia. The British government granted £10,000 towards the costs of surveying the proposed route and the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly passed a bill incorporating the company with a capital stock of £750,000. Construction could begin when one-third of the shares had been subscribed.

It took ten years to put the project in place. In early 1847, a board of influential British shareholders was established, the president of which was Lord William Fitzwilliam. The New Brunswick Legislative Assembly passed the appropriate bill granting property and building materials to the company. The Assembly also agreed to underwrite a guaranteed minimum dividend of 5% (to the English investors only) for a period of ten years. Everything was in place and work began on the long-awaited railroad in November 1847.

Meanwhile in Ireland ....
Three thousand miles east of Saint Andrews was Coolattin estate, the Irish home of the above mentioned Lord Fitzwilliam. Comprising over 85,000 acres, it covered one-fifth of the entire county of Wicklow and had more than 20,000 tenants. Yet, despite its size, Coolattin was just one of Fitzwilliam's estates. He had two more in England, and he spent most of his time there. The day-to-day running of Coolattin was left in the hands of his agent, Robert Chaloner. Unlike the usual absentee landlord, Fitzwilliam took a close interest in its management and was remarkably well versed in the minutiae of his Irish estate. Few decisions were made without his approval.

For generations the Fitzwilliams were regarded as liberal landlords who believed that the welfare of the tenants was not only morally laudable but also made good business sense. They paid higher wages and charged lower rents than other employers and landlords in the region. They also ran a 'Poor Shop' which operated as a savings club. Tenants could save as little or as much as their circumstances allowed. In most cases, the savings were used to buy blankets and clothes from the shop at favourable rates.

At a time when many landlords in Ireland would not allow Catholic churches to be built on their estates, the Fitzwilliams not only gave permission but in some cases donated land and contributed towards the cost of erecting the church. Schools, Catholic and Protestant, were also encouraged and many were either wholly or partly maintained from the estate coffers. Deals were struck between tenants and the estate as to how much each would contribute to improvement projects such as drainage and the erection or expansion of houses or farm buildings.

Of the 85,000 acres only about 800 were worked by the estate staff. The rest were leased and rented out. This created a multi-tiered structure. For example, a well-to-do farmer might lease 500 or more acres from the estate. He might work 200 acres and sub-let the other 300 to as many as twenty or more sub-tenants. Some of these sub-tenants did the same thing. At bottom of the social ladder was the landless labourer who rented a cabin and small plot of ground, seldom more than one acre, in which to grow potatoes. There could be as many as five strata of tenants and sub-tenants between the estate management and the landless labouring class. Those who leased direct from the estate were 'head tenants' and those in the intermediate strata were 'middlemen' or 'undertenants'. Sub-letters made quite a profit by charging a much higher rent than they were paying. It meant that, in many cases, the poorest were paying the highest rent pro rata.

Although County Wicklow was economically better off than most of the other counties of Ireland, there was a great deal of poverty among those on the bottom rungs of the social ladder. In general, the land on the Fitzwilliam estate was poor and needed regular treatment with animal manure and lime. There was never enough of the former and the latter had to be brought from twenty miles away, making it costly. This drove many into debt from money lenders whose rates of interest were usually about 40%. When tenants and sub-tenants fell behind in rent, the immediate landlord, whether the estate or a middleman, usually obtained legal permission to ‘distrain’ the value, that is seize goods from the defaulter to the value of the rent owed. There was a fee for this legal permission which was added to the amount owed. This constant erosion of what little capital and goods smallholders might have amassed in rare good years made it impossible for them to improve their holdings. This general downward trend in the economy caused greatest hardship among the smallholders with between ten and fifty acres and increasing unemployment among the landless labourers.

In practice, the landless labourers seldom handled cash. They 'paid' their rent in free labour, but with the demand for their services diminishing each year the poverty in which these people lived

became horrific. According to a Roman Catholic priest on the Fitzwilliam estate, giving evidence before the Devon Commission, a commission enquiring into the state of land tenure and general social conditions in Ireland in 1844*, "it is dreadful to consider the starvation they are subject to"* – and that was the year before the major potato crop failures which heralded the Great Famine. Twenty-eight percent of families in County Wicklow lived in one-roomed stone or mud cabins, topped with the poorest thatch. The mud floor had no covering.

The staple diet for the vast majority of these people was potato and buttermilk. Not only was the potato highly nutritious but it could be grown easily and abundantly on small plots of ground. It was a wonder food, but it was highly prone to disease. Seldom a year went by without a localised outbreak of blight. Seldom a decade passed without a widespread crop failure. Even in good years, there were the annual 'hungry months' between the last of the old crop being consumed and the harvesting of the new. It was life by brinkmanship.

Famine

In 1845, there was a partial potato crop failure and the 1846 crop was a total disaster. Local economies collapsed.

A simple system of social welfare existed in Ireland as a result of the Poor Law that had been passed in the late 1830s. This set up 130 workhouses to accommodate 100,000 inmates, which were funded by taxes levied on property owners. The workhouses themselves and the harshness with which they were run were deliberately designed to discourage anyone of seeking admittance. Only *"destitute persons who were either incurably lame, blind, sick, or labouring under bodily infirmity"* would be admitted. *"Orphaned children left in a state of destitution"* would also be allowed in. Paradoxically, another requirement was no individual of a family could be admitted unless all the members of that family entered the house, even if they were healthy. On entering, families were separated, males in one section, females in another, with the children taken to a third dormitory. They were allowed to meet once a week., and every inmate was given work to do either in the workhouse (washing, cleaning, and attending the physically and mentally ill) or in the yard, usually breaking stones for road works. Punishment for infringement of rules and insubordination ranged from solitary confinement to expulsion.

Despite the extreme bleakness of such a regime, workhouses were inundated by people clammering for admission following the severe potato shortage of 1845. Soon every workhouse in the country was filled beyond its intended numbers. They became hotbeds of contagion as paupers suffering from fever brought on by malnutrition were allowed into them. The Poor Law, less than ten years old, was useless. Extensive re-drafting of the legislation was required so that more destitute people would qualify for relief. The amendments included relief to those outside the workhouses, with a rate (i.e. tax) increase imposed to cover the extra costs. This meant that the biggest landlords were to be hardest hit.

The Fitzwilliam Clearances

Landlords throughout Ireland were faced with reducing the number of uneconomic tenants on their estates, and to get them out of their district where they would not be a burden on the rates. Large scale evictions, known as 'clearances' took place. There was no agreed policy between landlords, each acted as he saw fit or as his wealth allowed. In the vast majority of cases, poor tenants were simply turned out on the road to fend for themselves as best they could. Some wandered into towns to live in unspeakable squalor, others moved from place to place. Many died by the roadside, their mouths

stained green from chewing grass.

Fitzwilliam was clearly one of those most affected. He knew that shedding unviable or, in the expression of the time, "surplus" tenants was the only way to avoid bankruptcy, but he looked for the most humane way of doing it. He offered "assisted emigration" to those he wished to be rid of. They would be given free passage and a financial incentive to help them settle on the far side of the Atlantic. In most cases, the sum was ten shillings, but some managed to negotiate much better terms. The estate also agreed to purchase any crops in the ground. Of the two and a quarter million Irish people who went to America between 1845 and 1854, only 50,000 received financial help from their landlords, almost 6,000 of these were from the Fitzwilliam estate. None, except a relatively small number of workhouse inmates, received any assistance from government to emigrate.

In March 1847, Robert Chaloner opened the estate "Emigration Book". In it, he recorded the names of every tenant and family member prepared to leave for "America". This did not refer to the United States, but British North America - Canada. Between April and August, 313 families, comprising 2207 men, women and children left Coolattin for Quebec. They were among 98,000 refugees who sailed up the St Laurence that year to a country that was ill-prepared to receive such a deluge of pauperism.

The *Star*

The following year, in February 1848, just as Robert Chaloner was drawing up that year's quota of "surplus" tenantry (181 families, comprising 1271 individuals), and three months after the initial work on the New Brunswick/Quebec railroad route had begun, Fitzwilliam struck a deal with the railroad directors. He would supply one hundred men for three months at the rate of two shillings a day. He would pay the wage costs - about £1000 - and, in return, would receive the appropriate amount of shares in the company. On the face of it, it seemed a plan from which everyone would benefit. Fitzwilliam would be rid of another batch of tenants, the tenants would arrive in Canada with the prospect of three months' paid employment ahead of them, and the railroad company would be getting one hundred workers whom someone else was paying. Chaloner set about organising not only one hundred able-bodied men but also the families of those men, comprising 383 individuals to emigrate to Saint Andrews. The railroad company had no idea that anyone other than the hundred workers would be despatched and therein lay the seeds of a misunderstanding which was to have catastrophic effects in the months ahead. While other ships were being arranged to take the rest of that year's emigrants to Quebec, one ship, the *Star*, was bound for New Brunswick.

The *Star* arrived in St Andrews on May 28th, after thirty-seven days at sea. The passage had been uneventful until they reached the Grand Banks when they hit rough weather. Of the 383 passengers, sixty-three were badly stricken. Nine died. One poor soul was born en route, only to die ten days later without ever experiencing life outside the hull of an emigrant ship.

Saint Andrews

Passamaquoddy Bay has a sprinkling of islands and the *Star* came to anchor off the most wretched of these. Its proper name was Little Hardwood Island, but was better known as Hospital Island. Unlike the bigger Hardwood Island, a few hundred yards east, Hospital Island had no well or spring. Water had to be ferried across the sound. It had been designated a quarantine station in 1832, in response to the arrival of cholera and typhus sufferers, and had been chosen because it was the most useless piece of property in the bay. A hospital, measuring 60' by 25', of two storeys and a basement, was erected to cope with the emergency. Another, smaller one (50' by 25') was added later as were a doctor's

house, a keeper's house, and a shed.

The passengers and crew could not leave the *Star* until they had been inspected by the port's Medical Officer. The overall welfare of arriving immigrants, however, was the responsibility of the port's Acting Emigration Officer, James Boyd, one of several extra officers hired by the province to help the province’s lone Emigration Officer, Moses Perley, deal with the influx of destitute Irish.

In the company of a Dr. McStay, Boyd visited the *Star* the day after she arrived and spoke to the passengers to see if they had any complaints about their treatment at the hands of the master and crew on the voyage. They "*all spoke unequivocally in the highest terms of the master and the surgeon*", who had kept the ship clean, fumigated, and ventilated throughout the voyage, and had not apparently cut back on provisions. Half the well passengers were to be landed, the rest were to wash and clean on board before moving to the island for a few days prior to final discharge. The reason for this splitting of the passengers into two groups was because there simply wasn't room to accommodate them all on the island at the one time.

Boyd ordered Captain Baldwin to send ashore any provisions that had been designated for the use of the immigrants. Contrary to the glowing reports he had heard from the passengers about the provisions during the voyage, the quality of the food Baldwin unloaded was so poor that many deemed it unsafe to eat. Complaints were made to Boyd daily by the immigrants of their overcrowded state. In desperation, they asked that they be distributed along the railway line for the purpose of working, but this was not possible as the railway company had not yet erected shanties for them.

Boyd called on Harris Hatch, the vice-president of the company, and told him of almost three hundred people crowded into places not sufficient to contain a third of that number. Many of them lay on a little straw to insulate them from the bare ground. Hatch told him to mind his own business. But, as Acting Emigration Officer, Boyd was responsible for the welfare of the emigrants. Hatch, however, felt that once they had been landed, Boyd no longer had any authority in the matter. Boyd was not so easily dismissed and he warned that if the company did not supply "*proper wholesome provision and furnish them with more accommodation*", he would feel it his duty to do so and report the conduct of the company to the Lieutenant Governor. This had the desired effect and work on building shanty accommodation got under way. Primitive though they were, had the shanties been ready when the ship arrived, Boyd was sure that much of the post-arrival sickness would have been avoided. Because of this negligence, Boyd felt that the company, and not the province, should be made pay the expenses.

It had rained every day since the passengers' arrival, making conditions on the island even worse than usual. In that time there had been six new cases of fever resulting in four deaths - one adult and three children ranging in ages from three to ten years of age. When the weather broke, cleaning and washing got under way and things began to look better. Boyd expressed the hope that a large proportion of the passengers would be released and landed on the mainland in the following days. Meanwhile, the directors of the railway company were preparing to receive them as they were discharged.

The railway company was also giving food to people who had left the island for the mainland but who were too debilitated to work. This was putting a strain on the company's resources and they could not be expected to continue such charitable work for long. By law, the magistrates were required to supply food to immigrants only as long as they remained on the island.

The directors of the railway company were far from pleased with the situation. On one hand, they were acting in a charitable role they had not anticipated. On the other they were being accused by Boyd of not living up to their responsibilities. As far as they were concerned, they had agreed to

receive one hundred men capable of working on the railway construction. They could not believe that Fitzwilliam had sent out entire families. Fitzwilliam's answer to their complaints was that to the Irish mind emigration was bad enough, but separation from family was unthinkable. The only way to get one hundred men to work on the railway in New Brunswick was to send their families with them. The railroad men were unconvinced, but nonetheless decided to uphold their part of the agreement, that is, to employ one hundred men for three months. This would give the emigrants a chance to settle in before the onslaught of their first Canadian winter.

Even this presented the company with a problem. According to a report made to the Lieutenant Governor's Office;

"Of those taken into the service of the company, some were aged and so infirm as to be almost past labour; one or two (were) over seventy years of age and one nearly blind; all enfeebled by the passage and sickness; not over one-half could be rated as able-bodied men".

Of the healthy *Star* passengers, some were already taking steps to make Saint Andrews their permanent home, unlike most Irish immigrants who had merely used it as a port of entry. William Mahood, the Deputy Surveyor of Charlotte County, accompanied them to a tract of land adjacent to the railway line on which they hoped to establish a settlement. Mahood agreed that the land was suitable for such a purpose but nothing could be done until the exact location of the rail track was determined as the company had been granted a twenty foot margin of land on either side of it. While this was a valid point, it should be noted that the British government had also granted the company 20,000 unspecified acres with frontage on the line to entice immigrants to settle along the route of the railroad. The Irish, particularly the poor Irish, were categorised by the British establishment and in the British media as being feckless, and victims of their own social and cultural inadequacies. Contemporary newspapers are replete with references to the famine being God's retribution on such a backward, superstitious race. Their mass exodus across the Atlantic was looked upon as a solution to the intractable problem of what to do with them. It was a "solution" which the New Brunswick establishment did not welcome. Such an influx may be useful for temporary labour, but they were not wanted as permanent settlers. This is evident from a letter written by John Wilson, the prime mover behind the railroad, to one of Saint Andrews' leading citizens. He wrote: *"I am trying your plan to get good men to settle on the line, say English and Scotchmen who have some capital who will be shareholders and who will be settlers in the upcountry"*. Irish paupers did not fit the bill.

By August, all the *Star* passengers had been transferred to the mainland, but many were still far from well.

The crisis for Fitzwilliam's erstwhile tenants deteriorated throughout the winter of 1848/49. On January 2nd, the railway company wrote to James Boyd stating they had already employed the immigrants three months longer than agreed and they would have to let them go due to lack of finance. A copy of the letter was also sent to Boyd's superiors at the Provincial Secretary's Office. Boyd sent a stinging reply to Mr. John Richard Partelow, John Saunders successor as Provincial Secretary, blaming the bulk of the woes on the railway company's negligence. He urged the Province to intervene before the emigrants were forced to resort to crime to maintain themselves.

In February 1849, the province provided forty overcoats and one hundred pairs of shoes for the immigrants of the *Star*. While any help was welcome, these people were tired of living off charity. They had left Ireland in the hope of making something of their lives. They wanted to put down roots in Saint Andrews and show that, given the opportunity, they would prove to be decent, respectable

members of the community. But how where they to achieve this? Their request for land - which they were willing to pay for - back in July had been refused. In March, they tried again. With the support of some of the town's leading citizens, they wrote to the Lieutenant Governor, Edmund Wicker, requesting a land grant of fifty acres per family and loans of money to see them through to their first crops. This request was also denied. I can find no reason for the refusal, except perhaps that it was another result of anti-Irish feeling.

On March 30th, any *Star* immigrants still working on the railroad were discharged by the company. They were destitute and Boyd attributed that destitution *to "small wages and short time".* They applied to him for assistance and he wrote to the Lieutenant Governor's Office to see if he was authorised to provide it. Four days later, the magistrates of Saint Andrews also wrote to the Lieutenant Governor's Office stating that the destitute immigrants were now roaming the streets in a half-starved condition and threatening that if they did not get assistance they would take what they needed.

By April, many of the emigrants were dependent on the meat and molasses provided by the Province and Boyd could see no end to their plight. With the influx of new immigrants imminent, he asked for £150 from provincial coffers in Fredericton to get as many of them as possible on their way to Boston, Portland or Bangor, whichever took the least money. It is interesting to note that all three proposed destinations were in the United States, perhaps the reason for this lay in the fact that the U.S. lay just across the Sainte Croix River, easier and cheaper to get to than Ontario. Even if the people of Saint Andrews wished to support the immigrants, they were not financially able to do so. For a start, local business was at a standstill and the indigenous population were finding it difficult enough to get work for themselves. In such circumstances, it was unreasonable to expect them to feed and shelter a constant stream of newly arrived destitute people in their small town. Even logistically, it was impossible. Room had to be made for new arrivals and the only way to do that was to push last year's immigrants onwards. Once the offer of free or assisted passage into the United States was made, it would be up to the immigrants themselves to go or stay, but if they stayed they would have to fend for themselves and would be no longer entitled to relief. It was a repeat of what they had faced a year earlier in Ireland. Then they were being urged to emigrate to Canada or starve in Ireland, now it was move on to the United States or starve in New Brunswick.

Despite these urgings, a surprising number of *Star* passengers remained in the Saint Andrews area, settling in the Waweig district which was adjacent to the railway line. In 1861, 25% of the passengers of the *Star* were still in Saint Andrews. Several families were to live the rest of their lives there. Of all the shiploads of Irish famine emigrants who passed through Saint Andrews, only those who had arrived on the *Star* were to have a lasting impact on the resident community.

The railway

The railway project itself was a failure. The start-stop nature of the enterprise saw only nine miles of track completed in four years. Across the Saint-Croix River, in the U.S., a rival company completed a line connecting Portland with Quebec in the same period. John Wilson, whose dream had disintegrated, lost much of his fortune and died in 1856. The route was eventually completed by a new company. That Fitzwilliam's belief (and financial interest) in this project had not waned is reflected in the fact that in June 1852 his niece, a Mrs. Murray, turned the first sod on the next stage of the route and that one of the locomotives built for the company in 1857 was named "Earl Fitzwilliam".

In short ...

The Fitzwilliam clearance policy ran from 1847 to 1856 and a total of 5995 "surplus" tenants sailed for Canada, reducing the estate's population from 20,000 to 14,000. This was further reduced in following decades as more families made their way to the New World, some financially assisted by the estate, others from their own resources helped by money received from family members who had preceded them to the U.S. and Canada. This phenomenon of emigrants sending money back to Ireland to help family members to join them on the far side of the Atlantic was prevalent throughout Ireland and became known as "chain migration". During those ten years an estimated one million people left from all parts of Ireland for the U.S. and Canada. There are no exact figures, and available statistics are universally regarded as far short of the actual numbers. Another estimated million people died through hunger and disease because of the potato blights and political expediency. Irish social structure was changed irrevocably.

The end of landlordism

By the turn of the century, land reform was well under way and tenant farmers were helped by government loans to buy their holdings from their landlords, with the result that the Coolattin estate, in common with all the other great estates throughout the country, shrank dramatically. The Fitzwilliam family sold the property in the 1970s. They donated the estate papers, going back 250 years, to the Irish nation.