

Inland Voyage: Along the English Canals.
Smith, Cicely Fox, Miss.
The Times Literary Supplement (London, England)
Saturday, December 30, 1944; pg. 625; Issue 2239.
Category: Book Review

© News International Associated Services Limited
Gale Document Number: EX1200063068

INLAND VOYAGE ALONG THE ENGLISH CANALS

THE canal, known to the ancient civilizations alike of East and West centuries before the Christian era, is a modern innovation, comparatively speaking, so far as the English scene is concerned. It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the first—the Bridgewater Canal or “the Duke’s Cut”—was constructed by that great pioneer of canal building in this country, James Brindley, under the auspices of the Duke of Bridgewater, who may justly claim a place among those noble patrons of science and the arts produced by that most paradoxical of periods, the Georgian age; men whose mission it was (to quote Mr. H. G. Wells) “to make, foster and protect the accumulating science and literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”

* * *

During the latter half of the same century many others followed, to meet the growing demands of the dawning industrial era for more adequate means of transport than those afforded by the roads—at that time for the most part narrow, rough, and for a great part of the year all but impassable. Yet, mostly Georgian in origin though they are, the canals have become in the course of two centuries or less so integral a part of the landscape they pass through that they seem as inseparable from it as its rivers; so that they appear now to belong more to the England of Tudor villages, Norman churches, halls and manor-houses of Cotswold stone, than to the Palladian mansions and artificial vistas of the period which gave them birth, or to the noise and grime of the towns they were designed to serve and to which they brought much of their early prosperity.

Mr. L. T. C. Rolt*—already for many years a lover and student of canals, canal boats and the small but sturdy community that lives on

* NARROW BOAT. By L. T. C. ROLT. Illustrated by D. J. WATKINS-PITCHFORD. With a Foreword by H. J. MASSINGHAM. Eyre and Spottiswoode. 12s. 6d.

and by them—realized a cherished ambition immediately before the outbreak of war, when he acquired the Cressy and fitted her out for inland voyaging. The Cressy was formerly a horse-drawn boat of the type known variously as a “narrow boat,” a “monkey barge” or a “wusser” (Mr. Rolt, by the way, does not mention the last-named term either in the text or in his admirable glossary of canal terminology), and, provided with an engine, electric lighting, a bath and other amenities, her 70ft. hull became a comfortable and reasonably commodious floating home.

Like a good many other things, Cressy’s odyssey was determined by the progress of the war; but before it ended Mr. Rolt had covered in her practically the whole of the canal system of the Midlands, as far north as the Cheshire “wiches.” He avoided Birmingham and the Black Country, but passed through the Potteries, where he pays a reluctant tribute to the “sombre grandeur of this rolling forest of bricks and mortar,” with its pottery ovens “shaped like gigantic bottles, blackened and squat . . . which might well have been the pagodas of some temple to strange gods, or monuments that marked the burial places of kings who held court when the sabre-toothed tiger ranged the forests of Europe.” Mr. Watkins-Pitchford’s drawing accompanying this description—one of the best of many which adorn Mr. Rolt’s pages—equally expresses the bizarre and gloomy fascination of the scene.

* * *

The canal, handmaiden of cities though it is, tends, as Mr. Rolt observes, to avoid when it can the haunts of man, and his inland voyages thus enabled him to discover many remote and half-forgotten places whose beauty and interest are denied to the user of more-travelled thoroughfares; unspoiled villages, too often, alas! deserted and decaying, half-ruined halls dreaming of past splendours, and empty mansions which seem

to announce to the passer-by, “the place is haunted.”

The underlying note which runs throughout Mr. Rolt’s book is, however, that of regret for the things of the past—for the neglected and deserted farms of the shires, for the market-towns where “stays and tinned soup have become more profitable commodities than agricultural produce,” for disappearing local handicrafts like the painting of posies on the Long Buckby cans, for English cookery and “the bundles of thyme, sage, agrimony and rosemary which once hung above the hearth”; and for a score of other things which went to make up what Mr. Rolt and his introducer, Mr. Massingham, describes as “the good life.” It may be that in his capacity of *laudator temporis acti* he a little tends to over-idealize the days that are gone; Dickens, for example, found the inn meals of his time often not much to his liking. But one cannot but join with him in mourning the disappearance of much that was pleasant and gracious and leisurely in the life of the watery highways.

* * *

It may well be that some form of renaissance is in store for the canals of England, though, as Mr. Rolt remarks, it may be too late to hope such a renaissance for some of them, which still make such a pleasing foreground to the mellow brick of old walls and dove-cotes. But it is doubtful whether that renaissance, if it came, would any more restore the old order of things than has the modern revival of road traffic brought back the old romance of the road. It is, indeed, more than likely that any such development may result in the final extinction of such relics of the past as still linger along our neglected waterways, and that the electric barge may drive at last out of existence the monkey boat with its belted and corduroyed captain and sun-bonneted wife, and its cabin adorned with painted nosegays like that which blooms so cheerfully off the paper jacket of Mr. Rolt’s affectionate chronicle.