

My friend's diagnosis has sent me back to a 1960s estate

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Kenneth Roy, a gifted journalist, was preoccupied by the world of news for 60 years. One day that world suddenly shrank

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When the Scottish writer and journalist Kenneth Roy was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer a week or so ago, it took him a night to realise that the consultant's straightforward words had changed everything. That new understanding came the next morning, when hospital staff came round with the newspapers.

In the [valedictory editorial](#) that he published in the online magazine he founded, the Scottish Review, Roy writes: "The choice wasn't wonderful: Record, Sun, Mail. I thought I might enjoy being infuriated by the Mail, so the Mail it was. Except, for once, I wasn't infuriated. Halfway through quite a thick edition, I had found nothing to interest me. Did I care about any of this? Did I care if we crashed out of Europe? No. Did I care about Boris Johnson proposing to steal Theresa May's thunder at the Tory conference? No. Did I care if there was a second [Scottish] independence referendum and, if there was, did I care about the result? Perhaps a little; but only a little. The world of events, so preoccupying for the last 60 years ever since my first Bonnybridge Notes, had slipped away, and would never return."

He adds: "Well, not for me, anyway."

Bonnybridge lies close to Falkirk, in central Scotland: a village once blackened by iron foundries and served by trains that called at the equally misnamed Greenhill Junction, which was surrounded by brickworks, and surfaced awkwardly in my imagination whenever we sang the hymn "There is a green hill far away ..."

Kenneth – it seems false to continue calling a friend by his surname – began his journalistic career in these parts in 1958, when as a 13-year-old he regularly submitted news items to a local weekly, the Falkirk Mail, which later recruited him as a junior reporter.



Kenneth Roy in 1981. Photograph: Glasgow Herald/Evening Times

We met in a Glasgow newsroom seven years later, and soon afterwards he suggested we take a look at what was then, by some margin, the city's shabbiest, poorest and most unruly council estate: [Blackhill](#), built in the 1930s as a ghetto for what Glasgow corporation considered its "undesirable" tenants. The Herald (then the Glasgow Herald) had no tradition of such stories; its news came out of council chambers, official statistics, law courts, kirk sessions, trade unions, universities, chambers of commerce and the order books of heavy engineering, leaving little room for enterprising pieces of social observation. Nevertheless, Kenneth was given the go-ahead, and on a pleasant summer's evening we went by office car to the entrance (ghetto is no exaggeration) to Blackhill.

Almost immediately, the unusual sight of a big black car and two young men with notebooks attracted a crowd of the kind of scruffy kids that the painter [Joan Eardley](#) made her speciality – similar but wilder. Inside the estate no other cars could be seen. We went to a few houses that stank of urine and old mattresses, where tenants showed us how they had connected the separate households in the terrace by "knocking through" doors in their basement walls, so that a wanted man could escape if the police came calling.

The crowd around us grew larger, older and more boisterous – we'd become an event – and I remember wanting to get out. But Kenneth remained calm, sympathetic and, above all, inquisitive: qualities that were also prominent in the piece he wrote about our visit, which 50 years later he mistakenly remembered me as writing when every word was his.

During that half-century, he married and had children; moved to a Victorian villa inconveniently located in the uplands south of Edinburgh; began a magazine devoted to the theatre, which ran out of money; joined the BBC as a radio reporter and then moved into the role of TV presenter; and returned to newspapers as a TV critic and (at the Observer) a reporter who roved around Britain describing the scenes and people he encountered. He won awards and wrote a book or two. These are all fine things to have grown from the foundations of the Bonnybridge Notes, but perhaps his greatest achievement was the Scottish Review, which he founded in 1995 as an "independent quarterly of topical essays, biography, contemporary history and travel" and in the

next decade took online, where it became more mischievous and more frequent.

Today it publishes the most eclectic and interesting journalism in Scotland, thanks to Kenneth's fearless (and sometimes fearsome) independence. He has stood apart from the Scottish establishment in all its forms – artistic, social, unionist and nationalist – and owes few people any favours. I have never been sure of his politics – oppositional may be the word – but there has never been any question over his gifts as a writer or his willingness to investigate injustice, particularly towards the young.

And yet he isn't much noticed. In Scottish terms he has remained stubbornly provincial, with a little office that overlooks the runway at Prestwick airport and a house nearby in Ayrshire. We have always kept in touch, but we last met about 25 years ago. Annual promises to meet for lunch at Nardini's fish and chip place in Largs were never fulfilled, the brown sauce and salt never shared.

How will he be now? Anyone who has experienced a serious foreboding about their health, that thing called "a scare", will have an inkling. The world, the big world of events, shrinks to a small arena of personal terror; but then, this being merely "a scare", it expands again with relief to its previous size. But say instead there comes what Kenneth, quoting Michael Morpurgo, calls "an unwelcome diagnosis"? The void beckons.

In his farewell editorial, he promises to replace newspapers with books. Hemingway, Joyce, Chekhov, Simenon, Seneca and [Aurelius](#) all get a mention, and among English writers a "grumpy essay" by Priestley is preferred to all of Orwell: "I think I'm through with Orwell." Typically, there's "a forgotten novel by an almost forgotten Scottish novelist": James Kennaway's *The Cost of Living Like This*, which tells the story of a dying man. May he have a long time to read all of them.

"The world of the dying is different," wrote the Irish novelist John McGahern, close to the end of his life. "When well, they may have sometimes wondered in momentary fear or idle apprehension what this time would bring, the shape it would take, whether by age or accident, stroke or cancer ... the list is long. Then, that blinding fear could be dismissed as idle introspection, an impairment to the constant alertness needed to answer all the demands of the day. Inevitably, the dreaded and discarded time arrives and has its own shape: suddenly the waitress pouring coffee at tables, the builder laying blocks, a girl opening a window, the men collecting refuse, belong to a world that went mostly unregarded when it was ours but now becomes a place of unobtainable happiness ..."

There is a Blackhill far away. Two young men with notebooks get out of a car and into the world of events. The year is 1966.

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