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L T C ROLT, FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE AIA

It is our sad task in this, only the second Bulletin of the AIA, to have to record the death of our first President, Mr L T C Rolt. At the foundation of the Association in the Isle of Man last September, Tom Rolt was the unanimous choice as President, and members present at that conference were very conscious of the honour to the Association when such a distinguished pioneer of industrial archaeology as Mr Rolt accepted the invitation to preside over its affairs. In the event, he was only able to take the chair at two meetings of the AIA Council, the second of these being a memorable occasion in February of this year when all the Council members gathered at the home of Mr and Mrs Rolt at Stanley Pontlarge in Gloucestershire. His last public engagement was in the service of the AIA, when he presided over the inaugural meeting at Imperial College in March. Even though his friends were alarmed then to see the physical toll which illness was exacting upon him, they will remember with gratitude the courage and indomitable spirit with which he devoted himself to the end in the cause of industrial archaeology.

Tom Rolt died on May 9 at the age of 64. He was born in Chester in 1910. His own recollections of his childhood and early manhood have been delightfully recorded in the autobiographical essay published in 1971 as "Landscape with Machines". The title evokes the strong sense of enjoyment in the countryside, particularly the "Kilvert country" of the Welsh marches, and in nature generally, combined with a fascination for machinery which matured into a deep engineering knowledge and a skill with his hands which made him an expert motor mechanic and led to a lasting interest in vehicles and their history. The description in this book of steam ploughing techniques is a classic account of a lost craft of the countryside.

It is fortunate for posterity that Tom was able, before he died, to commit to paper his recollections of his career after he struck out as a canal narrow-boat owner and freelance writer in 1939. While his many admirers will await the publication of these reflections with interest, enough is known about Mr Rolt in these years to make it clear that he should be regarded as one of the outstanding Founding Fathers of industrial archaeology. As a founder member and first secretary of the Inland Waterways Association in 1945, he was amongst the very first people to recognise the extraordinary recreational potential of the British canal network

even at a time when it was falling into a demoralised condition of commercial decline, and his writing on this subject together with strenuous campaigning helped to preserve much of the network for the revival which is now taking place. In the early 1950's, a similar situation occurred with the narrow gauge railways of North Wales, which had become obsolete

with the closure of the quarries and were rapidly falling into decay. Tom Rolt took the lead in the foundation of the first of the narrow gauge railway societies - the Talylyn Railway Preservation Society - and the tremendous success of this as a tourist amenity has provided a model for all subsequent railway preservation efforts.

One of Tom Rolt's greatest gifts was his imaginative literary skill and sheer felicity in the use of the English language. This enabled him to win a great reputation as an interpreter of the engineering achievements of the Industrial Revolution and of the lives of the giants such as I K Brunel who had done so much to transform British life and society through their works of civil and mechanical engineering. The success of his many books in this field is a considerable reassurance to those who are anxious about the division of our society into "two cultures", for Tom Rolt managed brilliantly to bridge the gap between scientific and technological expertise on the one hand, and the humane and literary arts on the other. His books, moreover, stimulated a general interest in industrial history and did much to create the public opinion out of which archaeology and a care for our industrial heritage was born.

When industrial archaeology emerged as a well defined area of study in the early 1960's, Tom Rolt was thus once again in the forefront of the activity. He was a long-standing member of the CBA Research Committee on Industrial Archaeology, and became Chairman of the Committee last December. He became a highly respected member of the Council of the Newcomen Society, and one of its Vice-Presidents. He served on committees of the National Trust and the Science Museum, and took an active part in the negotiations to establish the Fund for Technological Preservation at the Science Museum. He consented to join the Advisory Council of the Centre for the Study of the History of Technology at the University of Bath when this was established in 1964, and he attended most of the Bath Conferences on Industrial Archaeology out of which the AIA developed. It was thus entirely appropriate that he should become our first President, and a great honour to the Association that he agreed to do so.

It is impossible in a short memorial notice to do justice to a man of such broad humanity and versatile ability as Tom Rolt. His written works will long endure and continue to give new generations an insight into past engineering accomplishments. His example will remain a stimulus to interest in industrial archaeology and a reminder to stick to the important issues. His friendship will endure as a treasured memory to those who were fortunate to know him well. The profound sympathy of the Association and all its members goes to his wife, Sonia, and to their two sons. We share in their loss, and we trust that the future work of this Association will prove worthy of the inspiration given to it by our first President.

Angus Buchanan
Vice-President, AIA