

# Obituary

## Sonia Rolt OBE, FSA

A personal tribute by Julia Elton



Sonia, in her Chinese silk robe, cutting the cake at the joint party for her 80th and Julia's 50th birthdays held at the Science Museum in 1999.

The problem for anyone writing about Sonia is how to confine her in a cage of words. Her sparkle, her ebullience, her charm and her infectious love for canals, railways, old buildings and building techniques, architecture and craftsmanship, together with her passionately held and spoken convictions on all manner of subjects meant that her presence was strongly felt at every gathering she attended and words can only paint a muted picture. She had great beauty, though she would have scoffed at me if I'd ever said this to her face. She always looked marvellous with that aureole of fluffy white hair, whether dressed for grand occasions in a green silk Chinese robe or in baggy trousers and a tatty old anorak for those endless expeditions along railway lines, down tunnels or into dark and dusty roof spaces which for years punctuated our lives with such happy regularity until Health and Safety regulations intervened.

Much has now been written about her early years but in brief she was born to an unhappy single mother in New York in 1919 and had something of a nomadic childhood before training as an actress; she never lost her interest in the theatre and in literary matters, holding play readings for the rest of her life and participating in the Cheltenham Literary Festival. When war broke out she found herself installing wiring for

Lancaster bombers at the Hoover factory in Perivale but then discovered a more congenial means of contributing to the war effort by working on the canals, an extremely tough job but one which coloured and influenced the rest of her life. She married a boatman, George Smith, in 1945 but eventually she and Tom (L.T.C.) Rolt, who was also married to someone else, were irresistibly drawn to each other, beginning their life together in the early 1950s at Tywyn, establishing the Talyllyn Railway Preservation Society. When they moved into their ancient house at Stanley Pontlarge near Winchcombe in Gloucestershire Sonia began to develop other powerful interests, sitting for years on the Gloucestershire DAC and fighting local planning battles. She supported with passionate commitment the tiny and remarkable Stanley Pontlarge church, where she is now buried, holding occasional fund-raising events, for instance making Pease Pudding for a great many people, which clearly caused her a certain amount of anxiety, as well as quite recently getting a new organ installed. Her close involvement with the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings sprang from the need to repair the roof of the house and she was to play a leading role encouraging generations of young people in conservation work through her long chairmanship of SPAB's Education Committee. She also worked for the Landmark Trust, furnishing its properties, allowing her firmly held "Philosophy of Imperfection" to guide her judgment to great and successful effect.



Sonia and Julia at the 1985 Newcomen Summer Meeting in the Isle of Man

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Sonia, Julia and James Sutherland on the Structurals History Group trip to Glasgow, 1988

When Tom died in 1974 she set out to keep his books in print and his name in the public eye and to maintain links with those societies and interests he had been involved with. I began to know her well at this period through the Newcomen Society (of which she was the first woman to serve on Council) and the Association for Industrial Archaeology. James Sutherland then invited us both to join the Institution of Structural Engineers History Study Group which opened up a new and wonderful world of stimulating discussions and arguments into which Sonia plunged with joy.

She was the most terrific fun to be with and would weep with laughter at lectures over the solemn absurdity of such phrases as *valves bouncing on their seats*. Once, when we were standing at the top of a grassy slope, formerly an inclined plane on the Bute Canal, having driven miles in a coach from Penzance to get there, she said, "Personally, I think this is a bit of a non-event". This was a phrase that we used with wild hilarity for years to come in places like the anchorage chambers of the Clifton Suspension Bridge. We partied hard and we frequently fought lack of sleep and raging hangovers while simultaneously being breathless with excitement over, for instance, a mass of masons' marks on a Scottish bridge. We misbehaved dreadfully at the AIA conference in Aberystwyth, succumbing to the irresistible offer of a private trip down a lead mine in Cym Yswyth, disappearing into a small dark hole in the hillside and cheerfully emerging a long time later to find an angry coachload of people waiting for us. We then nipped off to swim in Cardigan Bay during the AGM next morning.

Tom rarely left Britain and after his death Sonia discovered the joys of travelling abroad. We had unforgettable trips with the Structurals History Group to Paris and to St.

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Sonia during the L.T.C. Rolt centenary year, 2009

Petersburg, where our Russian hosts were so filled with admiration at her intrepidity, particularly when she climbed up and up the very tall, slender wrought-iron steeple of the Peter & Paul church, that she was serenaded at our final dinner by someone who sat at her feet, gazing into her face and singing Byelorussian love songs to her. We had memorable Italian holidays running round looking at Roman masonry and ancient churches, discussing masonry bees and discovering an enthusiasm for *Opus reticulatum* and she often managed to charm local policemen into letting us park wherever we wanted. She went to China, returning with wonderful tales of trying to buy a bicycle bell in Beijing, and to India, even though she was by then in a wheelchair, describing with great verve the lavatorial and washing arrangements where she was staying, and puzzling over why it was that the single tap (cold) was only a foot off the floor.

The last time I saw her, a few weeks before her death, she said as I was leaving, "I just want you to remember that I've had the most wonderful life". She shared that life with extraordinary and inspirational generosity and many, many people have benefitted from her love and friendship. With her death the world has lost a little bit of irreplaceable magic.

**Sonia Rolt 15 April 1919 - 22 October 2014**

**A Memorial Service for Sonia Rolt will be held on 14 May 2015 at St Paul's Cathedral, London EC4M 8AD. Further details will be announced shortly.**