

LTC ROLT CENTENARY 1910-2010

The author, canal and railway preservation pioneer, LTC Rolt, is perhaps best remembered in Ireland for his enduring classic of the Irish waterways, *Green and Silver*. Published in 1949, it tells of his boat journey from Athlone to Dublin via the Grand Canal, returning to the Shannon via the Royal Canal. Rolt's book offers a wonderful insight into the Ireland of the 1940s, a country utterly different to that of today.

Lionel Thomas Caswall (Tom) Rolt was born in 1910 into a well-to-do English family. However, his father was not particularly astute, and a boarding school education to the age of sixteen had eaten well into the family silver. Being of a more practical nature, the young Rolt was delighted to relieve his father of this expense, and leaving school forthwith, he began an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering. His time was served on the workshop floor of the great heavy engineering factories of 1920s industrial Britain. This was to be a formative period of his life during which he came to appreciate the skills of the craftsmen with whom he worked. However, being very much a country boy, he came to despise the grimy blackness of the industrial cities of the English midlands, enveloped as they were in perpetual smog and with row upon row of terraced houses. Weekly relief came after work on a Saturday afternoon, when he departed his mean lodgings for the country air at the home of his uncle and mentor, Kyrle Willans. Willans was an inventive entrepreneur, and it was he who introduced Rolt to the canal way of life. Leisure boating on the canals was a new concept in the 1930s, and Willans was keen to buy a boat for family holidays. The wooden narrow boat, *Cressy*, began life as a horse-drawn commercial boat, and being seventy feet long was ideal for conversion to meet their accommodation needs. A steam engine and propeller were installed, and Rolt was in his element immersed in the work. After the first few trips on the canal he was smitten, and his life would never be the same again.

It is perhaps a little unusual to be both literary and skilful with one's hands, but through the influence of an Irish-born female friend, Rolt was drawn to the work of WB Yeats and cultivated an interest in literature and writing. Gradually, he relinquished his tools in favour of the typewriter. As a newly married man he decided, with his wife Angela, to make *Cressy* their floating home. He refitted the boat and incorporated a folding desk where he would write about their travels.

The outbreak of the Second World War necessitated a change of plan, and he rejoined the civilian workforce involved in the war effort. However, the evenings were spent writing and his first book, *Narrow Boat*, was born. When he eventually found a publisher the book became an instant success, and has been continually in

print ever since. In *Narrow Boat*, Rolt tells of working life on the canals and reflects on late 1930s / early 1940s Britain, often in a rather critical manner. As an engineer, he was deeply interested in the machines of industry, but he was torn by what he saw as the devastating effects of mass production on the quality of workmanship, people's lives and the environment. In this respect, Rolt was an early environmentalist and ahead of his time.

Green and Silver, his tale of the Irish waterways, is a much lighter and more relaxed read, which beautifully reflects his deep love of the Irish countryside. There was little air pollution and no seething black mountains of burning slag to trouble him as he meandered along, but the rural poverty he witnessed could have been little different to that of inner-city Britain.

As a result of his writing, he became a founder member of the Inland Waterways Association (UK) which, in common with the work of the IWA here, was instrumental in saving the canals from closure. However, in 1951, a trio of traumatic circumstances were to come together that would effectively channel Rolt's interests away from canals to the railways: his first marriage was on the rocks, *Cressy* was riddled with wet rot and he was expelled from the IWA over fundamental differences.

The Talylln railway is set in the picturesque Welsh mountains, and was built in 1866 to service a slate quarry. It was the first such narrow-gauge railway in the world. It remained totally original and working until 1950, when it was faced with closure and probably the scrap man's gas axe. Rolt had been, since childhood, fascinated with narrow-gauge railways and was aware of this little beauty's fate. He intervened and, setting up one of the first railway preservation societies, personally ran the railway for two years wearing numerous hats including engineer, driver and general manager. The railway continues to attract large numbers of visitors today. In the early 1990s the Talylln railway acquired and rebuilt an Andrew Barclay



locomotive, first built in 1949 for Bord na Móna. It has been named

Tom Rolt in honour of the railway's preservation pioneer, which is also appropriate as the man himself travelled on the Grand Canal, through the Bord na Móna heartlands of the Bog of Allen.

Tom Rolt moved with his second wife Sonia into Stanley Pontlarge, his parents' former home in Gloucestershire, a charming, part-medieval house which I have had the pleasure of visiting. He continued to write until his early death in 1974, turning out almost fifty books and countless articles. Rolt's interest and background in industrial heritage, and his ability to convey information, made him one of the greatest exponents of the genre. With an interest in the supernatural he wrote several ghost stories, but his greatest legacy as a writer is undoubtedly his three classic biographies of the great engineers, Stephenson, Telford and Brunel, all of which are in print today.

Gerald Potterton is a member of Offaly IWA and his narrow boat, *The Tom Rolt*, usually lies in Lowtown. He has written a book based on his canal travels entitled *In the Wake of Giants* (Ballyhay Books, www.cottage-publications.com) and needless to say LTC Rolt, is one of the giants referred to in the title.

(Gerald's book is available from IWA's on-line shop shop.iwai.ie – ed)

