

George Stephenson Browne

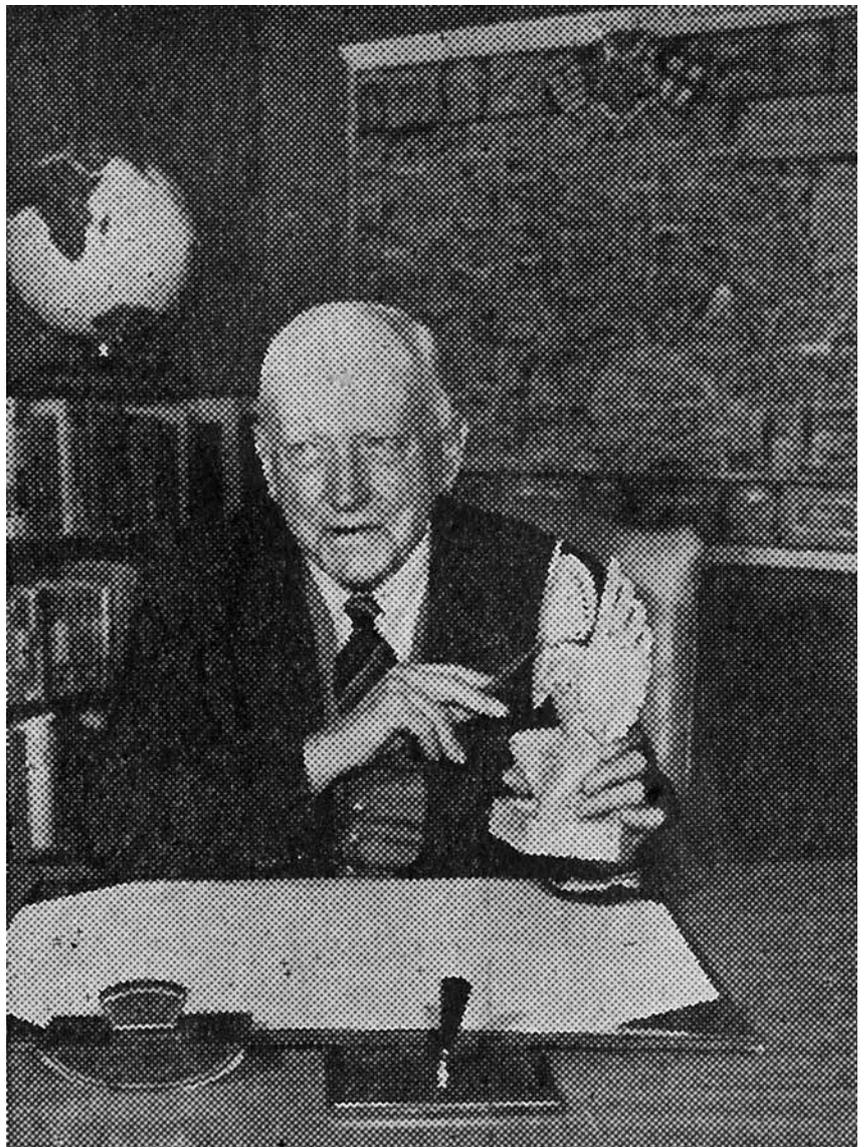
A most unlikely TV star

Derham Groves

Tee Vee at sixty

From the late 1920s, Australians were eagerly anticipating television. But one thing or another—including World War II—delayed its introduction until 1956. Australia's first TV station was TCN-9 in Sydney, which went to air on 16 September 1956, while Melbourne's first was HSV-7, first broadcasting on 4 November the same year.¹

Tee Vee at sixty is an exhibition at the University of Melbourne's Baillieu Library, marking the 60th anniversary of television in Australia. On display from 2 August 2016 to 30 January 2017, the exhibition is spread over several floors of the library building. It includes display cases of items relating to *The Mickey Mouse Club*, the hit US children's show produced by Walt Disney and telecast on HSV-7; *The Tarax show*, a popular, locally produced, children's TV show sponsored by Tarax soft drinks and telecast on GTV-9, the third TV station on the air in Melbourne (19 January 1957); and TV westerns like *Gunsmoke*, *Have gun—will travel*, *Maverick* and *The Virginian*, which were some of the most popular shows during the 1950s and '60s. Another display case looks at TV dining, to illustrate just how much television influenced everyday life in Australia, while the last is about



Previous page: George Stephenson Browne presenting an episode of *Professor Browne's study*. Collection of Derham Groves.

Below: A dog with its head in a rubbish bin, photograph. Box 13, 1976.0050, General Television Corporation Pty Ltd (GTV-9) 1955–1974, University of Melbourne Archives, courtesy the Nine Network.

TV knitting—the novel concept that saved knitting as a pastime from the onslaught of television.

Also in the exhibition are two vintage TV sets, each showing more than 500 black-and-white images of events, people and places that were originally used to illustrate stories on GTV-9 news bulletins between the late 1950s and early 1970s. The University of Melbourne Archives' entire GTV-9 News Department photographic collection consists of around 2,500 images of all sorts of things that captured the attention

of the TV-viewing public, especially during the turbulent 1960s.² They range from the Vietnam War to a dog with its head in a rubbish bin.

From 1956 until 1966, Australian homemaking experts, interior designers and manufacturers of household products wanted to make watching television as effortless as possible. In the exhibition is a mock-up of a 1960s living room, which features locally made period furniture and other items, including a TV set made by Astor, a TV antenna by Hills (of rotary clothesline fame),

a TV lamp by RiteLite, a TV chair by Fler, and a TV tray by Willow.

Also on display is a portrait of George Stephenson Browne (1890–1970), professor of education at the University of Melbourne from 1933 to 1956 and dean of the Faculty of Education, which was painted in 1970 by Melbourne artist Nornie Gude (Eleanor Constance Gude, 1915–2002; see p. 17). In 1957, at 66 years of age, Professor Browne became a most unlikely TV star. What follows here is an account of his surprising second career.

A TV star is born

In 1953 Professor Browne spent several months at Portland State University in Oregon, to observe the effects of television on American society.³ While over there he did two telecasts about Australia: *The land that time forgot* and *Introducing Australia*.⁴ One thing that impressed him was the trouble the TV producers took to tell an interesting story. Recalling the latter telecast upon his return to Australia, he told the *Melbourne Age*:

[They] prepared the necessary maps, charts and pictures, and actually sent some photographers to take movies of Australian animals and birds in the New York zoo.

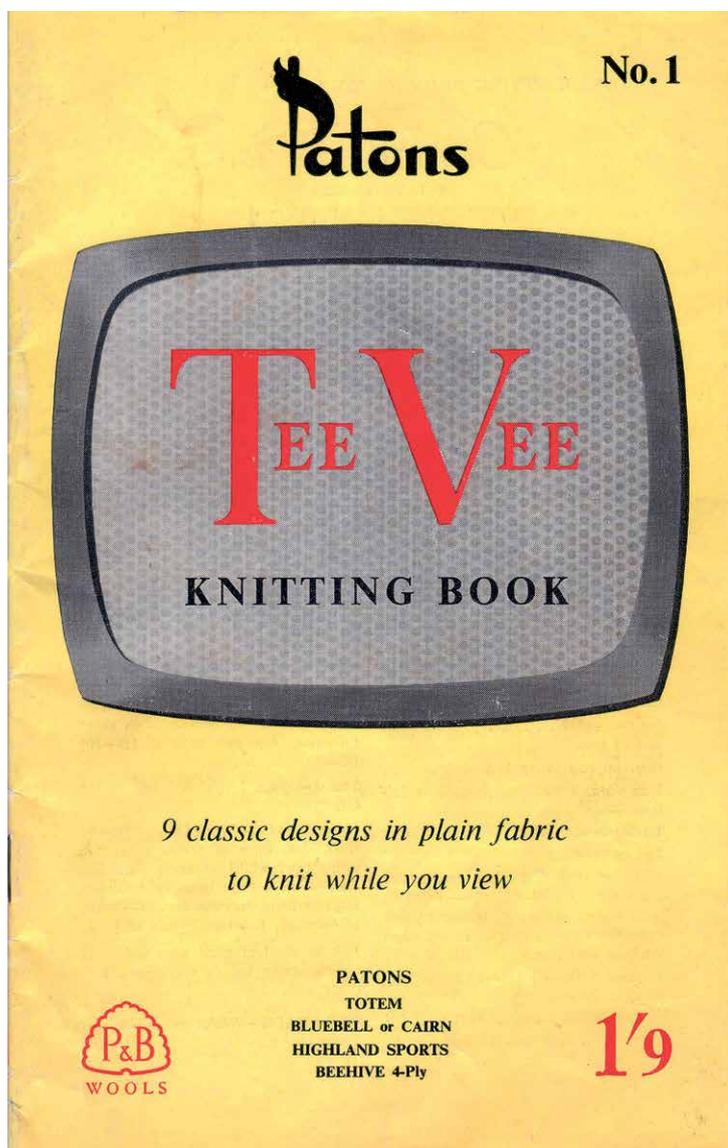


These were to appear for only a few seconds during the talk, but it was essential that they should be life-like and not just still pictures.⁵

While presenting *Introducing Australia* Professor Browne also experienced some of the pitfalls of doing a live-to-air telecast. When he told the studio audience, which consisted mostly of American high school students, that in Australia some merino rams were worth as much as 2,000 guineas each, to everybody's amusement one boy asked him: 'How much is that in REAL money?'⁶ And when a map of New South Wales accidentally fell onto the studio floor, 'an attractive girl in the front row dashed out, saying: "I'll pick it up and put it back". Then, giving [Professor Browne] a friendly push, [she told him to] "go on with the talk".'⁷

Since the introduction of television in Australia was only three years away, people back here were eager to hear what Professor Browne thought about the exciting new medium. His verdict was that:

television is an instrument with tremendous potentialities, both for education and for entertainment. Its influence will depend on how it is organised and controlled ...



Opposite: Nornie Gude (Eleanor Constance Gude), *Professor George Stephenson Browne*, 1970, oil on canvas, 110.3 × 88.3 cm. 1970.0255, commissioned by Melbourne Teachers' College 1970, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

If television is used for political propaganda or for partial representation of any question, it can be most dangerous, for the visual image is much more potent than radio which, after television, seems so impersonal. And if the standard of taste in entertainment and advertising is low, a playing down to the community, TV can be a menace. But ... if its administrators have a definite sense of responsibility to the community, it can be a wonderful educational medium without the word 'education' ever being mentioned. It will not affect the schools very much, but its real work will be done with the community generally.⁸

As rounded as Professor Browne's assessment of television was, some of his other observations about it were rather quaint, to say the least: 'Thousands of American husbands came home to Waldorf-Astoria class dinners because of good instructional television programmes to housewives', he excitedly told the *Adelaide Advertiser*. 'The French chef of the famous hotel regularly conducted cooking sessions shortly before tea-time. Hundreds of thousands of lucky husbands go home to the same menu. The one

I particularly remember was that of mushroom omelette.'⁹

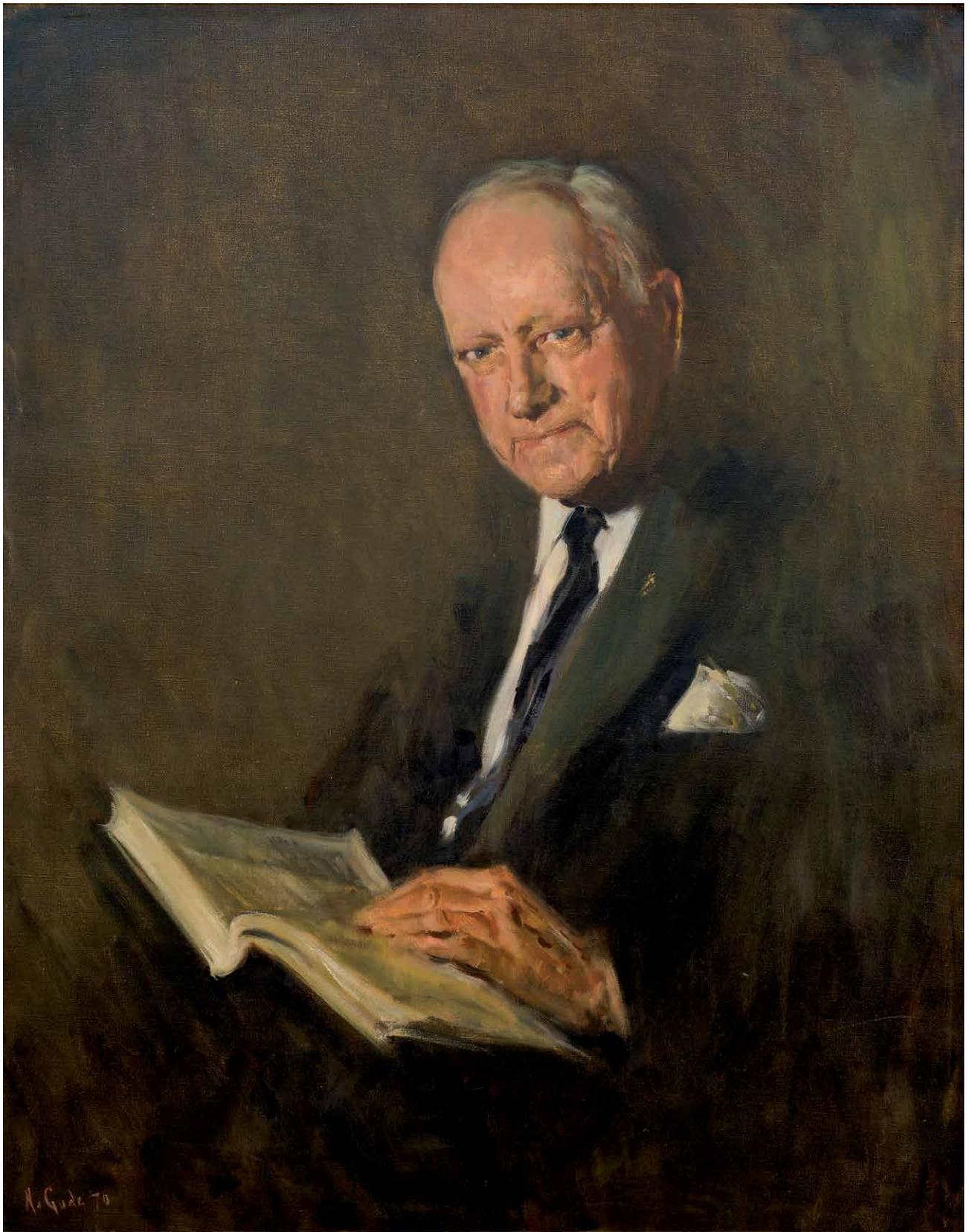
Following his American trip Professor Browne became *the* local authority on television. He wrote a series of articles for *The Age*, titled 'The screen in the home',¹⁰ wrote 'Television: Friend or enemy?' for the literary journal *Meanjin*,¹¹ and lectured on television around Victoria.¹² The Melbourne *Herald* invited him to write on his favourite topic—the effects of television on education—for a handbook on television.¹³ And an enterprising member of the Portland (Victoria) High School debating team tried to pick his brain on the topic 'Television will be a benefit to Australia'.¹⁴ As the introduction of television in Australia grew nearer, Professor Browne was in more and more demand to speak and write about it.

Professor Browne's own Faculty of Education was also doing research on television, such as conducting a survey for the Australian Broadcasting Control Board on the 'before and after' effects of television on families.¹⁵ But it was easy to get carried away by the hype surrounding television, and even Professor Browne was sceptical about some of the work that his faculty was doing. For instance, he told an American colleague that:

Mr. [Newman] Rosenthal [1898–1986, head of the Visual Aids Department, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne] has dashed off to London and Paris with the idea of gathering a lot of equipment and setting up a jury of TV enquiry at the University, whereby, as far as I can tell, intending advertisers can come along and see whether their projected TV advertisements are likely to be successful. How he managed to sell this to the University I don't know! For the life of me I can't see how it is going to work when there is, as yet, no TV. I suggested that he get a real expert out from America to manage the situation, but I am afraid he was rather hurt by the suggestion.¹⁶

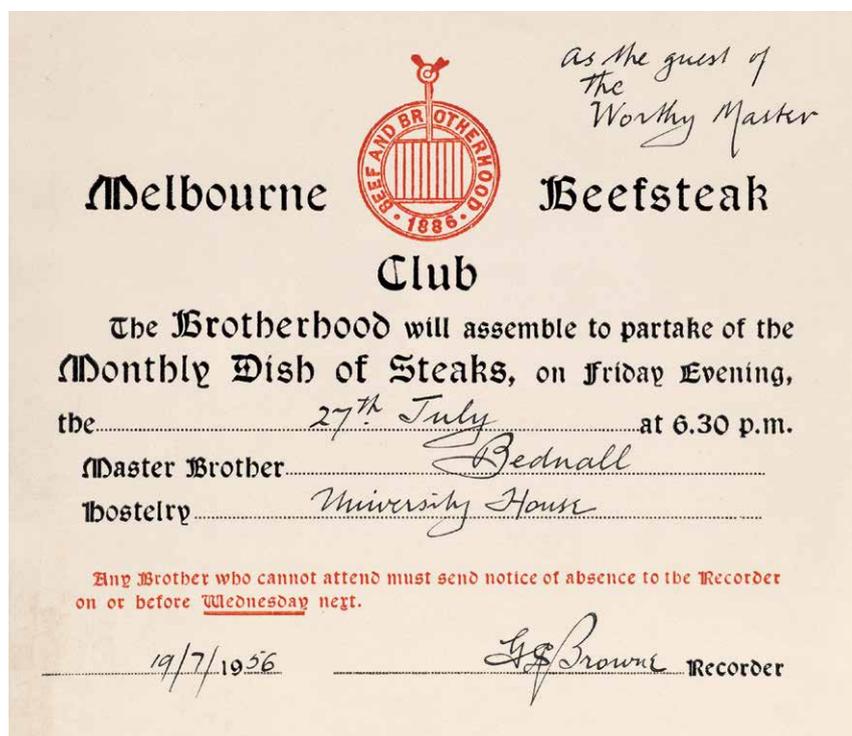
A friend in high places

Colin Bednall (1913–1976), the newly appointed managing director of GTV-9, was a friend of Professor Browne. They were both members of the Melbourne Beefsteak Club, which met once a month for dinner at University House, and of course they were both interested in television. At the club's meeting on 27 July 1956, Browne was the 'Recorder' (secretary) and Bednall was the 'Brother Master' (chairman). Television was no doubt



Derham Groves, 'George Stephenson Browne'

Invitation to the Melbourne Beefsteak Club's dinner on 27 July 1956. Box 9, 1975.0099, George Stephenson Browne (1954–1958), University of Melbourne Archives.



discussed, because Bednall's guest that evening was C.L. Faudell, the founder and president of the Television Society of Australia.¹⁷ 'I should like to congratulate you on last Friday's meeting', Browne told Bednall. 'It was a very good evening and the discussion was excellent. I have written up the records as well as I can—there was such a lot of gathering in from so many participants.'¹⁸ Browne noted that

Bednall 'introduced his own guest, paying a tribute to Mr. Faudell's world-wide knowledge of Television and to the contribution he was making in Australia'.¹⁹

Professor Browne retired from the University of Melbourne at the end of 1956. Given that he would now have time on his hands, he wanted to get involved in the fledgling television industry. Of course Bednall was well placed to help him. He suggested that

Browne might join the board of the General Television Corporation Pty Ltd, which owned GTV-9. Browne was chuffed and told an American colleague: 'I've been offered a directorship on the board of one of the commercial television companies and I think that might be quite an interesting post from which to bring some influence to bear on the programmes'.²⁰

But Browne had spoken too soon. Having received no official word about the directorship after several weeks, he wrote to Sir Arthur Warner (1899–1966), the chairman of the General Television Corporation:

A few weeks ago an associate of yours [i.e. Colin Bednall] telephoned me to ask whether I would allow my name to be submitted to the Australian Broadcasting Control Board as a possible member of the board of the television company which you are organising. I gave the matter some consideration and agreed, but since then have heard no more ... At the end of this year I retire from the Chair of Education at the University and would be able to give a considerable amount of time to this new and fascinating medium.

BROWNE, George Stephenson, M.C., M.A. Oxon., Melb., Dip.Ed. Oxon., Lond., Melb., Professor of Education Univ. of Melb. 1934-56, Emeritus Professor since 1956; Commentator and Lecturer GTV9, Melbourne, since 1957; son of G. Browne, Northumberland, Eng.; b. May 8, 1890, Malvern, Vic.; *ed.* Melb. High Sch., Univ. Melb., Oxford, Lond.; World War I 1915-18; M.I.D., M.C.; Oxford Traveling Scholarship in Educ. America & Germany 1922; V-Princ. Melb. Teachers' Coll. 1922-33; Lectr. R.A.A.F. Staff Sch. in Public Speaking 1942-55, & to R.A.A.F. on Modern Techniques in Instruction; TV Commentator on current affairs; *publications*, The Case for Curriculum Revision 1932, Modern World Geographies (4 vols. co-author) 1934, The Making of an Instructor 1943; *m.* Feb. 15, 1923, Rosalind T. (died 1938), d. A. W. Malcolm, 1 d.; *recreations*, tennis, golf; *clubs*, Melbourne, Naval & Military, Legacy; *address*, 50 The Avenue, Parkville, Vic.

George Stephenson Browne's entry from *Who's who* in 1965. Joseph A. Alexander (comp. & ed.), *Who's who in Australia* (18th edn), 1965, Melbourne: Colorgravure Publications, 1965, p. 130.

... The reason for writing to you is to enquire whether my nomination to your company is a reality, as other possibilities are on the horizon. I would like to work with your organisation, but at the same time I would like to be in a position to make some real contribution to the advancement of television ... You must be very busy, and I should not have written had it not been that the situation seemed a little vague and I wanted to work out my programme for next year.²¹

One of Professor Browne's 'other possibilities on the horizon' was an invitation from C.R. Bull, director of youth education at the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), to do a series of radio broadcasts for upper-primary and lower-secondary school children on current events, titled *The world we live in*.²² Professor Browne had previously done some similar broadcasts for the ABC on topics that included 'More about Nigeria' and 'Trouble in Cyprus', which had gone down well with Bull.²³ 'Congratulations on the first broadcast, which was an extremely interesting one and should have held your audience throughout', Bull told Browne. 'You handled very skillfully the somewhat difficult

question of independence within the Commonwealth of Nations. Teachers of course may have had some awkward questions afterwards as to why the British were fighting Cyprus, etc.'²⁴

Professor Browne's study

After nothing came of Professor Browne's directorship, Colin Bednall met him at the exclusive Melbourne Club (of which both men were members) to discuss 'the possibility of helping or participating in television programs'.²⁵ One idea was for Browne to chair an advisory panel on the effectiveness of news and current affairs programs on GTV-9. Another was for Browne to either help prepare or present a 10-minute summary of weekly news events.

Browne liked Bednall's second idea, because for quite some time he had wanted to do on television something like the ABC radio program *The world we live in*, and had even spoken to 'Disney, MGM and CBS about making a session like this a successful TV unit'.²⁶ He was pleased with the three American studios' 'very helpful suggestions', which focused on the use of a variety of visual aids, such as film clips, a 'living blackboard' and a flannel board for presenting maps and photographs.²⁷

After giving the idea more thought, Browne wrote to Bednall with a concept. He began by summarising several TV programs he had seen in America in 1953—including *Horizons of science*, *How did it happen?* and *So you don't like Shakespeare*—which were potential models for his own session: 'I thought I might be able to organise, or even give, a session like one of these for you, subject to the idea being approved by your Program Director'.²⁸

However, what Browne really wanted to do was to present a segment called:

Countries in the News ... as part of a summarized news of the week session, or independently. Probably about 7 minutes in length and selecting countries which figured prominently in the news of the previous week ... Recent examples that might be treated in this way would be the Riviera countries (Rainier-Kelly wedding), Egypt and the Suez Canal, Chicago (Democratic Convention). A good deal would depend on the availability of relevant pictures and 16 mm films at short notice. I could easily draw suitable maps and I have a fair stock of American stills.²⁹

Sir Arthur Warner, chairman of the General Television Corporation Pty Ltd. Box 33, file W, 1976.0050, General Television Corporation Pty Ltd (GTV-9) 1955–1974, University of Melbourne Archives, courtesy the Nine Network.



Evidently Bednall liked Browne's concept because over the next few months it evolved into *Professor Browne's study*, a five-minute session screened six nights per week at the end of GTV-9's evening news bulletin. *The Argus* reported:

The feature is a departure from the news commentary type of session. Having selected the topic of the day, the Professor will make some comment on it himself and then invite one of his experts to give his views and discuss it with him. If the topic is foreign affairs he will call on men such as Professor Zelman Cowen, Professor of Law, or Associate Professor Norman Harper, of the History Department, Melbourne University. Professor S.D. Rubbo will be available for comments on bacteriological subjects and Professor Sir Samuel Wadham for agriculture. There will be an expert for public health, student affairs, industry, art, and army, navy and air force subjects.³⁰

The program was called *Professor Browne's study* because Professor Browne presented each session from a faux study at the GTV-9 studios in Richmond, which was furnished with bookshelves, a desk, charts on

the wall, and a world globe. 'I was rather glad of this space to clear some of my shelves at home', he told *Age* reporter Neil Jillet. 'People are always pinching my books to use on other sets, and they aren't always put back tidily. We had the dummies [fake wooden books] made so that one row at least would be presentable to the camera.'³¹ The title of *Professor Browne's study* also cleverly implied a second meaning, 'a brown study' being a state of deep, often melancholy, thought.

The producer of *Professor Browne's study* was Denzil Howson (1918–2005).³² Howson worked on a number of live-to-air programs on GTV-9, including *The Tarax show* and *In Melbourne tonight*, the amazingly popular tonight show hosted by Melbourne's biggest TV star, Graham Kennedy (1934–2005). Felt & Textiles of Australia Limited, which manufactured Feltex carpets and Knight's slippers, sponsored *Professor Browne's study*.³³ The fact that such a short session had its own sponsor is an indication of its popularity with viewers and its high standing as an addition to the news bulletin.

Despite taking only five minutes to present, each session of *Professor Browne's study* took six hours to prepare. Jillet reported:

After studying his topic [Professor Browne] trims it down to a few notes and headings. He rehearses all his programmes for time and fluency with his research secretary (Miss Anne Mather) at his home. [Then just before the session finally goes to air] he gives himself another run-through ... while the news is being read.³⁴

Professor Browne told a colleague in the USA:

My retirement has not brought very much leisure with it, for I give a television session every evening except Saturday. Actually there are six each week for Melbourne and three for Sydney and, as each takes several hours to prepare and check, life is even fuller than it was in University days. However, I get a lot of expert help and I am enjoying the experience very much. The session seems to be fairly successful and tonight I give my 547th talk.³⁵

Professor Browne's study was indeed very successful. It was on GTV-9 from week one in 1957 until the mid-1960s, clocking up more than 2,000 sessions and covering an astounding variety of topics. For example, in just one week in 1963 Professor Browne



discussed 'Famous Victorian judges', the 'Island of Malta', 'The rebirth of Coventry', 'Saving the Dandenongs', and the fact that 'Public meetings are difficult in Pretoria'.³⁶ The popularity of *Professor Browne's study* was largely due to its presenter's cheerful, humble and scholarly manner, which Neil Jillet characterised as: 'Well, here's something that has just occurred to me. But I'm interested in it and know quite a bit about it: so perhaps you would like to listen'.³⁷

I dare say that a number of today's public intellectuals could learn a thing or two from a pioneer of their craft—George Stephenson Browne.

Dr Derham Groves teaches architecture at the University of Melbourne and is the curator of the exhibition *Tee Vee at sixty*. He is the author of several articles and books on popular culture, including *TV houses: The influence of television on the Australian home* (2004). Derham is currently working on a history of TV dinners, to be published in 2018 by Rowman & Littlefield.

The exhibition *Tee Vee at sixty* will be on display in the Baillieu Library from 2 August 2016 to 30 January 2017.

- 1 Derham Groves, *TV houses: The influence of television on the Australian home*, Melbourne: Black Jack Press, 2004, pp. 8–10.
- 2 1976.0050, General Television Corporation Pty Ltd (GTV-9) 1955–1974, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 3 'Educationist leaving on world tour', *Age* (Melbourne), 20 April 1953, p. 3.

- 4 G.S. Browne to Colin Bednall, 13 August 1956. Box 9, 1975.0099, George Stephenson Browne (1954–1958), University of Melbourne Archives (hereafter G.S. Browne Collection, UMA).
- 5 Professor G.S. Browne, 'The screen in the home—No. 2: High costs and hard work in television', *Age*, 23 September 1953, p. 2.
- 6 Browne, 'High costs and hard work in television'.
- 7 Browne, 'High costs and hard work in television'.
- 8 G.S. Browne, 'Television: Friend or enemy?', *Meanjin*, vol. 13, no. 2, Winter 1954, pp. 179, 182.
- 9 'Husbands get sumptuous TV dinners', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 July 1954, p. 2.
- 10 Professor G.S. Browne, 'The screen in the home—No. 1: Television: New field for education', *Age*, 22 September 1953, p. 2; 'The screen in the home—No. 2: High costs and hard work in television', *Age*, 23 September 1953, p. 2; 'The screen in the home—No. 3: How television affects family and school', *Age*, 24 September 1953, p. 2.
- 11 Browne, 'Television: Friend or enemy?', pp. 179–82.
- 12 'Television could rival printing—Professor Browne', *Age*, 20 January 1954, p. 2; 'Professor debunks television beliefs', *Argus* (Melbourne), 16 August 1954, p. 5; 'Professor Browne on Sunday', *Camperdown Chronicle*, 20 August 1954, p. 1; Notes for a talk titled 'TV blessing or menace?' in Castlemaine, Victoria, n.d. Box 3, file 5, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 13 G.S. Browne to L.P. Greenhill, 10 June 1955. Box 3, file 5, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 14 John Flowers to G.S. Browne, 17 July 1956. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 15 R.G. Osborne to G.S. Browne, 13 March 1956. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 16 G.S. Browne to L.P. Greenhill, 30 March 1955. Box 3, file 5, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 17 G.S. Browne, 'Records of the 678 Dinner of the Melbourne Beefsteak Club held at University House on the evening of Friday, July 27, 1956'. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 18 G.S. Browne to Colin Bednall, 1 August 1956. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 19 Browne, 'Records of the 678 Dinner'.
- 20 G.S. Browne to L.P. Greenhill, 10 June 1955. Box 3, file 5, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 21 G.S. Browne to Arthur Warner, 4 July 1955. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 22 C.R. Bull to G.S. Browne, 11 September 1956. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 23 G.S. Browne to C.R. Bull, 14 February 1956. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 24 C.R. Bull to G.S. Browne, 10 February 1956. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA.
- 25 G.S. Browne to Colin Bednall, 13 August 1956. Box 9, G.S. Browne Collection, UMA. According to Colin Bednall's nephew, David Bednall, 'Uncle Cog ... loved the incongruity of being a member of the Melbourne Club and running for the ALP'. (David Bednall, email to Derham Groves, 30 November 2015).
- 26 Browne to Bednall, 13 August 1956.
- 27 Browne to Bednall, 13 August 1956.
- 28 Browne to Bednall, 13 August 1956.
- 29 Browne to Bednall, 13 August 1956.
- 30 'These experts will tell us', in *GTV-9 Argus souvenir*, *Argus*, 18 January 1957, p. 4.
- 31 Neil Jillet, 'He uses TV as medium for education', *Age*, 28 October 1959, p. 8.
- 32 'Elusive TV personality', *Age*, 27 June 1957, p. 11.
- 33 'Even an elephant's footprint would hardly show on my carpet' (advertisement), *Australian Women's Weekly*, 25 September 1957, p. 14.
- 34 Jillet, 'He uses TV as medium for education'.
- 35 G.S. Browne to Dorothy Howard, 2 May 1958. Childhood Collections, Museum Victoria.
- 36 *TV Week* (Victorian edition), 26 January 1963, pp. 43, 48, 56, 59, 64, 67.
- 37 Jillet, 'He uses TV as medium for education'.