

TOM ROLT

a life in books

No-one did more to save the canal system than Tom Rolt... and it all started with a book called *Narrow Boat*. But what did he do next? As Rolt's centenary year begins, Mark Baldwin looks back over his achievements

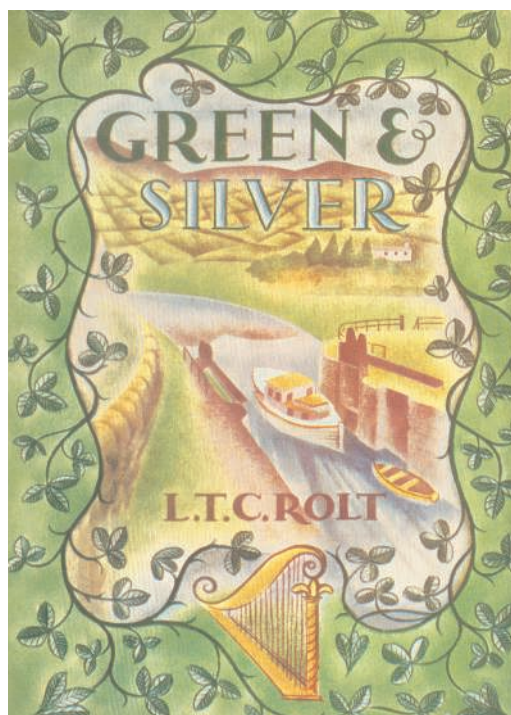
TOM ROLT WAS A GIANT whose achievements are particularly impressive because he shone in a variety of diverse, though related, fields.

Many know him as the founder of the Vintage Sports Car Club without being aware that he played a pioneering role in the railway preservation movement. Others associate him solely with *Narrow Boat* and the survival of Britain's inland waterways, and have no idea that he was a Trustee of the Science Museum and became Britain's leading industrial historian – not just chronicling the engineering successes of the Industrial Revolution, but also being commissioned to write official accounts of contemporary civil engineering projects such as the M1, the Severn Bridge, and the Tyne and Mersey Tunnels. Although engineering provides the underlying theme to almost all of his work, Rolt's writings display a breadth not often found. Their quality may be inferred from his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

All writers yearn for success, but some writers never escape the success of their first, or of an early, work. Throughout the rest of her long and productive life (she lived to be 87), Stella Gibbons was overshadowed by *Cold Comfort Farm*, published when she was only 30. Jerome K. Jerome lived for 38 years after *Three Men in a Boat* first appeared, but never wrote anything to match it.

The typescript of *Narrow Boat* lay in a suitcase, unpublished, for four years, leading to Tom's fear that it might remain in the darkness for ever. However, when it was finally published, its immediate and sustained popularity raised the real possibility that Tom might come to be regarded as a one-trick pony. We now know he had a lot more to offer, but for a time he felt trapped by the success of *Narrow Boat*.

The high regard in which *Narrow Boat* is held makes us wonder why its publication was such a challenge. It is a wonderful book, it is evocative, and makes the reader wish that he could follow Tom into the magical, closed, world of Number Ones and narrow boats, a world which Tom admired for its honesty and for its integration of life and work. Tom had no wish to be an intimate part of this world; he did not aspire to make a living as a boatman, but he knew enough of engineering and of history, and of the dignity of labour, to admire those who were born to the narrowboating life.



“TOM HAD NO WISH TO BE A BOATMAN, BUT KNEW ENOUGH TO ADMIRE THEM”

Left: Tom and Angela undertook a lengthy Irish cruise in 1946.

THE WATERWAY YEARS

The publication of *Narrow Boat* in December 1944 started a series of events which led to the formation of the Inland Waterways Association. This informed and vocal body worked effectively to ensure that much of Britain's waterway network survived the very serious threats of the 1950s and '60s when their commercial performance was waning and their historic and leisure values were scarcely acknowledged, particularly in Whitehall. The book also demonstrated that its author had real talent.

Narrow Boat was a personal account of a journey; it was followed by two other books describing further journeys. 1949 saw the publication of *Green and Silver*, chronicling a lengthy trip through Ireland's waterways made by Tom and his then wife Angela. During the next summer, Tom and Angela undertook a journey up the Thames to research his book *The Thames from Mouth to Source*. Published in 1951, this should have been a

handsome book, with its large page size, and numerous reproductions of 18th and 19th century engravings. Unfortunately, the colour printing technique used was not of high enough quality to do justice to the engravings, and the result is somewhat disappointing.

These three books are unashamedly personal, but Rolt's accumulated knowledge of the history and technology of waterways was put to good use in the preparation of two straightforward historical works: *The Inland Waterways of England* (Allen & Unwin, 1950) and *Navigable Waterways* (Longmans, 1969). The latter was the first volume in an excellent series launched by Longmans under the editorship of Rolt. Sadly, the series foundered when Rolt died in 1974, and although about a dozen titles appeared, many more were announced but were never published. The history of publishing is, alas, littered with incomplete series, launched with great

Seeking pleasure on canals



Mr. R. F. Aickman (left) and Mr. L. T. C. Rolt, chairman and secretary of the Inland Waterways Association, taking water aboard their boat on the Aire and Calder Canal yesterday. They were leaving to complete a survey which will, it is hoped, lead to the use of canals for pleasure cruising and extended commercial use. A note on the proposal appears in *This World of Ours*. (A "Yorkshire Post" picture.)

Robert Aickman introduced Tom Rolt to the publishing house Constable – but they proved unable to sell his later books.

WINTERSTOKE – THE GREAT LOST BOOK?

Most authors have a book in which they took great pride – but which failed to catch the public's eye as it deserved. For Tom, that book was *Winterstoke*.

"I conceived the idea of concentrating a number of actual historical happenings in the English Midlands upon one imaginary industrial town," Tom wrote. "The book would present the story of the growth of this archetypal town and the fortunes of its chief families, from the days of the first monastic mill on the river to the present day when the presence of an atomic research establishment on the outskirts of a huge blackened town struck a new apocalyptic note."

He called the town Winterstoke, an amalgam of Stoke-on-Trent and Coalbrookdale. The book was published by Constable, to whom he had been introduced by Robert Aickman back in 1948.

"Although I knew that *Winterstoke* was one of the best things I would ever write, I also knew it would be a difficult book to sell. But I was unprepared for the result. Sales were so minimal that they did not even cover the paltry £100 advance on royalties." Yet this cloud had a silver lining, in that Tom realised the time was ripe for him to seek another publisher – one who could bring his books to the audience they deserved. "Tom was loyal to the fact that Aickman had introduced him to Constable," explains Sonia Rolt, "but when *Winterstoke* came out he realised that Constable were unable to sell his books. If only he found out earlier he might have done much better! They didn't seem to appreciate the kind of publicity that Tom's books needed, and they failed to market the books with any success."

David Bolton

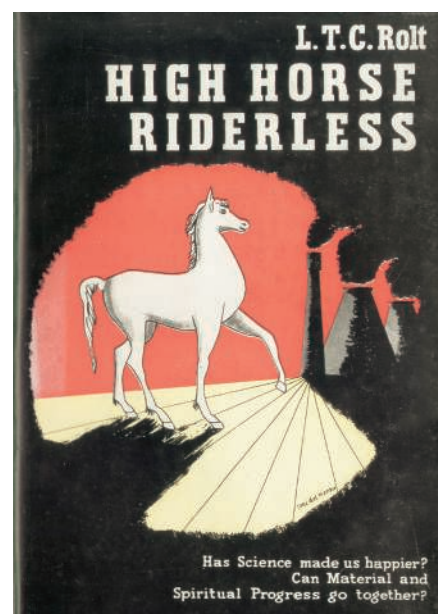
A BROADER CANVAS

Although Tom was now building a reputation as a writer on waterways, he was by no means content to limit his output to a single subject. Early in his career came a work expressing his philosophy, *High Horse Riderless* (1947), and *Worcestershire* (1949), a topographical work in the Robert Hale 'County' series – the contract for this having been signed even before the publication of *Narrow Boat*. A Danish translation of *High Horse Riderless* was published in 1948, making it one of the very few of Tom's books to be translated. Much more common were American or Canadian editions of his later books such as *A Picture History of Motoring*, *Patrick Stirling's Locomotives*, and *Tools for the Job*.

On leaving school at 16, Tom had trained as a mechanical engineer. Nowadays that term would imply the product of a university-based, theoretical, course, but Tom's training was very much a practical one, starting in Bomfords' workshop in Evesham, caring for steam ploughing engines and other agricultural machinery. He was later apprenticed to Kerr, Stuart & Co, and worked on the development of a diesel lorry. These early experiences proved formative; he retained a respect for, and understanding of, skilled workmanship in a mechanical world. On the one hand, his appreciation of fine mechanics led directly to his establishing a workshop to provide care for vintage cars; on the other,

"ROLT'S INTEREST IN ALL THINGS MECHANICAL NATURALLY EXTENDED TO RAILWAYS"

The Rolts at Stanley Pontlarge in Tom's Alvis: *A Picture History of Motoring* was among his works.



Rolt as philosopher.

he carried through to his research and writing a fundamental understanding of the principles underlying engineering of all sorts.

This innate feel for the basics of engineering gave him the ability to assess, to understand, and (even more valuable) to explain the reasoning behind engineering works. Coupled to his empathy for the industrial developments of the nineteenth century, this made him an obvious choice for compiling and presenting the histories of commercial organisations. He was commissioned to write a number of histories of companies, institutions and projects, of which the best known might be *The Mechanicals* (The Institution of Mechanical Engineers, 1967), *The Dowty Story* (1961, followed by a second volume in 1973), *The Severn Bridge* (1966) and *The Tyne Tunnel* (1967).

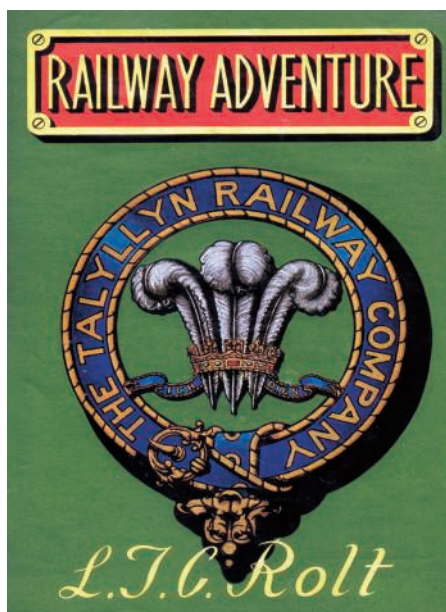
RED FOR DANGER

Rolt's long-standing interest in all things mechanical naturally extended to railways, which was eventually to inspire his best-selling book.

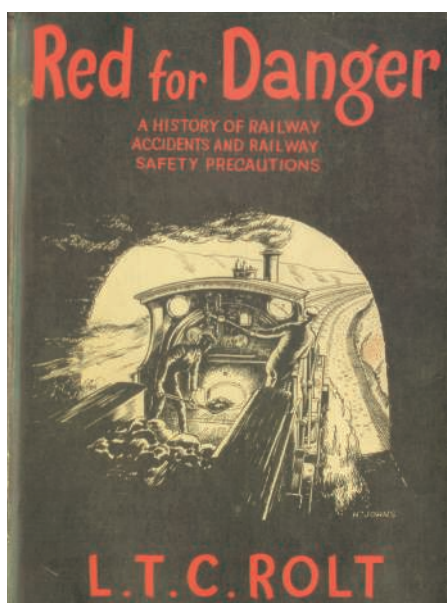
In 1951, Rolt, and many others, were expelled from the Inland Waterways Association for disagreeing with the views of the then President, Robert Aickman. To compound his problems, his boat *Cressy* was rotten beyond repair, and his marriage to Angela failing.

Battered by such overwhelming problems on the waterway front, Rolt turned his attention to railways, and in particular to the Talyllyn Railway, of which he became General Manager (and much more besides). Being now totally involved with railways, it is not surprising that he started to write about them: *Lines of Character* was published in 1952, and *Railway Adventure* in 1953, both by Constable.

Rolt had hopes that the latter, which he saw as the railway equivalent of *Narrow Boat*, might end a run of bad luck. Alas, it did not match *Narrow Boat* in terms of sales, and the virtual failure of five books in as many years made Rolt fear that the muse had deserted him, and that he should abandon his career as a writer. In the event, fortune smiled, and dropped into Rolt's lap the suggestion of a book about railway accidents. *Red for Danger* was published by The Bodley Head in 1955, and quickly proved its worth. It was re-issued as a paperback (a first for Rolt) and restored Rolt's confidence after a demoralising spell. It went on to become Rolt's most successful book, going through numerous editions and impressions, and has been updated by other hands in the years since Rolt's death in 1974.



Railway Adventure was Rolt's second railway book.



In 1955 came Rolt's most successful work.

A HAPPY ACCIDENT?

As Tom established himself as a writer, publishers began to approach him with ideas for books that they wished him to write.

Richard Hough of the Bodley Head suggested the idea for a book about railway accidents and Tom thought it was an extremely promising one. (Sonia believes they were introduced via a mutual friend, Frank Eyre – the first Treasurer of the IWA, and a friend of Charles Hadfield's at Oxford University Press.)

Tom and Sonia's experience of running the Talyllyn Railway had brought them into contact with the Railways Inspectorate, responsible for investigating accidents, and they were given freedom to research all their reports.

This was the first book that Tom had based on original research, which Sonia says he much enjoyed, and he soon found that he was pleasantly overwhelmed with material.

"In preparing to do this book with the publisher, Tom's ideas clarified that the theme and backbone of the book should be that accidents led to changes in working. So safety was being improved by each of these accidents in a marked way that could be written about," explains Sonia.

When *Red for Danger* was published in 1955 it sold well. In 1960, it was taken up by Pan Books as Tom's first title to appear in paperback format. A new edition was produced by David & Charles in 1966, followed by several further editions, and it was re-issued in 2009 by the History Press.

David Bolton



GHOST STORIES

Although the earliest published writing of Rolt's so far discovered is a modest 1934 letter in a splendidly titled periodical – *Steam Car Developments & Steam Aviation* – he seems initially to have seen himself as a writer of fiction. For this (and thus for Rolt's becoming a writer at all) we have to thank the mysterious Anna, that delicious demi-mondaine who briefly dallied with the young Tom, teaching him many things, and encouraging him to write. Two of his ghost stories were first published in about 1937 in the magazine *Mystery Stories*, and these have proved good enough to earn reprinting more than once. In 1948, very early in his writing career, a collection of his ghost stories was published under the title *Sleep No More: twelve stories of the supernatural*. Although it did not make much impact at the time, not only

was the whole collection re-published in 1974, but also a number of the stories were selected for inclusion into anthologies of ghost stories or railway stories. Most importantly, one story, Bosworth Summit Pound, merited inclusion in *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories*. By an extraordinary coincidence, that collection also included a story by Robert Aickman, the President of the Inland Waterways Association who had engineered Rolt's expulsion from the IWA. We can only guess what their reactions to sharing the same covers might have been, for neither Rolt nor Aickman lived to see the publication of this anthology.

Left: Two editions (1948 and 1996) of Rolt's collection of mystery stories. The latter was limited to 400 numbered copies.



Sonia Rolt at the Rolts' Cotswold family home in Stanley Pontlarge.

LIFE AT STANLEY PONTLARGE

Tom moved with Sonia in the autumn of 1953 into his parents' old historic house at Stanley Pontlarge, near Winchcombe in the Cotswolds, with the intention of pressing on with his writing career. He was taking on a tough undertaking. The house had proved difficult to manage after Tom's father's death in 1941, and a new house was to be built in the grounds for his mother.

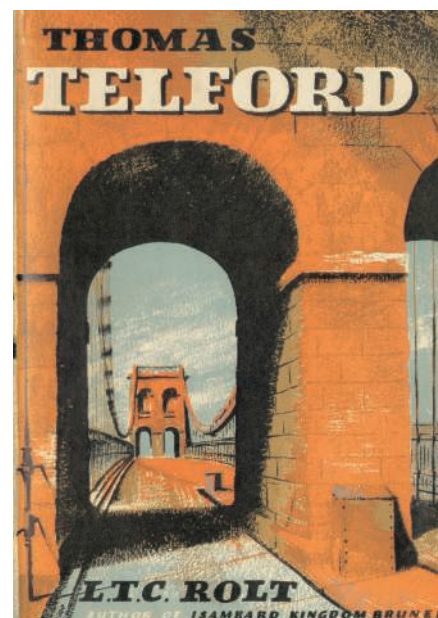
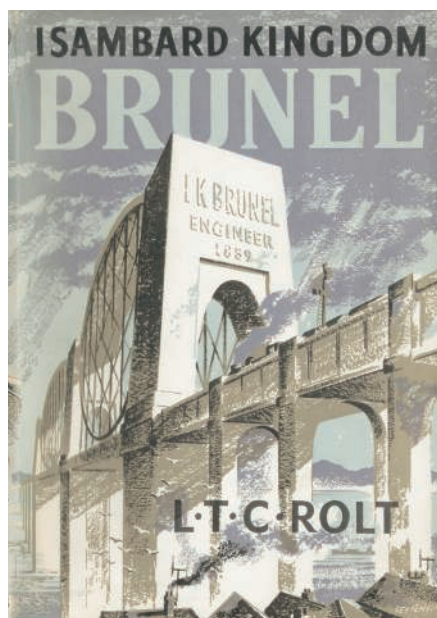
Shortly after moving in, Tom created a small writing room-cum-business office on the first floor by partitioning off a portion of the very large bedroom which his mother had used, occupying the whole of the south end of the medieval part of the house. (The room still exists unchanged today.)

"He would be clacking away upstairs, then silence during which he was smoking assiduously, followed by an outburst of typing, because he did think out fully before he put the words down," recalls Sonia. "Then, the text went onto these special size sheets, broader than normal, and they were clipped into a file with spokes and corrections in the margins. When a chapter was finished it would be read through more than once.

"In the evening, he would always read a chapter that he had just completed. He loved doing that! I'm ashamed to say, though, sometimes I would fall asleep because I was so exhausted after a day of saucepans, the patter of small feet and granny across the garden. Sometimes I was able to help, which I adored, in such ways as sorting out photographs and the books that came in for literary reviews."

In *Landscape with Figures*, Tom recalled these days modestly. "There is not much to be written about the hours one has spent in the study, although in my case they were absolutely vital because I possessed no other source of income. That I have succeeded in keeping a wife, bringing up and privately educating two sons, assisting an impoverished mother, and maintaining an ancient Gloucestershire 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."

David Bolton



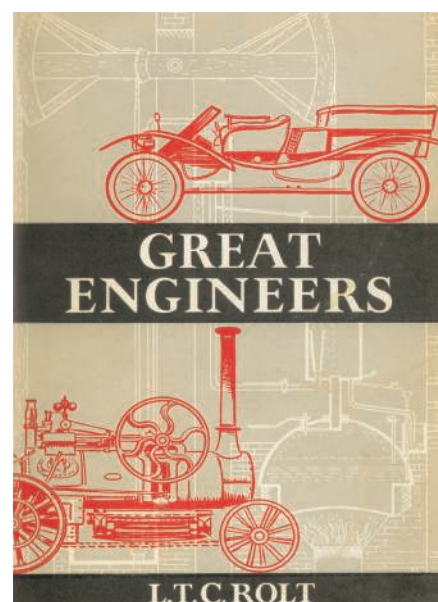
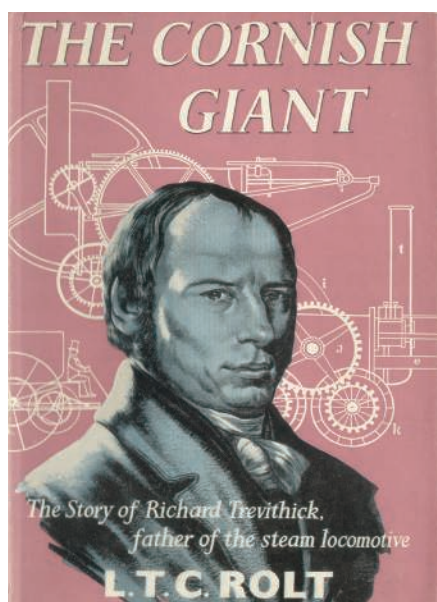
THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

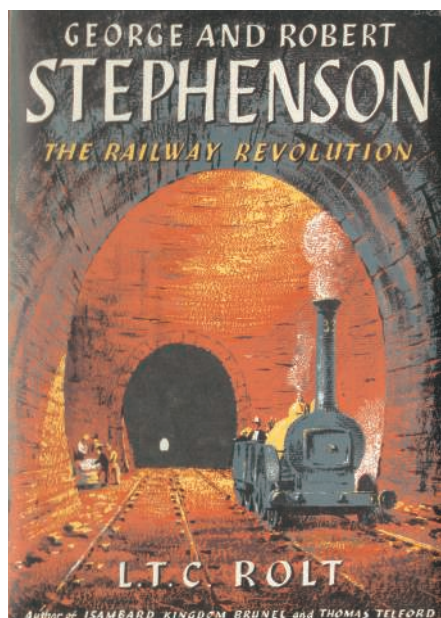
The author Samuel Smiles (1812-1904) much admired the archetypal 'rags-to-riches' stories exemplified by many of the engineers of the Industrial Revolution. Probably no other group in Britain's history had shown so positively how determination and talent could elevate a lowly-born individual to fame and fortune. This accorded exactly with Smiles' philosophy of 'Self-Help' (the title of one of his best-known books), and thus he became, inevitably, the leading historian of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Between 1857 and 1894, many of his biographical studies were published, of which the most influential was *Lives of the Engineers* (3 vols, 1862-3). Our debt to Smiles is great, for none of his contemporaries was interested in lowly-born engineers, but it is a debt with prickles. Smiles had his own prejudice and bias (don't we all?), and these were naturally ingrained in his work. However, much of his writing was based directly on interviews with surviving friends and relatives of the early engineers, and

Smiles did not provide his readers with any way of verifying or checking these sources. His work, inevitably biased, thus stood unchallengeable for many years, until, in fact, after the Second World War.

One of the defining actions of the post-war Labour Government was the passing of the 1947 Transport Act. Amongst other things, this drew together for the first time the records of many early canal and railway companies, although it was not until 1951 that the accumulated records were opened to the public, at the archive in Porchester Road. At last, Smiles' views could be challenged. The first reader's ticket was issued to Charles Hadfield, but Tom Rolt was not far behind.

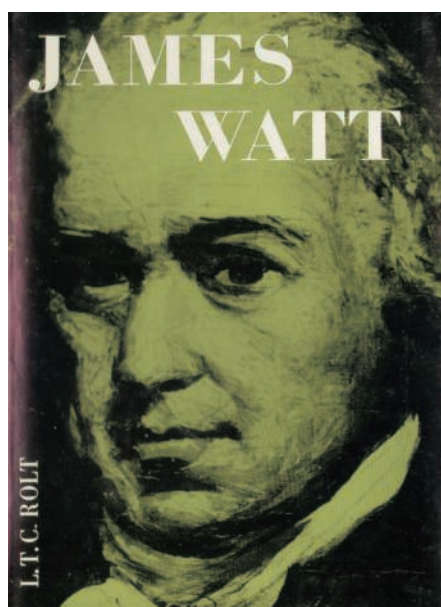
Research blossomed. New perspectives emerged. Charles Hadfield established himself as an outstanding historian of the waterway companies, with their Parliamentary campaigns, plans, and dividends, but it was Tom Rolt who emerged as the biographer. Samuel Smiles was, at last,





knocked off his pedestal. Rolt's engineering biographies came thick and fast: in 1957, Longmans published his *Isambard Kingdom Brunel*, quickly followed by *Thomas Telford* (1958), and *George and Robert Stephenson* (1960). Other publishers brought out *The Cornish Giant* (Lutterworth, 1960), *Great Engineers* (Bell, 1962), and *James Watt* (Batsford, 1962). Thus was established Rolt's reputation as the outstanding interpreter of the technical aspects of the engineering of the Industrial Revolution.

The Longmans titles have deservedly been much reprinted, but not the others, which remain difficult books to find. One of the puzzling features of Rolt's writing career is that, even latterly, his publishers never seemed to have had the confidence to order large print runs for the first editions. Even after Rolt had been a demonstrably popular author for nearly thirty years, books like *Landscape With Machines* (Longmans, 1971) and *From Sea to Sea* (Allen Lane, 1973) were not printed in large numbers.



THE GREAT ENGINEERS

"Tom always wanted to find something new to write about – he didn't want to keep repeating the same thing," recalls Sonia. "Publishers always wanted him to do another beautifully nostalgic and illustrated book of wanderings. He hated it when people came up to him at parties and gatherings asking 'Mr Rolt, when are you going to do another *Narrow Boat*'?"

A real turning point, then, came when David Cape, son of the publisher Jonathan Cape, proposed the idea of a new biography of the great Victorian engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

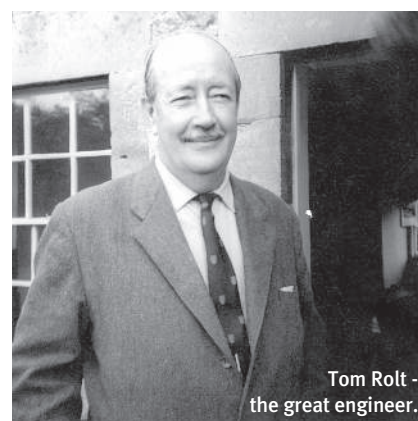
"Like all brilliant ideas it seemed obvious," wrote Tom. "Why had I not thought of it before? I had been a lifelong admirer of the Great Western Railway and its famous engineer whose powerful and extraordinary personality made him a plum subject for a biography. Yet no biography of him had been written since 1870."

"David Cape was thrilled about it, but then he failed to convince his father," recalls Sonia. "His father was prepared to take it with a murmur of acquiescence for about £300 with all rights sold. Something told Tom not to accept such dreadful terms. He had no agent to protect him. David Cape, who was a very good man, said, 'It's your idea, Tom, go ahead and write it,' and recommended Tom to take on one of the top literary agents of the time, A.P. Watt."

The agent obtained a contract from Collins with a larger advance than anything Tom had been offered before – although, afterwards, Tom continued to handle relationships with publishers on his own as he liked to have the personal contact.

The saga of this book, however, was not yet over. After spending 18 months on researching it, Tom sent the manuscript to Collins to be told that they had placed it in the hands of an editor, just returned from America, called Milton Waldman.

"He said to Tom, 'You must concentrate on the high spots and exciting episodes



Tom Rolt -
the great engineer.

– then we will have a best-seller here'," recalls Sonia. "Tom, having sweated over the research for months, was of course not inclined to start pulling the text apart! He felt that he was writing a biography about the whole man, and he didn't want the book cut about and reduced to something here-today-and-gone-tomorrow."

"Then, he had this very strange happening of a fan letter out of the blue from John Guest of Longmans. John read the book over a weekend, and persuaded Longmans to repay the advance to Collins and publish the book as it stood. At last, Tom had found a very high grade publisher of the kind he had hoped for who would listen to his hopes about covers, presentation and so on."

None of Rolt's readers would ever have doubted that he was capable of such an achievement. But for Tom himself, it had a special significance. "With the publication of my three engineer biographies," he wrote in *Landscape with Figures*, "I found that the ghost of *Narrow Boat* no longer hung around my neck like an albatross. I was no longer introduced as 'the man who wrote *Narrow Boat*', but as the man who wrote *Brunel* or, more commonly, as the engineering historian. This did my morale an immense amount of good!"

David Bolton

THE SOURCE

Rolt's life was shaped by powerful influences: his admiration for mechanical craftsmanship, his meeting with Anna, his talent for writing. These came together to mould the man and his world, but they alone do not explain his success. Along with his undoubted abilities, he had the good sense not to let writing become his sole activity. He relished his involvement in engineering projects and activities, and surely his ability to tackle these

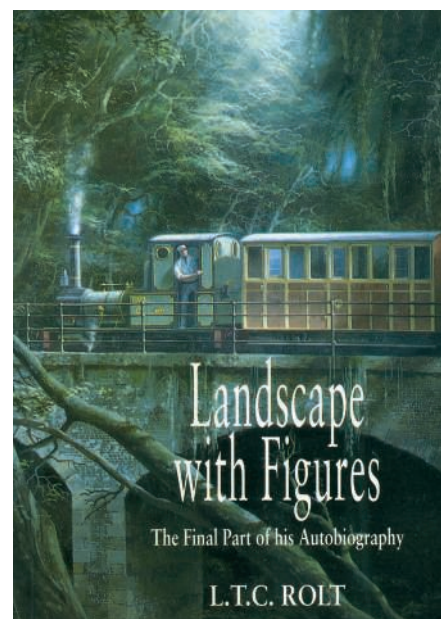
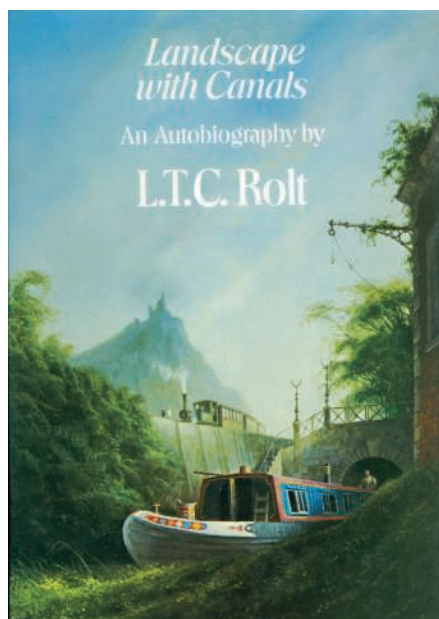
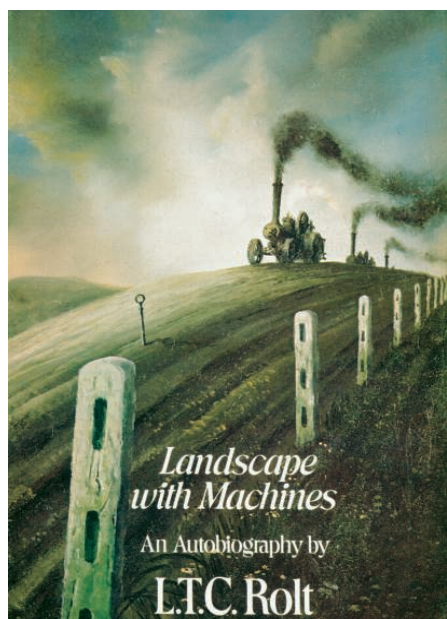
**"ROLT KNOCKED
THE 19TH-CENTURY
AUTHOR SAMUEL
SMILES OFF HIS
PEDESTAL"**

successfully owed much to his original engineering training, and to the research to which his writing led.

Conversely, his author's skill in bringing to life the challenges, successes and failures of the engineering world depended on his very real appreciation of the practicalities of that world. How ironic that Rolt's headmaster, disapproving of Tom's father's resolve to take him away from school at the age of sixteen, asked "I suppose you realise that by taking this step you are ruining your son's career?"

He could scarcely have been further from the truth. Tom created his own career, interwove the practical and the theoretical, and left a splendid body of writing which remains both a delight and an inspiration.





THE ROLT LEGACY

Landscape with Machines, Landscape with Canals, Landscape with Figures. The titles of Rolt's three-volume autobiography give a clue to his unique gift – reconciling the old and the new, the landscape and the machines, in a way that no writer could match, before or since.

"I think he was an immensely pioneering figure, looking back and forward," reflects Sonia. "He thought the notes of life that he made were so much to be cherished that he couldn't help writing about them – but he didn't really care about who came to read them. He had conflicting attitudes about life which, in fact, prompted a great deal of what he wrote. He wrote with love about the things he cared for."

"I think he tried to make sense in his writing of a violent contrast. There was a beauty in what he saw in the ordered life of people who seemed harmonious with their doings and deeds – particularly in the early

world of the Welsh border, where a certain kind of mixture of richness and wildness cohabitated together." There is a strong strain of this, too, in *Narrow Boat*.

"But as well as that, he was by instinct an engineer, and was drawn to people building and creating new things. He was a very intense and sensitive personality."

Tom died at the comparatively early age of 64 in 1974. Since then, Sonia has made a deep commitment to his writings. She has worked with a number of different publishers, including Penguin, and a variety of chosen designers in producing a sequence of new editions.

There remained unpublished, however, one last book that Tom had gone on writing during his final illness. The third part of his autobiography, which he called *The Gifts of Gradual Time*, is "the work of a man who is leaving," explains Sonia, "and at the end sums up in a beautiful, touching way."

"I had let it sleep for 20 years as I was busy with things myself, getting my sons through all the business of growing up, producing my own book *A Canal People*, and not least the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings," says Sonia. "Peter Clifford of Sutton Publishing pursued me until I gave consent to him so that he could read the manuscript. Then, he was so positive about it – and 20 years had gone by – that I agreed to it being published, but under the title *Landscape with Figures* that linked it with the other two volumes."

"Tom wrote a lot of books during his lifetime which have served wonderful needs throughout my life. I really want to leave them with 30 years still to go in copyright in as good a state as they can be to my sons, Richard and Tim, who will look after this inheritance."

David Bolton



Left: The memorial to Tom Rolt at St Michael's Church, Stanley Pontlarge.

