

Sonia Rolt - obituary (Guardian)

Campaigner for the preservation of canals and historic buildings



Sonia Rolt on a canal trip in 1987 aboard Ronaldsway. (Photograph: Tim Rolt)

Sonia Rolt, who has died aged 95, was the grande dame of Britain's waterways, a link between their harsh working past and their leisured present. She also campaigned for an appreciation of the wider legacy of the industrial revolution – for the architecture of coal and steam – and for the preservation of even older buildings. But her first love remained the narrowboats of the cut. She even married into the waterways, twice.

Born in New York to British colonial parents, and orphaned when young, Sonia had a peripatetic childhood and a convent-school education. She trained in acting at the London Theatre Studio but, under the second world war's directed labour scheme, was trapped in a factory wiring bombers until a flatmate saw a Ministry of Transport advertisement saying "women may volunteer for the carrying of goods" on the Grand Union canal – they would be paid by tonnage, and under nobody's orders.

Sonia feared she might be imprisoned for her unpatriotic attempt to change jobs, but a Ministry of Labour psychiatrist said she was "the pioneer type" and, with her two flatmates, she was sent for brief training on the first canal she had ever seen. The three became the crew of their new home, a narrowboat towing its butty (freight barge) laden with 50 tons of steel or aluminium from London to Birmingham, and coal on the return journey; their earnings depended on the speed of their turnaround. Freedom came at the bearable price of fleas, rats, heavy manual labour and a struggle against the coal dust that soiled the fine decoration of the boats. But the view from low in the water around the back entry to working cities was revelatory, and Sonia saw clearly the beauty in the buildings of an industrial landscape: "At the end of some dark, blackened channel you'd see flaming red, and men working with shovels ... totally alive."

She was also drawn to the family warmth of the boat clans; they were suspicious of the recruits (whose IW badge initials stood for Inland Waterways and boaters claimed meant idle women) but, once their competence was proved, Sonia's craft gained "a retinue of followers ... polishing our brasses". Among them in the summer of 1943 was George Smith, a handsome young boatman, "the Adonis of the cut"; he was illiterate but knew everything about waterways. Sonia and George stayed on the water after the war's end, married in 1945, and hauled coal across the Midlands: there is colour footage (<http://nbharnser.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/more-old-working-boat-footage-with.html>) of them at work on the boats Cairo and Warwick, he with blond curls, she with dark waves – tough, equal, modern.



Sonia Smith, as she then was, on the water in 1947

George can also be seen, at the pub bar, not the tiller, in Charles Crichton's 1945 Ealing semi-documentary, *Painted Boats*. At a screening of it in Birmingham for boaters, Sonia met Tom Rolt, who wrote under the name of LTC Rolt and in 1944 had published *Narrow Boat*, an account of his life with his wife, Angela, aboard their craft, *Cressy*. Tom was also on the water by choice. Although his core passion was engineering, especially railways, he became a campaigner for canals, co-founding the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) in 1946. Sonia thought Tom soft (*Cressy* was actually equipped with a bath); Tom thought her a scary leftwing blue-stockings. But she was a remarkable boat spokeswoman to the government and trade unions, and they campaigned together for better working conditions, especially after the canals were nationalised in 1947.

In 1951, the IWA expelled Tom because he was prepared to compromise over partial canal closures. He was by then chair of the Tallylyn railway in mid-Wales, whose preservation had been his idea. Angela had left Tom to join Billy Smart's circus as a ringmaster; Sonia had broken with George after the Festival of Boats organised by the IWA in 1950. After the divorces, Sonia and Tom married in 1952, and they managed the railway together, he the mechanic, she everything else.

They moved into his family home at Stanley Pontlarge, near Cheltenham, a 14th-century building in disrepair (roof sections slipped into the lane with a clatter) and canal-like conditions – paraffin lamps, open fires. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) advised them about subsidence, and Sonia progressed from being an SPAB supplicant (“we glued the house back together”) to a member of its main committee and chairman of its education committee.

She also worked with the Institution of Structural Engineers history study group, and advised on the restoration of HMS *Warrior* and Isambard Kingdom Brunel's steamship *Great Britain*. The founder of the conservation charity the Landmark Trust, John Smith, asked her to help furnish rescued buildings in the same happily shabby style as her own home, and she and Tom found and delivered the goods, even driving the van. (Sonia chose appropriate books to line the shelves in each venue). She did similar work for the National Trust.

Sonia was appointed OBE in 2011 for services to heritage and industrial archaeology, and was vice-president of the IWA and the Waterways Trust (now the Canal & River Trust). She stayed friends with George, who died in 2012, and dedicated her 1997 book, *A Canal People: The Photographs of Robert Longden*, to him and his second wife. Tom died in 1974; their sons, Richard and Timothy, survive her.

- Sonia Rolt, conservationist, born 15 April 1919; died 22 October 2014