Obituary

Sonia Rolt OBE, FSA
A personal tribute by Julia Elton

When war broke out she found herself installing wiring for her life and participating in the Cheltenham Literary Festival.

in 1919 and had something of a nomadic childhood before.

in literary matters, holding play readings for the rest of

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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

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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

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.

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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.

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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.

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 Twyn, 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.

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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 steeples 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.

With her extraordinary and inspirational generosity and many, many people have benefited from her love and friendship. With her death the world has lost a little bit of irreplaceable magic.

Further details will be announced shortly.

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.