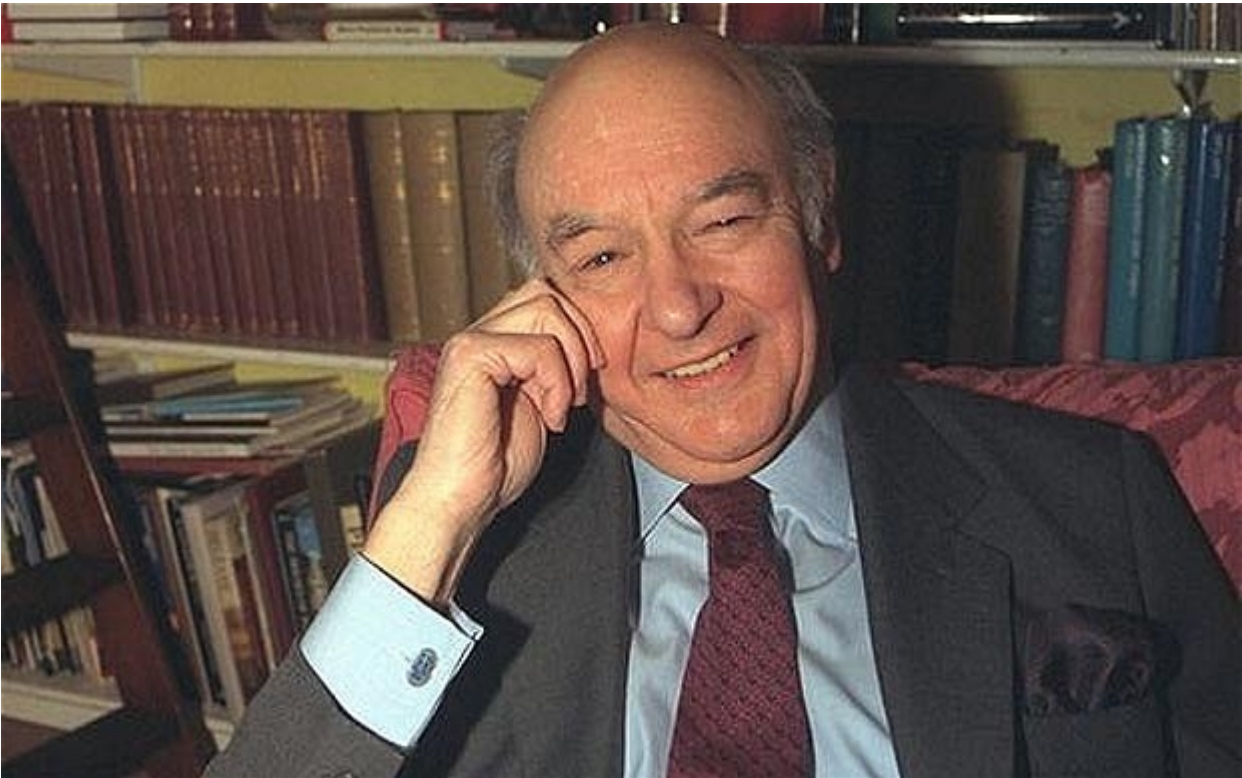


# Kenneth Rose - obituary

**Kenneth Rose was a Telegraph columnist who chronicled the Establishment with wit, style and occasional asperities**



Kenneth Rose Photo: ERIC ROBERTS

Kenneth Rose, who has died aged 89, had an unrivalled reputation as a chronicler of the Establishment; he was also a fine historian, combining insight and scholarship with an attractive prose style.

“Albany at Large”, the social diary he wrote over four decades in *The Sunday Telegraph*, dealt almost exclusively with the doings and sayings of the people of rank in whose orbit Rose liked to move — royalty and nobility, senior politicians, diplomats and academics. “Gossip column”, though, was a term that Rose firmly rejected.

Inevitably, perhaps, the contrast between the world in which Rose had grown up — his father was a GP in Yorkshire — and the comparatively exalted company he kept in adult life attracted a fair measure of mockery, mixed with envy. In waspish circles he was sometimes known as “Climbing Rose”.

But Kenneth Rose’s gifts as a stylist — and his sharpness of tone when he felt it necessary — kept his Albany column as free of sycophancy as was possible for a diarist writing about people whom he expected to meet again. He did not hesitate to offer a rebuke if he felt that someone’s behaviour had fallen short of his exacting standards of public behaviour; and, such was his stature as a commentator, it would generally be taken on the chin.

When Lord Charteris, formerly the Queen’s Private Secretary, let slip to a journalist his opinion that the Duchess of York was “vulgar, vulgar, vulgar”, Rose’s reprimand was lofty: “It is not for a retired royal servant, whether lord-in-waiting or footman (and they are all much of a muchness in the Queen’s sight), to write an end-of-term report on members of the Royal family.” It said something

for the good nature of both men that their friendship was not interrupted.

Besides his published diary, Rose also kept a private journal which is certain to be of value to historians in the future. He knew a great deal more about his subjects than ever appeared in Albany, and night after night he recorded — with their knowledge — material which for various reasons had to be kept in the dark.

The range of his friendships among the great and the good, his writing skills and his powers of observation are likely to make him the Thomas Creevey of the 20th century when the journal is finally published.

As a historian, Rose wrote several books, notably *Superior Person: a portrait of Curzon and his circle in late Victorian England* (1969), and *King George V* (1983), which won three awards — the Wolfson for history, and the Whitbread and Yorkshire Post awards for biography.

Kenneth Vivian Rose was born into a Jewish family on November 15 1924 and grew up at Shipley, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where his father ran his practice. From Repton he won a scholarship to New College, Oxford, but soon after taking up his place he left in 1943 to join the Welsh Guards.

Before his posting to an active service battalion, Rose had a narrow escape when the Guards' Chapel received a direct hit from a German flying bomb. He and a fellow ensign had been given unofficial leave for the weekend, and, instead of returning to Wellington Barracks to attend chapel on the Sunday evening, they decided to splash the wartime maximum of five shillings on dinner at Claridge's. As they sat down, the head waiter told them that the Guards' Chapel had been demolished; 121 Guardsmen, relations and friends were killed.

In 1945 Rose was attached to Phantom, GHQ Regiment, whose job was to supply commanders-in-chief with information direct from the battlefield.

After the war he returned to Oxford to complete his degree. He shared a staircase in an annexe of New College with two future eminences, both of whom were to renounce hereditary peerages: the historian John Grigg, and the Labour politician Tony Benn, then Anthony Wedgwood Benn.

At Oxford, Rose had the maturity of a war veteran, but it was in character for him to be star-struck by Lord Curzon, who had been Viceroy of India during the Edwardian era and later Foreign Secretary. The combination of brains, lineage and high office was everything Rose admired, and the essay on his hero which he delivered to the Canning Club was entirely uncritical. Even his later biography of Curzon, good though it was, would probably have been even better if written 10 years on, when Rose had come to see Curzon in the round.

Attracted to the bright world, Kenneth Rose was determined to become part of it, despite his lack of money and connections. After Oxford, he taught history at Eton, where one of his pupils was Douglas Hurd. But schoolmastering, even at Eton, was limiting for one of Rose's ambitions. London was the magnet, and in 1952 he joined the Peterborough column of *The Daily Telegraph*.

In 1961 he began his long spell as diarist on the newly-formed *Sunday Telegraph*. From that moment his journalistic life centred on an endless round of invitations to grand events, high tables and country houses. Much of his knowledge came from the Beefsteak, where he dined with figures such as Harold Macmillan and Harold Nicolson.

From his contact with men and women in public life he extracted enough material to titillate that world without offending it. The Albany column was sometimes geyed as a puff for the Establishment, but it was saved from unctuousness by Rose's wit, style and occasional asperities. Fleet Street had nothing else like it.



Kenneth Rose: he was invited to grand events, high tables and country houses

A typical item told of the Pol Roger drunk by Correlli Barnett and his staff at the Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, to celebrate the acquisition of Sir Winston's papers with an endowment. Rose noted that while the 1995 price of Pol Roger was £60 a bottle, a bill in the archives showed that in 1908 Churchill paid £4 16s a case. The story had several of Rose's favourite themes — a great name, university matters, purchasing power through the ages, and enjoyment of the good things of life.

Rose's reputation as a historian grew steadily. Three years after *The Later Cecils* (1975) came a monograph on William Harvey, discoverer of the circulation of the blood (as a doctor's son, Rose had an informed amateur's interest in medicine).

He followed up the success of *King George V* with a royal potboiler in 1985: *Kings, Queens and Courtiers*, intimate sketches of the House of Windsor and its adherents, could have been embarrassing but for Rose's inside knowledge and his combination of fairness and candour. To write about living royal personages as an insider is to enter treacherous waters, and a friend congratulated him on "navigating so cleverly between the Scylla of sycophancy and the Charybdis of crabbiness".

Unencumbered by wife and family, Rose was able to live the life of a man-about-town, seldom dining at home. He was a frequent guest of the Royal family, who appreciated his gift for wearing his learning lightly. He shared a love of music with the Duke of Kent, whom he would accompany to classical concerts. But however much Rose enjoyed the *haut monde* and made himself at home in it, he never lost a radical streak. He had a Whiggish attitude towards his royal hosts and would criticise their lapses when he thought fit.

Severe on anything that he thought smacked of injustice, he was also scrupulously fair. When, for instance, TS Eliot was criticised long after his death for the anti-Semitic sentiments he had expressed before the war, the historian in Rose was irritated by the application of post-Holocaust judgments to an earlier time.

Rose numbered several prominent members of the Anglo-Jewish community among his friends, and the 3rd Lord Rothschild chose him to be his biographer. Scientist, intelligence man and grandee, Victor Rothschild was a subject right up Kenneth Rose's street. The book, *Elusive Rothschild*, was published in 2003.

Although Rose's researches into Victor Rothschild's domestic life caused him to temper his admiration for his late friend, his generosity of spirit generally made him see the best in the people he wrote about.

He showed the same generosity in his readiness to help younger writers. His careful corrections, involving the blue-pencilling-out of many a superfluous adjective, always improved the text. He himself maintained an exceptionally high standard as a writer; but while his private journal remains unpublished it is safe to say that the best is yet to come.

In appearance, Rose was short and bald, and would have blended well into a crowd of elderly Japanese. His personality was characterised by high intelligence, good humour and integrity. Conversations with him on the telephone, however friendly, would end suddenly as he put down the receiver without saying “Goodbye”.

Kenneth Rose was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and was appointed CBE in 1997.

**Kenneth Rose, born November 15 1924, died January 28 2014**

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