

5th November 2018

# Obituary: Kenneth Roy - publisher, television presenter and editor



kenneth roy

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## **Publisher, television presenter and editor;**

Born: March 26, 1945;

Died: November 5th 2018

Kenneth Roy, who has died aged 73, was for several decades a publisher, television presenter, columnist and editor. His forte was as a judicious (and often caustic) narrator of the crimes, controversies and campaigns that preoccupied **Scotland** over the past half century.

Kenneth Alfred Roy was born in Falkirk and raised in Bonnybridge by his parents Richard and Esther (née Bernard). He began his career as a

journalist before he was even old enough to vote, filing “Bonnybridge Notes” for the Falkirk Mail at 13. He became a full-time reporter on leaving Denny High **School** three years later, covering the local courtroom, **police** and fire stations and, three nights a week, dog racing.

The Falkirk Mail closed in 1962 and Roy joined its arch rival, the Falkirk Herald. He found a niche as its theatre critic, annoying a local operatic society with a “stinker” of a review. From there, he joined the (then) **Glasgow** Herald aged just 19, again covering crime and the High Court. He quit after a solicitor called Winnie Ewing, not yet an MP, complained about one of his reports. “You could”, lamented his editor Alastair Warren in a farewell memo, “have had a good career in journalism.”

A few weeks later, in March 1967, he married Margaret Henderson Campbell, who had played his fiancée in an amateur production of “Quiet Wedding”. They went to live in Portobello, **Edinburgh**, and Roy started a new job “turning out soul-destroying promotional guff about Scottish industry”. He quit that too, bought a printing press and for a few years led a “precarious Bohemian existence” with his young wife and two sons.

His Scottish Theatre magazine (1969-72) was widely admired but a commercial flop, while a touring theatre company failed to draw the crowds. Roy got out of bed one morning and counted unpaid bills for £3,000 – he was just 25. Saved by a short-term contract with BBC Scotland as a reporter, he reported to Queen Margaret Drive in Glasgow, where he had previously worked on a documentary called “The World of Mrs Smith”, produced in his native Bonnybridge.

Roy proved an awkward fit for the very proper Corporation. It was coolly suggested he get “a suit and a haircut”, although his appointment (without a formal interview) coincided with an eventful period in Scottish politics. He covered North Sea oil and the **SNP**, both of which were on the rise. Politically, Roy was “one of **Labour**’s silent if disenchanted Scottish majority, sceptical enough to be intrigued by the nationalists but repelled by their materialistic approach”.

He came into his own when Alastair Hetherington quit as editor of the

Guardian to become controller of BBC Scotland, determined to shake up Scottish politics and broadcasting. Roy covered the annual General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, an annual ritual being a formulaic interview with its Moderator. He presented religious programmes like *The Yes, No, Don't Know Show*, *Crossfire*, *Agenda* and *Voyager*, making some extra cash as an occasional co-presenter on Radio Scotland's *Good Morning Scotland* programme.

Roy interviewed hundreds of prominent Scots, of whom his favourites were Lord MacLeod of Fuinary and Hugh MacDiarmid. Later, his encounters were collected together in a book, *Conversations in a Small Country* (1989), a sequel to his first, *Travels in a Small Country* (1987) and prequel to an engaging memoir, *The Closing Headlines* (1993). Later, he published *Both Sides of the Border* (1998) and two "panoramas" of post-war Scottish life, *The Invisible Spirit* (2014) and *The Broken Journey* (2016).

By his own admission, Roy "rarely felt at ease in the company of fellow journalists" except when he "could choose the company". He holidayed in Scotland, venturing abroad for the first time at 32, on a press trip to Copenhagen. Prone to grudges – a perceived slight could provoke a tempestuous onslaught – Roy was also fearless and open minded; very much his own man, a quality that won as many enemies as it did admirers.

He left the BBC full time in 1978, having come to dread its Glasgow newsroom. Roy confessed to paranoia, even presenting *Reporting Scotland* on the day of his father's funeral for fear of being usurped, what he called "the occupational hazard of the television anchorman". For a while, he edited a community drama association magazine and had another go at publishing, but after suffering a minor nervous breakdown he drifted back to the BBC on a more casual basis.

In the early 1980s, Roy moved into commercial radio, launching *West Sound* in as managing director, having beaten off competition from the more established *Radio Clyde*. *Clyde's Jimmy Gordon* warned him he would spend most of his time putting out fires, and indeed for the next year Roy found himself dousing several editorial flames. Out of the blue, he was fired on the station's first anniversary, thereafter refusing to tune in to his wireless baby, for "the hurt went deep".

Roy returned to publishing for the third time (Carrick), this time more successfully, and combined it with more political presenting at the BBC. He also reinvented himself as a television critic, chiefly for Scotland on Sunday, becoming Bank of Scotland Press Awards' "Critic of the Year" in 1990 and 1993. Columns such as "Kenneth Roy's Week" also appeared Scotland on Sunday (1988-94) and the Observer (1995-96). In 1995, he was named UK Press Gazette's "Columnist of the Year"; from 1985, he edited The Journalist's Handbook.

In January 1995, Roy launched perhaps his most successful venture, the journal "Scottish Review". Initially a print publication, it wisely moved online a decade later, eventually becoming a must-read weekly (or bi-weekly) electronic magazine of reviews, features and columns, of which the liveliest were usually the editor's own. In 2000, he founded the Institute of Contemporary Scotland and, two years later, its "Young Scotland Programme" (and, in 2004, a UK and Ireland equivalent), which sought to encourage debate and ideas between young adults.

Roy announced he was relinquishing the editor's chair shortly after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, during which his sceptical voice proved essential reading. He later changed his mind, only hanging "his last prejudice out to dry" on revealing he was terminally ill in a typically elegant piece on 3 October 2018.

Kenneth Roy is survived by his wife Margaret and sons, Christopher and Stephen.

LINDSAY BRYDON