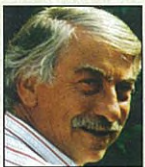




In *Cressy's* forward well at Tardebigge, late 1940s. Left to right: Vanessa de Maré, Angela Rolt, Tom Rolt

Tom Rolt — a tribute



This month marks the centenary of the birth of the most influential canal writer of the 20th Century. Hugh McKnight explains why he was such a fascinating and likeable man

TEXT AND PICTURES BY HUGH MCKNIGHT



Tom in 1966

It is an extraordinary and rather sad fact that very few waterways enthusiasts have ever heard of Peter Willans. But for his 19th century boating exploits, there is a strong possibility that much of the British canal and river system would now lie in ruins.

Willans was an eminent engineer who, in 1874, patented a totally enclosed steam engine suitable for river launches. On August 4 1876 he set off from Henley-on-Thames aboard his 36ft demonstration steam vessel *Black Angel*, accompanied by a companion named Warneforde. Within less than four weeks, they had reached Ripon in Yorkshire and returned to the Thames, having averaged 12mph and clocked up more than 1,000 miles. The longest day's run was 130 miles from Newark-on-Trent to York, when they burned 5cwt of coal during 18 hours steaming. (Wow!)

Peter Willans died in 1892 and his son Kyrle, also a renowned engineer, never forgot

his father's epic pioneering journey in *Black Angel*. In 1929, Kyrle bought a horse-drawn Shropshire Union boat named *Cressy* and had her converted to a steam-powered pleasure boat at Beechey's Frankton dock, near the Welsh border. The engine was by Plenty of Newbury, connected to a second-hand boiler removed from a Yorkshire steam wagon. It is believed that there were then just two other converted narrow boats in existence.

Kyrle Willans was an 'uncle' by marriage to

A very young Tom, appropriately aboard a toy train, with his mother near their Hay-on-Wye house, circa 1915



19-year old Lionel Thomas Caswall Rolt (generally known as Tom) and in 1930 Tom was invited to join his uncle and cousin Bill on *Cressy's* maiden voyage. Years later, Tom recalled: "Before we had covered many miles I had fallen head-over-heels in love with canals. This is it, I thought; this is what travel ought to be like."

Tom Rolt was to become the 20th Century's leading writer on engineering and transport subjects, with a range extending from waterways to railways, steam power, cars, ballooning, company history, the impact of industry on the British countryside and, perhaps most famously, biography.

That Tom developed an interest in engineering at all was entirely thanks to Uncle Kyrle. His father, Lionel Rolt, whose career had included an unsuccessful involvement with the 1898 Yukon Gold Rush, existed on an ever-decreasing supply of private funds. Rolt Senior devoted much of his married life to shooting and fishing and living off the reflected glory of his powerful 18th century ancestors. Tom, an only child, whose birth was such a traumatic experience for his mother that initially he was raised by a hired nurse and his father, seems to have enjoyed a happy childhood at home and an utterly miserable time at boarding school.

For seven years the Rolts lived in a comfortable house outside Hay-on-Wye. When Tom was ten, in 1921, near ruin came with failure of a company in which most of the family's money had unwisely been invested. They 'downsized' to a fascinating part-mediaeval stone house in the Gloucestershire hamlet of Stanley Pontlarge. When I spent a night in this lovely building in



Stanley Pontlarge house in Gloucestershire, home to the Rolts from 1921 to the present

1994, as guest of Mrs Sonia Rolt, I was enchanted to find among the books arranged in my room a well-worn juvenile publication with a title something like *My Big Book of Trains*. The flyleaf bore a neat, childish inscription 'Tom Rolt'. Even at an early age Tom might have guessed that his destiny lay with transport history.

Soon after the move south, the Rolts were astonished to learn that Oswald Martin, the young solicitor who had bought their house

During Tom's war effort work with the Ministry of Supply, he lived with Angela aboard *Cressy* for 1,800 days at Tardebigge Wharf on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal

near Hay, had been the subject of an unsuccessful murder attempt by the town's respected lawyer Major Herbert Armstrong who had regularly socialised with Tom's family. The Major was subsequently found guilty of killing his wife Katherine with carefully controlled doses of arsenic, openly purchased with a pretence that the poison was for controlling dandelions on Armstrong's lawn. A hanging followed and among mementos left with the Rolts was a photograph showing them sharing a picnic with Britain's only solicitor to have been executed for murder. The case was serialised on television in 1994 under the title *Dandelion Dead*.

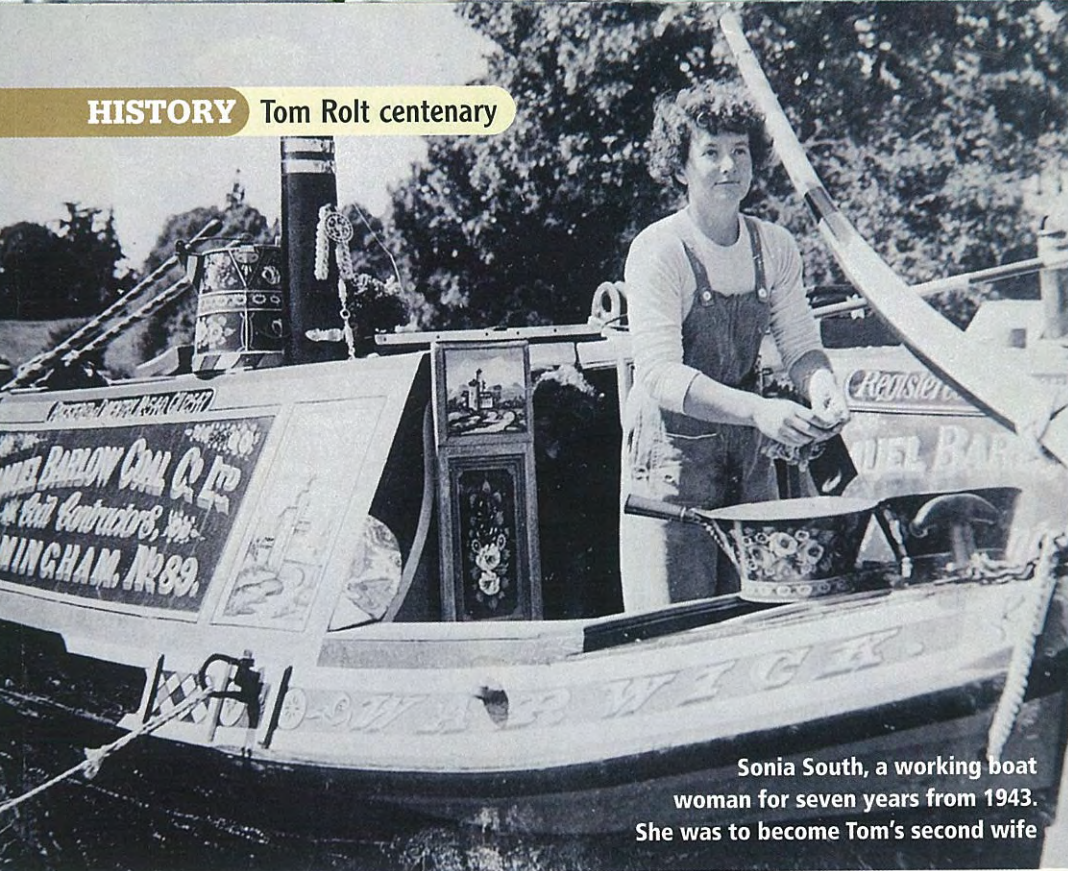
Young Tom escaped from hated school at 16 in 1926 and, encouraged by Uncle Kyrle, spent the next thirteen years working with steam engines, early diesel lorries, at a railway locomotive works and finally, in 1934, as co-owner of a Hartley Wintney garage in Hampshire which was to become the unofficial headquarters of the Vintage Sports Car Club of which he was founder.

One morning in the late summer of 1937, a striking blonde girl named Angela Orred pulled onto the garage forecourt at the wheel of her white Alfa Romeo. Five years younger than Tom, she was a direct descendant (on her mother's side) of King William IV via the King's mistress Mrs Jordan. Robert Aickman later was to comment: "...she looked exactly like that monarch, whose features were distinctive."

Over the next two years Tom and Angela became increasingly attached to each other. A complicated jigsaw was being assembled. ▶

Inland Waterways Redevelopment Advisory Committee members (1959-62) in Northants. Tom Rolt is centre (yellow tie), with IWA Chairman Capt. Lionel Munk on the left. Sir Robert Grant-Ferris (later Lord Harvington), the IWA's unofficial voice in Parliament, on the right





Sonia South, a working boat woman for seven years from 1943. She was to become Tom's second wife

◀ Tom, in spite of his devotion to things mechanical and industrial, was alarmed at the manner in which the English countryside was being engulfed by manufacturing greed and the blight of suburbia. He formulated his "Design for Living." He and Angela would marry; live aboard a narrow boat slowly exploring the waterways; and Tom would support them with his writing. (He had yet to have anything substantial published).

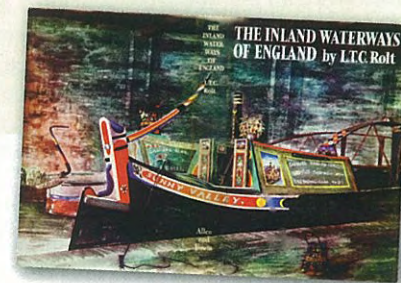
Cressy, now propelled by a Model T Ford petrol engine installed beneath a flat deck where the boatman's cabin had once been, was bought from Uncle Kyrle for £100. The

boat was based at Tooley's yard in Banbury for repairs and modification. Accommodation for a holiday party was transformed into a full-time home for two, complete with bath. This was then an astounding luxury for a canal boat. But all this was the easy bit. The young couple had yet to tell Angela's parents of their plans. Major Roland Orred, her father, was both a snob and a nasty bit of work. There was no possibility of his agreeing to a liaison between his daughter and a garage mechanic! Tom's elderly father tried to mediate but was repulsed by a torrent of poisoned words. Who now remembers the

appalling Major Orred? He certainly lived up to his name! The marriage, in July 1939 at a London register office, must have been a bleak occasion. There were only two friends present. Tom wrote long afterwards: "...it all seemed rather furtive and hole-in-the-corner. Angela was scarcely a radiant bride. Her father had seen to that and throughout the years of our marriage he did not for one moment relax his hostility". There would be happy times but throughout the 12 years Tom spent with Angela, the spectre of Major Orred never seemed to be far away.

Cressy set forth from Banbury on her now well-known 400-mile circuit: Oxford Canal, Leicester Section, Trent & Mersey, Shropshire Union, Staffs & Worcs, Coventry and Oxford again, where the boat was frozen in for several months. Weeks into the journey, Britain had declared war on Germany, resulting in a change of plans for the Rolts. The magic destination of the great Pontcysyllte Aqueduct was struck off the itinerary and Tom signed up for a short-lived depressing job in the Rolls-Royce aircraft engine factory at Crewe. The coming of war seemed to have torn the impecunious Tom's Life Plan into shreds.

These dreary details were expurgated from the book that Tom hungrily wrote at his little on board desk through the long, cold winter



A canal chronology of Tom Rolt

1876 Peter Willans completes a 1,000-mile return canal and river voyage from the Thames to Yorkshire in the steam launch *Black Angel*.

1910 February 9, Tom is born in parents' Eaton Road, Chester, house.

1914 The Rolts move to Radnor View in Cusop near Hay-on-Wye.

1921 The family 'downsize' to Stanley Pontlorge, Gloucestershire.

1926 Leaves school to begin career as mechanical engineer.

1929 Uncle Kyrle Willans buys narrow boat *Cressy* and commissions its conversion to a steam-powered pleasure boat.

1930 Tom's first canal trip on *Cressy* with Uncle Kyrle and cousin Bill.

1937 Meets his future first wife Angela Orred.

1939 Decision to begin career as a writer and living afloat. Trial cruise on Shakespeare's Avon aboard hire boat *Miranda*. Buys *Cressy* for £100 and converts her to 'Grand Design for Living'. Tom marries Angela and they set off on 400-mile voyage.

1940 *Cressy* iced up in Banbury for three months. Writes *Narrow Boat*, which fails to find a publisher.

1941 *Cressy* arrives at Tardebigge, where she will remain as home to the Rolts until the War is over.

1943 Sonia South, Tom's future second wife, begins narrow boat carrying as her contribution to the War effort.

1944 *Narrow Boat* published.

1945 First meeting with Sonia at preview screening of film *Painted Boats*.

of 1939-1940. Astonishingly, the book failed to find a publisher for three years. Originally entitled *A Painted Ship, Narrow Boat* is much more than a mere travelogue. There is also plenty of Rolt's philosophy on England and life in general. It positively reeks of a vanished pre-war canal system, alive with working boats and where you could travel for months without meeting anyone else afloat for pleasure. This wonderful account has never been out of print in the 66 years since it first appeared in 1944, bravely wearing its original dust jacket of traditional narrow boat flowers commissioned from Mr Herbert Tooley of the Banbury dock. Tom Rolt's book covers were frequently adorned with splendid artwork.

Tom never much cared for the line illustrations by Denys Watkins-Pitchford, all based on Angela's splendidly evocative photographs. He strongly believed that such an account of a real journey would have been better served by the greater truth of photography. The 50th anniversary of *Narrow Boat's* publication was marked by an edition using all the original drawings together with as many of Angela's relevant photographs as could be obtained.

Like thousands of people before and since, my enthralled 1960 reading of *Narrow Boat* propelled me into making the first of many long canal voyages.

There had been other books on canals before 1944. But nothing at all like Tom's. Its publication prompted rave reviews. "The fan



Twenty-year old Tom in the engine room of the steam-powered *Cressy* in 1930

Left: Tom enjoys a first class compartment aboard a train on the West Clare line in Ireland in 1946. Photo: Angela Rolt

mail went on arriving for months," recalled its astonished author. It directly led to Tom and Angela meeting Robert Aickman and his then wife Ray on board *Cressy* at Tardebigge Wharf. Next followed Aickman's first ever canal journey, with the Rolts, from Tardebigge to Banbury which Aickman recalled in glowing terms many years after the bitter disputes of 1950/51: "*Cressy*, beautifully painted and lovingly converted... I was astonished by how beautiful and dreamlike the Worcester & Birmingham Canal proved to be."

Rolt and Aickman were complete opposites. Aickman was a flamboyant and charismatic



public speaker; Rolt was quiet and rarely opened his mouth unless he had something to say worth hearing. Rolt had a deep love of inanimate objects such as engines and he much enjoyed the company of country workers in pubs; Aickman (in his own words) "cared nothing about machinery or any kind of engine and I disliked both beer and pubs".

Yet in 1946, the Inland Waterways Association emerged with Aickman as Chairman and Rolt as Hon. Secretary. Robert always claimed the title of Founder. I prefer to believe that it was Tom's idea, along with many of the good things that ▶

1946 Robert Aickman, having read *Narrow Boat*, suggests meeting with Tom and the Inland Waterways Association is founded as a result. Three-month voyage on Irish waterways, obtaining material for *Green and Silver*.

1947 *Cressy's* successful attempt to navigate the decaying Northern Stratford Canal.

1948 Joins IWA notables in long voyage of northern waterways, including the scarcely navigable Ashton and Huddersfield Narrow.

1950 *Cressy's* research trip, Brentford to Lechlade, resulting in *The Thames from Mouth to Source*. Resigns as Hon. Secretary, IWA. Tom's idea of staging a National Rally of Boats results in the event taking place in Market Harborough.

1951 Tom's marriage to Angela ends; *Cressy* found to be rotten beyond economic replacement; Tom expelled from his IWA, following disputes with Aickman.

1952 Tom and Sonia set up home together.

1953 Tom and Sonia move into his family home, Stanley Pontlarge; their first son Richard is born. Having failed to find a buyer, *Cressy* is broken up at Stone, Staffs.

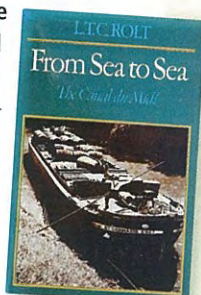
1955 Second son, Timothy, is born.

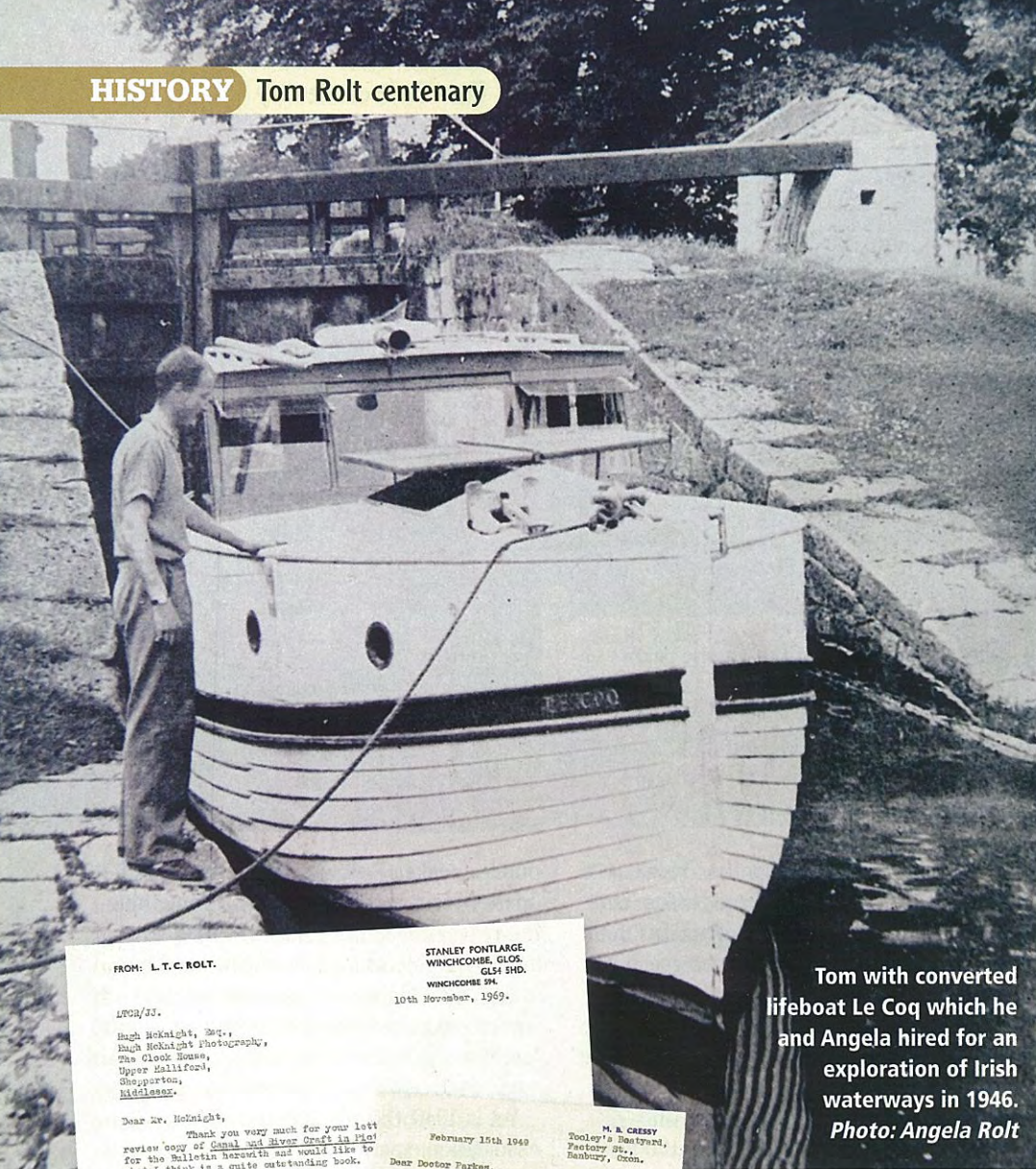
1959 Member of Government's Inland Waterways Restoration Committee until 1962, under Admiral Sir Frederick Parham. Other members included staunch canal enthusiasts Capt. Lionel Munk, John Smith and Sir Robert Grant-Ferris (Lord Harvington).

1971 25th anniversary of IWA; Tom accepts invitation from the then Chairman, John Humphries, to become a Member once more. Makes two inspection trips on the French Canal du Midi, researching his book *From Sea to Sea*.

1973 Makes a final voyage up his favourite canal, the Welsh Branch of the Shropshire Union.

1974 May 9 Tom dies at his Stanley Pontlarge home aged 64 and is buried in the adjacent churchyard.





Tom with converted lifeboat Le Coq which he and Angela hired for an exploration of Irish waterways in 1946. Photo: Angela Rolt

insulting and parsimonious. After his second marriage to Sonia and the birth of their two sons Tom was proud to say that by his writing alone he had been able to maintain a wife, educate his children privately and keep his lovely but demanding home in a reasonable state of repair. But it was always a struggle.

In addition to the classic *Narrow Boat*, Tom's legacy to waterways literature includes the ever readable *Green and Silver*, recording his travels by boat in Ireland in 1946; his definitive *The Inland Waterways of England*, which perfectly captures the flavour of our canals in 1950; and the remarkable *From Sea to Sea: The Canal du Midi*: a waterways history not since bettered and remarkable for his researches with French language documents which he could barely understand and written at a time when his health was fast deteriorating.

Tom was seriously disenchanted with the methods used by television companies to persuade him to appear in broadcasts for woefully inadequate fees or indeed no money at all. As far back as 1945, he had acted as researcher/script writer/ideas man/consultant for the famous Ealing Studios Drama/Documentary *Painted Boats*. Even the title was his. When he attended a private screening in Birmingham, he was shocked to find his name missing altogether from the credits!

Little archive film seems to exist of the great Tom Rolt apart from some delightful colour sequences showing him during a 1971 transit of waterways in Southern France aboard Lord Harvington's motor yacht *Melita*. This 16mm material was the work of talented canal film-maker June Humphries.

I was closely involved with the I.W.A. when, around the time of its 25th anniversary in 1971, its Chairman John Humphries, knowing nothing of the expulsions of long before, welcomed back as Members Tom and his friend and canal author Charles Hadfield, another early Aickman casualty. The Rolts and the Hadfields were among the guests at one of the Humphries' legendary dinner parties at their imposing Wimbledon home. So it was that I came to know Tom slightly and was able to form the judgement that he was quite one of the nicest, kindest and most interesting men I ever had the pleasure of meeting.

After a long battle, Tom succumbed to cancer in 1974 at the sadly early age of 64. He knew that there was so much more he

FROM: L. T. C. ROLT.

Dear Mr. McKnight,
Thank you very much for your last review copy of *Canal and River Craft in Film* for the Bulletin herewith and would like to what I think is a quite outstanding book. a very remarkable set of pictures.

STANLEY PONTLARGE,
WINCHCOMBE, GLOS.
GL24 5HD.
WINCHCOMBE ST.
10th November, 1969.

February 15th 1949

M. A. CRESSY
Toolry's Boatyard,
Fectory St.,
Banbury, Oxon.

Dear Doctor Parkes,
I am most grateful to you both for your kind and appreciative letter, and for so generously presenting me with a copy of your book on the Hull & Barnsley. I have found this most interesting and a very welcome addition to my store of railway literature.

Though I have read quite a lot of railway history, I must confess that I had not realised that the Hull & Barnsley was such a late-comer. These are sad days for the still as their fascinating diversity is steadily diminished. Hence, I think, the anomalous increased interest in the old companies and in such odd little survivors as still survive. In this connection I am some like-minded friends have been looking with a scheme to ensure the survival of the Hull & Barnsley Railway, but it is early days yet to forecast whether we shall succeed.

Also I fear that we shall soon see the closing of many branch lines (a most mistaken policy in my opinion) and already I hear Chipping Norton is to be closed so passenger traffic before long. We need better, not fewer, cross country services.

We will certainly bear in mind your kind suggestion that we might call and see that you let us know if you ever have occasion to come to Banbury?

Tom was a very active writer of kind and courteous letters. This concerned a review for my *Canal and River Craft in Pictures*. While I like Tom's letter to me

(obviously), that with the Cressy address at the top must be very much rarer

◀ came out of the I.W.A.'s first four years, the great 1950 National Rally of Boats at Market Harborough among them.

In 1951 Tom's life hit a very low point. In that year, wanderlust got the better of Angela and she left Tom to join Billy Smart's Circus; Cressy was found to be badly rotten and beyond economic repair. Tom had invested all his hopes and dreams in his much loved boat and to have to abandon her was an utter disaster. Finally (following internal squabbles that no longer seem important) Tom Rolt, Founder of the I.W.A., was expelled from his

own organisation. Fortunately, new interests beckoned. Among these were the saving of the Tallylyn Railway and the discovery of his second and ever-devoted wife Sonia. Sonia had seven years of carrying aboard narrow boats to her credit and fully shared Tom's enthusiasm for canals. Eventually, they would set up home in Tom's family house in Stanley Pontlarge. There his prolific writing career would flourish.

For a while, Tom Rolt feared that he would be remembered as a 'one book' author. He so did not wish to be just "the man who wrote *Narrow Boat*". In spite of publishing more than 60 titles, many of which are the classics in their respective fields, he never achieved great wealth. In Britain, all respectable writers apart from a tiny minority whose works sell in their millions, are astonishingly poorly rewarded for their efforts.

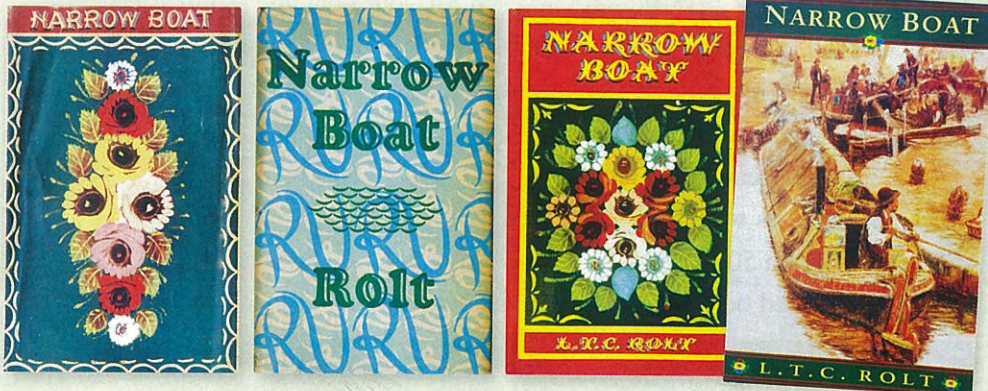
Even when he was an established author with an entry in *Who's Who*, some of Rolt's dealings with famous publishers were

could have written, had there been more time.

Of one thing we can be sure. Without Tom's book *Narrow Boat*....without Kyrle Willans introducing Tom to canals....without Kyrle Willans' father Peter making that record-breaking steam launch trip in 1876... there would have been no I.W.A. And so, neither would there today have been an intact and

flourishing waterways network in Britain.

I would like to express my gratitude to Tom's widow, Sonia, for her enthusiastic encouragement while I was writing this article; and for generously granting permission for the use of illustrations and other material from her family archives. Mrs Rolt tells me she is an avid reader of Canal Boat. CB



Tooley's famous cover on the first, 1944, edition of *Narrow Boat*; Reader's Union Book Club, 1946; Tony Lewery's interpretation of the original jacket, 1978; 1994 edition included Angela Rolt's photographs with Charles Wyllie's colourful painting of Brentford on the cover



Rolt, the author, seen writing *Narrow Boat* at his desk on Cressy. Winter 1939/40. Photo: Angela Rolt

Tom Rolt's waterways books

HIS LIFETIME'S OUTPUT amounted to at least 62 published books and booklets. Listed here are those wholly or partly devoted to inland waterways. Rolt's autobiographical trilogy is particularly recommended.

Narrow Boat.

Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1944. 212 pp. Illustrated by D.J.Watkins-Pitchford. Dust wrapper painting by Herbert Tooley. Numerous subsequent impressions and editions to the present time.

Inland Waterways.

Association for Planning & Regional Reconstruction, London. 1946. 12 pp.

Green and Silver.

Allen & Unwin, London, 1949. 275 pp. Photographs by Angela Rolt. Travelogue of Irish rivers and canals. Reprinted 1968 and (Inland Waterways Assn of Ireland), 1993.

The Inland Waterways of England.

Allen & Unwin, London, 1950. 221 pp. Photographs by Angela Rolt. Dust wrapper painting by Barbara Jones. Numerous reprintings.

The Thames from Mouth to Source

Batsford, London, 1951. 96 pp plus 26 colour plates from antique water colours and aquatints. Text in part describes a journey aboard *Cressy* in 1950.

Inland Waterways.

Educational Supply Association, London, 1958. 96 pp, illustrated.

Waterway.

Newman Neame, London, 1961. 91 pp, illustrated.

Look at Canals.

Hamish Hamilton, London, 1962. 96 pp. Line illustrations by John James.

Navigable Waterways.

Longman, London. 1969. 216 pp. Illustrated.

Landscape with Machines.

Longman, London, 1971. 227 pp. Illustrated. First vol. of autobiography, up to 1939 and including the early years with *Cressy*.

From Sea to Sea: the Canal du Midi.

Allen Lane, London, 1973. 227 pp. Illustrated. Second revised edition, Euromapping, Grenoble, France, 1994.

Landscape with Canals.

Allen Lane, London, 1977. 196 pp. Illustrated. Second vol. of autobiography, up to 1951 and the end of *Cressy*.

Landscape with Figures.

Alan Sutton, Stroud, Glos., 1992. 272 pp. Illustrated. Final vol. of autobiography, up to 1974.

The Landscape Trilogy.

Sutton Publishing, 2001. (Paperback, 2005). Combines all three vols. of autobiography.

Waterways Books concerning Tom Rolt

Tom Rolt and the Cressy Years.

By Ian Mackersey. M & M Baldwin, Cleobury Mortimer, Shropshire, 1985. 108 pp. Illustrated. Tom's involvement with canals, 1930-1951.

L.T.C. Rolt: a Bibliography.

Compiled by Ian Rogerson & Gordon Maxim with the assistance of Sonia Rolt. M & M Baldwin, Cleobury Mortimer, Shropshire, 1986. 48 pp. Lists all his published work, together with biographical material by other writers.

The River Runs Uphill.

By Robert Aickman. J.M.Pearson, Burton-on-Trent. 1986.

Race Against Time.

By David Bolton. Methuen, London, 1990.