

Preface

THE MOST FAMOUS canal in France has been a subject of admiration, curiosity and often passionate debate for more than three centuries. In recent years the Canal du Midi has also established itself as one of the major tourist attractions in South-West France. As such, it has inevitably received much attention, and is now covered by a substantial bibliography.

Despite the wealth of information available in print, we feel that this book written by L.T.C. Rolt in 1972 and first published in 1973 makes a unique and valuable contribution to canal literature. This is why we are publishing it simultaneously in English and French editions.

To understand the importance of the book, it is necessary to recall some of the facts of Rolt's life and work. In 1970, when he turned his attention to the canal built by Pierre Paul Riquet in 1666-1681, he had been writing books on inland waterways for the past 30 years. He had decided to put an end to his career as a mechanical engineer, to live on board a narrowboat converted to make it his home and study. His idyll on board *Cressy* with his young wife Angela had begun in July 1939, two weeks after they were married. They cruised through the Midlands, sharing a marginal lifestyle with the professional boatmen who were still operating at that time. Although interrupted six months later by the war, the experience had provided the material for a captivating work, entitled simply *Narrow Boat*. Published in 1944, the account soon became a manifesto, inspiring the creation of a movement for preservation of the old English canals. Rolt thus founded the Inland Waterways Association in 1946, with three other men who had also realised the extraordinary value of the 2000 miles of water routes crossing the length and breadth of England. The association's campaign was successful, for the greater part of the network was saved from abandonment.

At that time, Rolt undertook a cruise for several months on the canals of Ireland, which he described in *Green and Silver*, another valuable work of reference.

The author's knowledge of mechanics and engineering was coupled with an insatiable curiosity concerning all that human beings have invented to make life easier, to derive greater benefit from their work and to increase their productivity. He was also fascinated by the relationship between machines and landscape. Rolt's imagination was obviously fired by the extraordinary engineering achievement of the Canal du Midi, and it had for long been one of his ambitions to research and publish the story of its design, construction and operation. He thus embarked with his second wife Sonia for two rare trips abroad in 1971. In spring they cruised through the canal from Castelnaudary to the Etang de Thau in a hire boat and explored the Montagne Noire. They returned in September to cruise the whole length of the Canal du Midi and the Lateral Canal from Agde to Castets-en-Dorthe.

At the same time, they researched the canal's history. Like other authors, Rolt was captivated by the personality of Riquet as well as by his achievement. Unlike others, however, he had the experience and the technical knowledge to distance himself from the first-hand accounts, and gives a balanced interpretation of all the difficulties and conflicts which had to be overcome. He was also careful to look at the whole Atlantic to Mediterranean route, and thus covers the Canal du Midi's logical extension, the Canal latéral à la Garonne, with the same awareness, sensitivity and attention to detail as for its more prestigious predecessor.

Rolt's merit and the interest of this book lie in the precise image it gives of the *Canal des Deux Mers* at a turning point in its history. In the early 1970s, works were proceeding apace on lengthening the locks of the lateral canal and building the water slope at Montech. All that could be observed on the canal suggested there was a future for waterborne freight. The option to modernise the Canal du Midi intrigued Rolt, but was certain to appeal to the man who had witnessed with sadness the decline and disappearance of commercial traffic on the English canals.

Our postscript briefly describes the main events of the past 20 years, but we have deliberately left intact the original text, with the exception of minor editing changes and a few corrections on points of detail. These mainly concern the cutting on the *rigole de la Montagne* at Conquet (p48) and the Libron crossing (p130). We have adopted metric units in both editions for convenience, and to conform to current practice.

The reader will be able to appreciate the pertinence of the author's observations, and find interest in comparing these with the state of the canal today. The footnotes are those of the original edition, except where otherwise indicated. The illustrations, including a number of maps and detailed plans, have been chosen to support the text and further enlighten the reader wherever possible.

The cover illustration is a sanguine by Jean-Pierre Merlin, based on a proposal submitted by Riquet to Colbert in December 1669. All our attempts to locate the original sketch have been fruitless. We have thus taken the liberty to interpret Riquet's textual description and give a representation in the baroque style which was much in vogue under Louis XIV.

David Edwards-May, Grenoble, October 1994