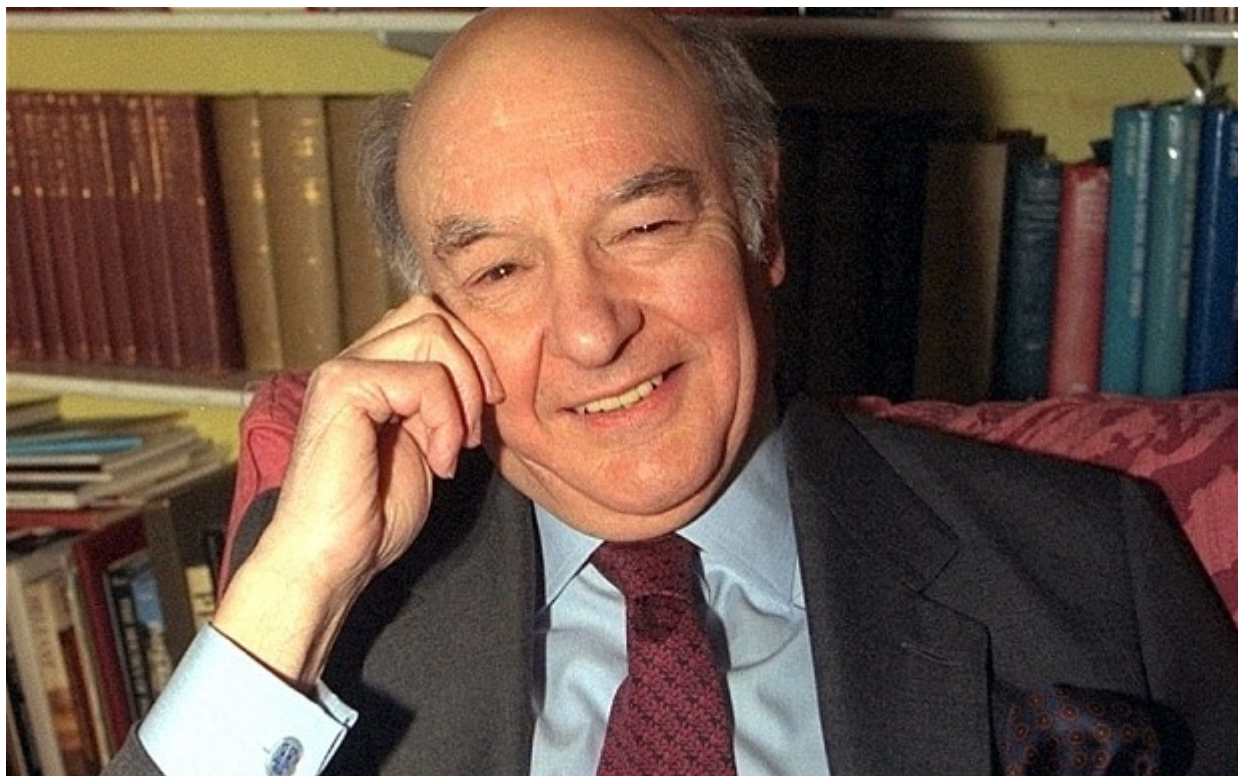


Kenneth Rose: we'll miss his wit, warmth and wry sense of humour

An affectionate tribute to Kenneth Rose, the Telegraph's much-loved diarist, who died last week



Man of many words: Telegraph diarist and historian Kenneth Rose Photo: ERIC ROBERTS FOR THE TELEGRAPH

By William Shawcross

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Kenneth Rose was a joy to his many friends. His wit was superb and his jokes were never-ending. He made us laugh until we wept. His memory was astonishing; he could recall what people were wearing 40 years ago, as well as knowing exactly what they had said (or whispered) to him. It's all in his notes.

He was one of the greatest fixtures of the Telegraph – first on the daily paper's Peterborough column and then, from 1961, with his own column, Albany, on the new Sunday Telegraph.

This was sometimes mocked as the house diary of the Establishment, but it was always enlivened by his irony, his turn of phrase, and his understanding of his remarkable contacts and friends – at any time these always included princes, prime ministers, banking titans, scholars, permanent secretaries, artists, writers, doctors and scoundrels.

In his lifetime, Kenneth was also a distinguished historian, writing biographies of Curzon, George V and Victor Rothschild. But he may now become better known after his death for his diaries.

These are six million words long. They cover all the decades, indeed, almost all the days from his

time at Oxford in the Forties to his death last week aged 89.

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Each one was written in his tiny, precise handwriting. He never tried to master a typewriter, let alone a computer.

I think these journals, to be edited by the distinguished historian DR Thorpe, are likely to be the most detailed, amusing and accurate account ever of the post-war world of the English Establishment, which he chronicled principally for The Daily and Sunday Telegraph for decades.

I am lucky that since the Sixties, Kenneth was a close friend of my family; he was always a welcome, if sometimes pernicky, guest at our home. Like scores of others, he helped me to write better.

Born the son of a Yorkshire doctor, he joined the Welsh Guards in the war, and at Sandhurst he met Matthew Ridley who protected the diminutive Rose from bullying.

Ridley recalled a wonderful moment in summer 1944 when they spent an afternoon together in Hampshire “and sat on a hill just looking at England. Christ, it was beautiful... It was harvest time and a full summer afternoon with great white castles of clouds in the air and grasshoppers and butterflies in the hay. We just sat on this hill and listened to the church bells. I suppose it must have been Sunday, and God it was hell leaving”.

But leave they did, like so many millions of young men and women, to fight to protect that which they loved.

His love of Britain, and his fascination with the quirkiness of its rulers, informed almost everything Kenneth ever wrote. After the war he attended New College, Oxford, and met on his staircase Anthony Wedgwood Benn. Kenneth was very impressed by the diligence with which Benn kept a diary, and resolved to do the same. I venture that his diaries will be a little more fun than those of Benn.

Then began Kenneth’s long decades on the Telegraph – decades in which he got to know thousands of people and probably never forgot one of them.

When he began his Albany column, he took on young assistants and was both kind and tough with them, always demanding not only total accuracy, but also perfect writing. He had a passion for quality – he chose words with the dedication of a weaver selecting the threads for an Aubusson tapestry.

Of course, he was snobbish and loved to collect gossip (and more serious stories) about the famous and the rich, but he wrote for accuracy not for malice. One of his young disciples remembers criticising a politician for alleged cowardice in the war. Kenneth rounded on him and said, “Never judge anyone in battle unless you have been there, too”.

His first book, *Superior Person: A Portrait of Curzon and his Circle in Late Victorian England*, was widely acclaimed when it was published in 1969. Kenneth luxuriated in Curzon’s glamour, his brilliance and his high offices, which included Viceroy of India and foreign secretary.

His *Later Cecils* (1975) added to his reputation as a historian. It contained chapters on each of the children of Lord Salisbury, the prime minister, and gave extraordinary portraits of one of the most significant families in English history.

Most important was his 1983 biography, *King George V*, which won the Wolfson and Whitbread prizes. It was witty and warm and more rounded than Harold Nicolson's official biography of the gruff king. Nicolson thought the king a bore, devoted only to shooting game and collecting stamps. But Kenneth Rose saw the founder of the Windsor dynasty as "a man of shrewd sense and salty humour who, without seeking popularity, became the best loved of British sovereigns".

The biography also revealed for the first time how, in 1917, the king persuaded his government to deny asylum to his much-loved cousin, Tsar Nicholas – a decision that resulted in the murder of the tsar and his family by the Bolsheviks.

This grim story Rose called "perplexing" and "wholly out of character", explicable only in terms of the king's fear of the republicanism that swept across Europe towards the end of the First World War. George V was frightened that if he became identified with tsarist autocracy, his own throne might also be swept away.

Thus Kenneth showed that however much he enjoyed the company of the Royal family, he was no sycophant as a historian. He was a Whig not a Tory.

The book no doubt displeased some at the Palace. Kenneth laughed often at the comment of his friend Martin Gilliat, the Queen Mother's private secretary, who told him that his chances of an honour from the Queen "have just floated out to 20-1".

In 1985, he published *Kings, Queens and Courtiers*. This has been dismissed in some obituaries as "a potboiler" or "a lesser royal book". Yet it contains lively and wonderfully informed pen portraits of, in his words, "Lord chamberlains and ladies of the bed chamber, doctors and lawyers, secretaries and chaplains... cooks and couturiers; tutors and gamekeepers and racehorse trainers... Nor have the black sheep been forgotten: a blackmailer and a gambler, an embezzler and spy".

Kenneth called it "a self-indulgent book" that he hoped would add a footnote or two to history. Indeed it does – it is invaluable for anyone interested in the progress of the constitutional monarchy in the 20th century.

He remained close to many members of the Royal family all his life. Every year he would send the Queen Mother flowers on her wedding anniversary. Every year she wrote to thank him and he treasured all her letters.

Among his closest friends was the Duke of Kent. Last week, when the duke heard that Kenneth was in a coma and dying, he went straight to the hospital; he was the last of his friends to say goodbye.

Kenneth's last subject for a biography was Victor Rothschild. The scientist, intelligence man and government adviser had been a close friend of Kenneth, as was his son Jacob, and this must have made the story of a complex man hard to write. None the less, the book, *Elusive Rothschild*, abounded with Kenneth's usual eye for detail and panache.

He wrote about Rothschild's generous gifts of cases of Château Lafite to his friends. The cases were accompanied by his lordship's precise instructions on how the wine should be stored and served. Rose commented, "Without such guidance, he seemed to imply, his bounty might be drunk straight from the bottle, shaken up until it foamed, or even boiled in a saucepan. One sentence of the decree, however, was both wise and welcome: 'The absolute maximum number of people allowed to drink a bottle of Lafite 1945 at a meal is two.'"

He was sensitive to slights, often imagined, but he could be cajoled back to happiness – and wittiness. He lived alone – and simply – in Notting Hill, and in later years when I visited him, there was often nothing but a few cold pork pies in the house – sustenance while he continually polished and perfected his six million words so that every one should glitter.

He never married and was always generous to friends in need, giving them thousands of pounds if they were in dire straits. He became more crotchety as he became more ill with various cancers, but his neighbours, the postman and the milkman – and especially his long-serving Eritrean maid – were devastated when he died last Tuesday.

Even after cancer struck him, he would still take people out to meals at Le Gavroche. His god-daughter Mary (daughter of his wartime friend, Matthew Ridley) recalls a recent lunch at which his stories were so entertaining that the couple at the next table stopped talking to listen to him. That was a very good decision on their part.