

Tom Rolt. A personal note by James Sutherland.

I first met Tom Rolt in the late 1940s, almost immediately after the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) was set up as a campaigning body to save Britain's canals. Tom Rolt and Robert Aickman were the leading spirits. Both were idealists but, as it turned out, incompatible ones. Aickman was a writer and literary agent while Rolt was a 'hands-on' engineer who had just published *Narrow Boat*, an account of some months travelling on the canals in the converted narrow boat *Cressy*. I was introduced to Aickman and then found myself on the IWA council with an active group generally ten years older than me. I was very sympathetic to the cause and all seemed to be going well until early in 1951 when there was a great dispute between the two leaders and Tom Rolt left (or was pushed out?). Nominally the difference was about how much of the canal network should be saved but in practice it went much deeper and to this day I cannot be sure of the full reasons for the row. It was so bitter that it almost seemed as if the Association might split apart. Although professionally my interests were generally closer to Rolt's than to Aickman's I had seen much less of him than Aickman and was clearly considered to be on Aickman's side in the 'war'. At this stage my work took me to Yorkshire for about five years and I dropped my day-to-day link with the IWA.

My next contact with Tom Rolt came later in the 1950s, after I had been persuaded by Professor Skempton to join the Newcomen Society and mainly after I had been elected to the Council. Looking at Tom across the Council table I found it hard to see how that amiable and interesting man opposite could ever have been an enemy. Of course he never really was one but, as with divorce, it was difficult to be equally friendly with both parties.

The great Rolt engineering biographies were then coming out and I started reading them avidly, first *I K Brunel*, then *Telford* and the *Stephensons*. This brings me on to Tom Rolt as a writer. I have always admired the way he presented the engineer and the scientist, both to their fellows and to the literary world. With his engineering background Tom wrote convincingly for

fellow technologists, but at the same time he could engage readers from all walks of life with understandable and gripping narratives full of real people set in real landscapes and challenging situations.. These qualities were well illustrated in a conversation I overheard at The Travellers Club many years ago. The Club, hardly the centre of science, used to offer an alternative light buffet which I used periodically as a short escape from my work in Victoria Street. One day the member sitting opposite me, clearly from somewhere in the publishing world, was extolling to a friend the merits of a biography of a railway engineer written by "someone called Rolt". He had found in it all the qualities I have just mentioned. I listened spell-bound and was just about to butt in when his companion looked at his watch and the two disappeared in a rush.

Tom Rolt's writing ranged far beyond railways or other forms of transport or even manufacturing, although these were favourite subjects. You have only to look at Mark Baldwin's bibliography⁽¹⁾ to see the range of the books he wrote. One which sticks in my mind is *High Horse Riderless*, a philosophical treatise on work, and I found that *Victorian Engineering*, which I only read recently, had a message which has lasted particularly well. There were also many articles in magazines like *Country Life*, and a whole volume on *Worcestershire*.

Writing was not the only thing, which Tom Rolt did. He was a pillar of the Talylln Railway, a trustee of the Science Museum and a strong supporter of many research and conservation organisations. All round he was a man of great stature and a wonderful ambassador for engineering. Starting with no formal university education he ended with two honorary degrees. He was born on 10th February 1910 and the centenary of his birth should certainly be remembered in 2010.

4th November 2009 (revised)

¹L T C Rolt: a bibliography: M & M Baldwin Cleobury Mortimer, Salop 1986