

Tom Rolt - Narrow Boat Man



At the invitation of Tom Rolt's widow Sonia, **Tim Coghlan** joined actor and canal and train enthusiast Timothy West at the recent Cheltenham Literary Festival to discuss what was billed as 'a celebration of Tom Rolt's extraordinary life and remarkable achievements – engineer, prolific author and the man whose elegiac work *Narrow Boat* sparked the campaign to save Britain's inland waterways...' The event – a sell out with an audience of 240 - was the very first of the Festival. It was brought forward even earlier to 11.45 to allow Timothy West to get back to London to star that night in *A Number* at the Menier Chocolate Factory. It was appropriate to remember Tom Rolt here in his centenary year – as he and Sonia had done much to save the Cheltenham Literary Festival from collapse in 1960 – one of many things he had saved, alone or with Sonia. To prepare himself, Tim wrote this paper, much of which was used variously by him in the panel discussion chaired by former ITN Newscaster Pamela Armstrong.

One of my favourite *Monty Python* sketches appears quite late into the series - in fact Episode Thirty-one. It's *The All-England Summarize Proust Competition* in which the host Terry Jones explains that each contestant has to give a brief summary of Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* in a maximum of fifteen seconds. Jones then draws the back stage curtain to reveal the *Proustometer* which per the stage directions is 'a true enormous, but cheap audience appreciation gauge; it lists the seven books of Proust's masterwork in the form of a thermometer.'

The performances by the contestants are comic disasters - despite a strong challenge by last year's semi-finalist Mr Harry Bagot from Luton - whereupon Jones announces, 'Well ladies and gentlemen, I don't think any of our contestants this evening have succeeded in encapsulating the intricacies of Proust's masterwork, so I'm going to award the first prize to the girl with the biggest tits.' On comes a lightly-clad Carol Cleveland doing her famous wiggle...

Years later in a retro-programme about the series, I saw Carol 'Cleavage' as she was known, being interviewed about her many non-speaking parts including this one. She said that the *Python* team, who wrote their own material had all been to public school and Cambridge, and as a result had had no contact with women other than mothers and sisters. It's perhaps fortunate for my co-presenter's wife, Prunella Scales, that John Cleese had met Connie Booth before he wrote *Family Towers* or Sybil might have been cast in a different role. 'I know, I know'...

Anyway, I have a feeling I face the same challenge as the luckless con-



1 Tom Rolt in later life revisiting the Talylyn Railway, which he saved almost singlehandedly. Born in 1910, he died at his home in Stanley Pontlarge in 1974. (Sonia Rolt)

2 The 29 year old Tom Rolt on *Cressy* at the entrance to Crick Tunnel in 1939 on his epic voyage that inspired his classic book *Narrow Boat*: He wrote: 'As we approached the northern end we could see vivid flashes of lightning and torrential rain... so I put *Cressy* astern and we sheltered in the tunnel mouth...' (Sonia Rolt)



3 On the Boards at the Cheltenham Literary Festival: L / R Session Chair Pamela Armstrong - former ITN news presenter; introducer Christine Chambers, Friend of Cheltenham Festival; actor, canals and rail enthusiast Timothy West; and 'canal expert' Tim Coghlan. (Diana Coghlan)

4 *Narrow Boat* The book that launched a thousand restorations... The cover of the 1946 second edition, which is now a collector's piece.

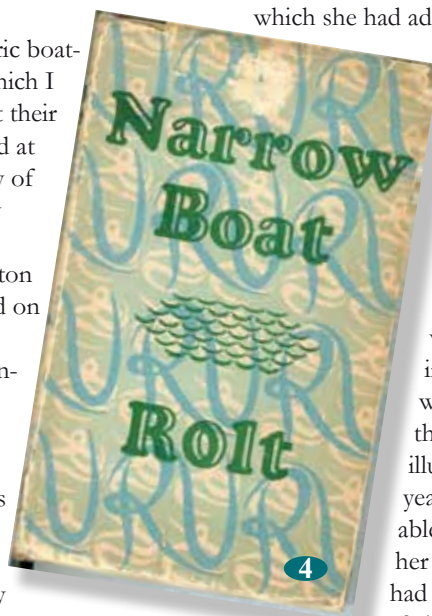
5 Towards the end of the the *Cressy* years: Tom Rolt at Sutton Stop in the autumn of 1949 heading south from Atherstone for Banbury. (Longden/Sonia Rolt)

testants in trying to talk about Tom Rolt's literary output in the short time I have been given. I can already hear the *Roltometer* ticking away with the thirty plus books, let alone my giving a sensible appreciation of his contribution to the saving our waterways, and the inspiration he gave to so many to become involved in them. So I will confine my thoughts as to why Rolt is important to me.

I bought Braunston Marina in 1988 when this historic boatyard was in a pitiful state. I knew little about canals, which I came to as a seagoing sailor, and almost nothing about their history and how near we came to losing them. A friend at the time who was also a narrow boater gave me a copy of *Narrow Boat* and said I had to read it. The book deeply affected and inspired me as few have ever done. What was most surprising was that as Nurser's Yard, Braunston Marina appeared in the book. The very ground I stood on was sacred.

It changed my thinking as to the way I wanted Braunston Marina to develop. There needed to be a balance between conserving its historic structure and heritage, and putting in place the necessary changes to the marina to make sure it never went bankrupt again. Others must be the judge of what I have done, but someone who has spoken kindly of endeavours is Sonia Rolt, who invited me to join the platform today, now twenty two years on, as 'a canal expert' - her words not mine!

I had the privilege of first meeting Sonia when she launched her book *A Canal People* at the 1996 Braunston Boat Show - which in my opinion as a collection of miraculously rescued old canal photographs, is as important a work as *Narrow Boat*. Over the years since I first met Sonia, I have seen her



many times - including her twice opening our now annual Historic Narrowboat Rallies, and even climbing onto the steam narrowboat *President* as a nimble ninety year old.

I have even visited her house, after I had taken her back from the *Stop The Cuts* protest demonstration we held at Braunston in March 2007, in which she had addressed the throng blocking the canal in their boats from Braunston's Butchers Bridge using a Henley style megaphone. At the protest, this gamy bird was even quite happy to sport the demo plaque I made for her, with its slogan *CUT OFF BLAIR!*

The drive back to her ancient home at Stanley Pont-large in rural Gloucestershire was fascinating. She reminisced as we drove down the busy Fosse Way, that in her childhood it was still a gated road, with several real gates to open and close - impossible to imagine now. Perhaps with my hands firmly at the wheel she opened up, knowing I could not write anything down - not even the odd key word - about her childhood as a Catholic convent girl, at the same Farnborough Hill Convent that my sister and her illustrious contemporary Anne Robinson had attended some years later. And from there to the stage, and then via a miserable wartime factory job, to the canals as an Idle Woman. On her early encounters with Tom Rolt, some of which I knew had occurred at what is today Braunston Marina - when both of them then otherwise married - she seemed to draw down

the veil of privacy.

Then she asked me if I had seen George Smith, her first working-boatman husband now aged 92, and like her, still active, at that demo. She had heard he was there but had not seen him. I said I hadn't, but later I found out that he had come... the old twitch upon the thread, the unfinished business. In 1951 they had parted a few hundred yards away on what was then Castle Bridge, now demolished to make the A45 Bridge, he going solo on his boats, and she walking up the hill with her few possessions to lodgings in Braunston village, before her new life with Tom Rolt.

Once at this most famous of writers' houses, Sonia sat down at the kitchen table to sift through the latest pile of correspondence which this most extraordinary of woman receives almost daily, and answers. Whilst the kettle was boiling, she invited me to go up on my own to see Rolt's study at the head of the stairs, where he wrote most of his books. Built with his own hands, the room was something of time-warp and I sat nervously down on his chair - the blank wall in front with views over the ancient priory church to the side. And then on as instructed into a large room in the attic, where there were neatly stacked on shelves and tables remainder copies of various unsold books that Rolt had written, some of which were first editions. I wondered what would become of them. This summer I found the answer, with the now 91 year old Sonia running a book stall of them at the IWA National at Beale Park. I was able to stock up on those first editions.

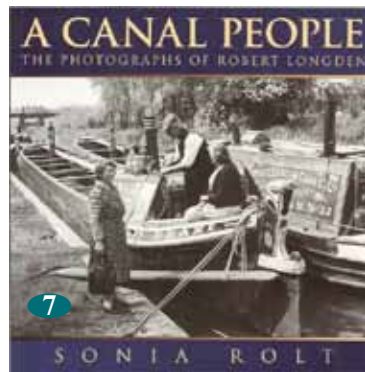




When I returned to Sonia in her kitchen across the hall, she told me how Tom used to dread climbing those stairs to start his daily writing and would find any excuse to linger. ‘You see he had to write to pay the bills. We had no other income, and I had to look after the two boys.’ I recalled those lines of Rolt in his *Landscape With Figures*, the last of his autobiographical trilogy written towards the end of his life and unpublished until twenty years later - and after he had been dead for ten:

‘That I succeeded in keeping a wife, bringing up and privately educating two sons, assisting an impoverished mother and maintaining an ancient Cloucestershire house, all solely upon my literary earnings is a source of pardonable pride to me. It was not an easy achievement. It involved great self-discipline and long hours of work seven days a week.’

I would now like to talk about one the major influences on Rolt’s style of writing which particularly interests me, and that is the poet A E Housman. I am a paid up member of the A E Housman Society, and can claim to have read at least twice every poem that man wrote, for the simple reason that there are so few of them, and all are at least good in parts. I cannot claim that achievement with any other poet or indeed author. And when I was asked some years ago as the Braunston *guvna* to preside over the non-religious scattering of the ashes of an old Nurser’s Yard boatman at



Braunston Bottom Lock, I read his *From far, from eve and morning/ And you twelve-winded sky.* my most favourite poem from his *A Shropshire Lad*

In his *Landscape with Machines*, the first volume of his autobiographical trilogy, Rolt writes: ‘I thought the Shropshire landscape like, and yet at the same time strangely unlike, that other country of the Herefordshire Marches further to the south which I had come to know so well as a child. Despite its great natural beauty, however, I felt then - as I still feel - that there is some-thing indefinably melancholy about western Shropshire.

6 ‘The very ground I stood on was sacred’: Nurser’s Yard , Braunston in July 1950. Tom and Sonia Rolt were still married to their first spouses, but intriguingly Sonia’s *butty* the *Warwick* is seen by the crane undergoing repairs and Tom’s *Alvis* is under canvas in the distance. (Ian Wright)

7 *A Canal People*: ‘A collection of miraculously-rescued old canal photographs... as important a work as *Narrow Boat*...’

8 Sonia Rolt at the 1996 Braunston Boat Show going boating with David Blagrove after she had launched her book. *A Canal People*. (Tim Coghlan)

9 *CUT OFF BLAIR*: The 88 year old Sonia Rolt, with celebrity protestors, attending the March 2007 IWA Demo at Braunston, in protest against the Labour Governments cuts to the Cut. (Paul Bennett)

10 *Still an Item*: A reflective Sonia Smith, in the hatchway of *butty Warwick* with husband George – cigarette in mouth and friends at Bedworth Bridge about 1949. (Longden/Sonia Rolt)



Instead of seeming to transcend and lift the heart as did the country of my childhood, it seemed to speak of time passing and to evoke rare memories of old, unhappy, far off things. I had not read Housman at this time, but when I did so, some of his poems seemed to me to be loaded with the burden of profound sadness.”

That ‘profound sadness’ occurs time and time again in Rolt’s autobiographical works, *‘those blue remembered hills... the land of lost content... The happy highways where I went and cannot come again.* For me this is Rolt at his very best. Near the end of *Landscape with Canals*, he painfully describes his parting with his wife Angela at Tooley’s Boatyard in Banbury, where their adventures had begun those twelve years before: “This was the spring of 1951 when life on *Cresy* was drawing to its expected end. For the sum of £10 Angela bought herself a ‘flat-nose’ Morris Oxford two-seater coupe. It both looked and sounded pretty down-at-heel, but after suitable treatment by me it became reasonably reliable.” (*Angela’s story begins and ends with aside-description of her cars at the time!*) “When she had stowed her belongings in the dickey, I watched from *Cresy*’s deck as she drove away over the wooden drawbridge at the end of Factory Street. I then went below into a boat that suddenly seemed to have become very silent. Twenty years were to pass before I saw Angela again, and for her they were to be years of wandering...” Like George Smith, he was to left alone on his boat.



Only pages later comes the even more painful parting with *Cresy*. “I had to journey on alone to Stone Wharf. The last ten miles and nine locks were into the low sunlight of a perfect spring evening. To say that I felt sad would be a gross understatement, and yet it struck me as only fitting that *Cresy* and I, who had voyaged together for so many years, should now complete our last journey alone.” At Stone Wharf a friend came to collect him to drive him back to his mother’s house Stanley Pontlarge in Gloucestershire. Rolt continues, “Then I shut the cabin doors behind me for the last time. I did not look back as we drove away. From now on I should be living ‘on the bank’ as the canal boaters put it. I understand that *Cresy* lay at Stone Wharf for some weeks, if not months, before they towed her away to some backwater on the Trent & Mersey where they left her to sink and rot. I have never inquired the precise whereabouts of this watery grave because I did not want to see her again.”

But not all of Housman’s influence is one of brooding melancholy. In his *Sleep No More* Rolt wrote a collection ghost and mystery stories. In one called *The Mine*, the opening lines are, “There was a high west wind over the Shropshire March - a boisterous, buffeting wind that swept down the slopes of the Long Mynd and over the Vale of the Severn to send the November leaves whirling through the darkness from the mane of Wenlock Edge.”



11 Stanley Pontlarge Cottage: The house in rural Gloucestershire which the newly married Rolts inherited from Tom’s mother and moved into in 1953 - after two seasons of running the Talyllyn Railway. It was then in a ruinous state, seen restored here. (*Sonia Rolt*)

12 Sonia Rolt (91) with friends running a bookstall of Tom Rolt’s remaindered copies of various unsold books at the 2010 IWA National. (*Tim Coghlan*)

13 Family outing: The Rolts going out for a drive in 1957, with their two young sons, in Tom’s 1929 Alvis, which he drove as his runaround car to the end of his life. Their lifestyle depended entirely on Rolt’s literary earnings, involving ‘long hours of work seven days a week.’ (*Sonia Rolt*)

Compare that with Housman:

*On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble;
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
The gale it plies the saplings double,
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.*

I think Rolt was enjoying himself playing *Spot The Quotation* and having a bit of literary fun!





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I would now like to move across the waters to Ireland and to what is my favourite of Rolt's works, his *Green & Silver*. If I had to take a book to Sue Lawley's *Desert Island*, then this would have to be on my shortlist of five. I had the honour of being presented with a copy of the recently printed *Third Impression* when I visited the Irish canals for the first time in 1994 on a goodwill visit as guest of the Irish government and the Office of Public works – their equivalent of British Waterways – at the height of the Troubles, when there was so little contact between Britain and Ireland. That third impression of *Green & Silver* was printed in Ireland, and the flag of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland is made up of silver and green stripes - such is the esteem Rolt is held in over there. All remember that he was the last person to fully navigate the Royal Canal before it closed in 1946 and it is only this September that it has finally been fully reopened to navigation.

In his foreword, Rolt writes, "This book describes a voyage through the inland waterways of Ireland in 1946. So little was known about these waterways then, that our journey was undertaken in the spirit of discovery, a venture into the unknown." The book is therefore of considerable historical importance, as well as a wonderful read to anyone who knows and loves Ireland and its waterways. I would just like to read just two of my hundreds of favourite pieces – every page is a delight.

The first is on the Upper Shannon: "We made our way back down the river in the late afternoon and turned into Jamestown or, to give it its official title, Albert Lock. The lock was in charge of Michael Bourke. He possessed a great store of conversation and a felicitous turn of phrase which reminded me of Synge's 'Playboy'... From fishing the talk drifted I know not how but in typical Irish fashion to Russian expansionist policy (at that



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14 Sonia and Sons – making a meal of it with Tim Coghlan at the *Brasserie Blanc* after the Cheltenham Literary Festival Tom Rolt presentation. (Diana Coghlan)

15 Sutton Stop 1949 A rare photograph of Angela Rolt, working the lock with a local little helper – Tom Rolt at the helm of *Cressy*. Their marriage was already under strain and in 1951 she was to leave Tom to join a circus and 'years of wandering'. (Longden/Sonia Rolt)

16 Landscape With Canals – Tom Rolt's frank and fascinating autobiography of his canal years, including the breakdown of his marriage to Angela and the destruction of *Cressy*.

17 'My favourite of Rolt's works, his Green & Silver' The cover of the Irish-edition copy presented to Tim Coghlan by the Office of Public Works on the occasion of his 1994 goodwill visit to Ireland as guest of the Irish Government.

time much in the news) and from thence to some barbarous murder which seemed to have left a deep impression on Michael's mind. Russian policy was easily explained: 'It's no religion they have at all', said he, while his graphic description of the murder was punctuated at intervals by the query: 'And wasn't that a terrible thing now?'

"Eventually we bade Michael farewell and moved on through the cut to moor up to the rings of the convenient disused quay situated where the cut rejoins the river just above Jamestown, whither we walked that evening to enjoy an excellent glass of porter." In 1997 I retraced Rolt's voyage on the Upper Shannon, and moored at the same spot and walked into Jamestown, which had hardly changed from Rolt's time, only to find that the pub, which Rolt probably would have used, had closed - 'And wasn't that a terrible thing now?'

My other piece is from his voyage down the Grand Canal from the Shannon to Dublin, when he stops at the small canal-side town of Tullamore, famous for its Tullamore Whiskey, in County Offaly, from which my father's family originate. "Few things have a greater attraction to my eyes than a distant range of hills or mountains. Whether they merge into the blue of the horizon, whether they veil themselves in mist or stand stark in the storm light they entice me to scale them and to discover what country lies beyond their far skyline... I too know the urge to go 'always a little further', and the particular objective in this case was the ridge of the Slieve Bloom Mountains which seemed to have marched along beside us in tantalizing fashion all the way from Shannon Harbour. They were about eleven miles distant from Tullamore, so we proposed to hire bicycles and visit them if the weather held fair."

So once again Housman's *What are those blue remembered hills?* Or that other profound influence on Rolt, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, whom Rolt refers to on quite a few occasions in *Landscape with Canals*, including marking his death in southern France in January, 1939 : *I will arise and go now,*

*and go to Innisfree... And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow/
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow.*

I would like to move away from his Arcadian waxing lyrical moments to his more practical side, which is the world of the today's canals in which I work. For a long time marinas were despised by the canal purists, and well into my time. The WWII *Idle Woman* Margaret Cornish in her biography *Troubled Waters* wrote, 'Even the word 'marina' makes me shudder...such an alien concept to my own feelings on the canals – like pinning a cheap piece of jewellery on a tailored tweed suit.'

Rolt is kinder: Writing in 1969 in his *Inland Waterways of England*, he states: "Today all is changed. We have rediscovered our waterways and paradoxically, this discovery has coincided with the death of the old indigenous and colourful commercial life of the canals. Whether a modern fibreglass cruiser is a worthy substitute for a commercial 'narrow boat' in all the brave splendour of bright paint and polished brass work, or whether a ... marina is an appropriate end of an eighteenth-century range of canal warehouses may be questioned. Those who deplore such changes must take the consolation in the fact that at least they are positive and spell life of a new kind. The only alternative was a weed-choked and ruinous death.'

I read that piece as part of my statement at the Public Enquiry in 1994 into our plans to expand Braunston Marina. Rolt is still relevant today.

For my final thought on Rolt, the acid test of any great writer is whether that person's works survive the test of time. Several of Rolt's books are still in print and being sold, even though some are now well over sixty years old. With many of them appealing to canal or railway enthusiasts this is perhaps understandable, and we have at least three of his canal books on sale at Braunston Marina at any one time. But even his more general books, such as *Victorian Engineering* still have an appeal to today's reader simply because they were so well and entertainingly written. Which reminds me of that epigram from Hilaire Belloc:

*Of me, when I'm dead,
Let it be said,
"His sins were scarlet,
But his prose was read!"*

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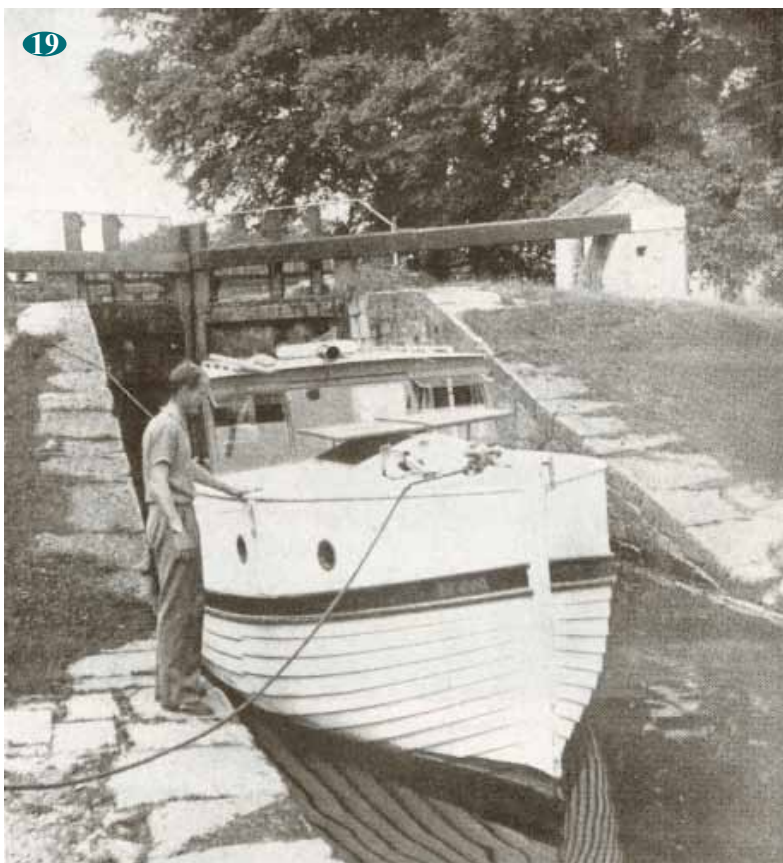


18 'Moored up to the rings of the convenient disused quay..' In 1997 Tim Coghlan, using the modern steel inland waterways cruiser *Duiske*, retraced Rolt's 1947 voyage on the Upper Shannon and moored at exactly the same place – little changed - that Rolt had used for his visit to Jamestown. (Tim Coghlan)

19 Tom Rolt with his small wooden cruiser *Le Coq*: It was propelled by a small petrol outboard, seen here at Lyons House Lock, Grand Canal, Ireland in 1947. (Sonia Rolt)

20 Sonia Rolt in 2009 in Tom's writer's room at Stanley Pontlauge. Tom wrote all his books in longhand, never mastering the typewriter, and writing many of them at this desk. Sonia now uses the room and by contrast is reasonably high-tech with a little help from a friend. (Harry Arnold/Waterway Images)

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