

Kenneth Roy was a broadcaster and journalist.

Early life

Kenneth Alfred Roy was born on 26 March 1945 in Falkirk, where his parents — his father, an engineer, and mother, an office worker — were involved in amateur theatre.

Roy was raised in Bonnybridge. At the age of 13 he volunteered as Bonnybridge correspondent of the *Falkirk Mail*, a role for which he was paid in postage stamps.

After an unhappy time at Denny High School, which he left as soon as legally possible, the *Falkirk Mail* promised him a a full-time job as a junior reporter as soon as he acquired proficiency in shorthand and typing from Skerry's College in Glasgow. By the age of 16 he was working as a

Kenneth Alfred Roy	
Born	26 March 1945 Falkirk, Scotland
Died	5 November 2018 (aged 73) Ayr, Scotland
Cause of death	Stomach cancer
Nationality	Scottish
Education	Denny High School

reporter. He recalled many years later:

My working day consisted of attending the court and going round the police and fire stations. After the 11.30 a.m. court session we all used to pile into the Tudor tearooms. It had this huge round table, around which all these important guys, from the law firms and the local papers, used to gather. It was a very ritualistic social occasion and one that left a big impression on me.

Three nights a week I had to cover the dog racing. It used to draw huge crowds. Myself and John Inglis from the *Falkirk Herald* would both be there. I could never understand why we couldn't just pool our resources, but there was a huge rivalry between the papers at the time. ^[1]

He was promised promotion once his shorthand and typing, studied at Skerry's College in Glasgow, were up to speed but, less than a year after joining, the *Mail* closed in 1962. Roy and his chief reporter Frank Thomson both found work at the *Falkirk Herald*, but he made the rookie mistake of "writing a stinker of a review of a local operatic society and being the most unpopular chap in town for months".

Glasgow Herald

After a short spell with the Greenock evening paper, and still only 19, he joined the *Glasgow Herald* in the mid-1960s. Assigned to cover the criminal courts, he recalled that this experience gave him a dark view of human nature, particularly as his duties were sometimes combined with a night-time trawl of the city's police stations for copy.

His colleague, Ian Jack, recalled how Roy suggested they visit the Blackhill council estate, a rough area traditionally ignored by press and society alike. Jack told how the unusual sight of a big black car and two young men with notebooks attracted a crowd of scruffy children that grew boisterous, but Roy "remained calm, sympathetic and, above all, inquisitive: qualities that were also prominent in the piece he wrote about our visit".

Roy left the *Herald* with a treasured note from Alastair Warren, the editor, predicting that he "could have had a promising future in journalism"; instead, he suffered a barren few years in public relations.

Meanwhile, in June 1967 he married Margaret, who survived him with their sons Stephen and Christopher, who continued to publish *Who's Who in Scotland*. The family lived in a crumbling Victorian villa in Kirknewton, south of Edinburgh, and later in Ayrshire, close to Roy's office overlooking Prestwick airport.

Roy returned to publishing in 1969, setting up *Scottish Theatre*, a monthly magazine, but ran into financial difficulties and it closed in 1973. His financial difficulties were compounded when he diversified into the publication and production of plays by prominent Scottish writers, all of which enterprises lost money. He was left to eke out a bare living with jobbing work on Radio Scotland arts programmes and as an adjudicator of drama festivals.

In the late 1960s he did freelance work for STV, including a programme with [George Reid](#) called *Talking Heads*, which he said they would both prefer to forget. ^[2]

[Finlay J. Macdonald](#) of BBC Scotland called him and asked if he would like to work on a television documentary.

BBC Scotland

In 1972, and floundering in debt, he was rescued by [Hugh Cochrane](#), newly appointed head of news and current affairs at BBC Scotland, who offered him a job on the teatime news programme, [Reporting Scotland](#) and, for six years, he co-presented the programme with [Mary Marquis](#).

His long, prematurely greying hair proved too much even for the urbane Cochrane: he was ordered to get it cut.

In search of more creative challenges, he seized an opportunity to work with the head of religious programmes, Ian Mackenzie, on [The Yes. No. Don't Know Show](#), an early experiment in audience participation, which focused on ethical issues. The series achieved uniquely high ratings for late-night religious television, but was bitterly opposed by the Church of Scotland hierarchy, which saw it as a threat to the sanctity of the God slot.

West Sound

In 1979 Roy rented a 16th-century castle on the high street of Maybole, where he lived with his wife and two sons. It was from there that he engineered a bid for one of the first independent local radio franchises in the UK. Fighting off competition from Radio Clyde, the franchise was awarded to Radio Ayrshire Limited in September 1980. Unlike most other ILR stations, it would not be playing pop music throughout the day. As Roy told the *Glasgow Herald*: "[T]he last thing we want to do is copy Clyde in Ayrshire. We intend to do something different with an emphasis on

news and current affairs programmes.^[3]

The station launched as West Sound in the autumn of 1981 from studios in Ayr. Roy's preference for news and talk over needle-time gained an unexpectedly large audience, but his backers decided that he lacked the expertise to make a commercial success of the business.

In late 1983 Roy returned to the BBC as a presenter of the politics programme, *Agenda*.

Later

He then set up his own small publishing company, profitably establishing the biographical reference annual, *Who's Who in Scotland* in 1986.

After a long absence from newspaper journalism, he was offered two berths on Scotland on Sunday when it launched in 1988 – as the paper's television critic, for which he was twice named Critic of the Year in the Scottish Press Awards, and as a peripatetic sketch writer. Switching to the *Observer*, he travelled the country for a series of observational pieces entitled 'Kenneth Roy's Britain'. At his most prolific he also contributed a weekly commentary on current affairs to The *Herald*, which earned him the title Columnist of the Year in the 1994 UK Press Gazette Awards, as well as a daily notebook, 'Kenneth Roy's Pocket Companion,' on the back page of the *Scotsman*.

Scottish Review

In 1995, Roy founded the *Scottish Review*, an independent quarterly of topical essays, biography, contemporary history and travel writing. When it migrated to the internet as a weekly in 2008, its small readership was dramatically enlarged. The online version acquired a sharper edge than the print version and was noted for its campaigning on such issues as the defective fatal accident inquiry system, the policy of detaining mentally disturbed young women in prison, and the need for greater transparency in public life.

He took up causes that might otherwise fall below the radar, particularly on behalf of the ignored and dispossessed. He investigated the case of Annie Borjesson, a young Swedish woman whose body was found on a beach in Ayrshire in 2005, and drew attention to the institutionalised backgrounds of Neve Lafferty, 15, and Georgia Row, 14, who plunged to their deaths from the Erskine bridge in October 2009.

Having edited the magazine for almost 24 years, he retired in the early autumn of 2018 because of terminal illness.

Institute of Contemporary Scotland

In the hope of stimulating a social and cultural counterpoint to the fledgling Scottish Parliament, Roy established the non-political Institute of Contemporary Scotland (ICS) in 2000, persuading 800 prominent Scots – mostly recruited from the pages of his own *Who's Who in Scotland* – to bankroll the venture. A bitter row between the founder and some of his influential supporters, who claimed to find him impossible to work with or control, was soon being played out in public. They were not the first. One writer sent to inquire about his enterprises reported that the experience was "like interviewing a stone".^[4]

Undaunted, Roy went on to create the Young Scotland Programme, an annual series of courses for the intellectual development of people in the early stages of their careers, exporting the concept south of the border through the foundation of a separate charity. He regarded his work with young people – more than 3,000 participated in the courses between 2002 and 2018 – as the most rewarding thing he did in his professional life.

Books

From quiet seclusion in an Ayrshire village Roy wrote two deeply personal accounts of the post-war Scotland in which he was born and brought up. *The Invisible Spirit* (2014), which dealt with the period 1945 to 1975, excoriated political complacency and judicial incompetence while highlighting the resilience of ordinary Scots. It was described by Ian Hamilton QC as the most remarkable book about Scotland he had ever read.

Although no nationalist, he argued that post-war Scotland "reverted to the place ascribed for it in the Union as an unthreatening backwater distinguished by the poor education, poor health and poor housing of its people". He added that Scots schoolchildren were deliberately denied by the education system a grounding in Scottish history: "In denying children an adequate knowledge of their own culture and identity, it asserted the relative insignificance of Scotland."^[5]

Its sequel, *The Broken Journey* (2016), continued the narrative to the brink of the millennium, shining a light on the oil boom in Shetland, the Orkney child sex abuse scandal, and the cloning of Dolly the sheep. It, however, failed to achieve the sales of the first volume despite the endorsement of Allan Massie of the *Scotsman*, who nominated it as one of his books of the year.

Awards and honours

In 2000, Roy won the Oliver Brown Award given annually in recognition of outstanding service fo Scottish culture. His native Falkirk made him the town's person of the year in 1978 and hosted a civic dinner in his honour. But perhaps the honour he valued most was the invitation from the family of Jimmy Reid to conduct the humanist service for the Clydeside legend at his funeral in Glasgow in 2010.

Death

On 3 October 2018, Roy announced on his *Scottish Review* website that he was terminally ill with stomach cancer, describing the final journey he faced. "I'm on the last bus now, front row nearest the driver, and heading for the terminus," he wrote. "And hoping all the traffic lights are at red."^[6]

Kenneth Roy died on 5 November 2018 at the age of 73.

Links

- [Kenneth Roy obituary](#) , *Scottish Review*, 5 November 2018.

References

- ↑ '[A career forged in Falkirk](#) ', *Falkirk Herald*, 9 December 2011.
- ↑ 'Ferretting for stories', *Radio Times* (Scotland), 15–21 October 1983, 79.
- ↑ 'Radio Clyde beaten to it by Ayrshire', *Glasgow Herald*, 9 September 1980, 5.
- ↑ '[Kenneth Roy obituary](#) ', *The Times*, 6 November 2018.
- ↑ Kenneth Roy, *The Invisible Spirit* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2014)
- ↑ '[End of an era](#) ', *Scottish Review*, 3 October 2018.

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