

1956 TELEVISION ARRIVES & THE MELBOURNE OLYMPICS

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The Box

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to television.’ With these eight words spoken into the camera on Sunday, 16 September 1956, a young TCN-9 executive named Bruce Gyngell ushered into Australian living-rooms a new world of entertainment and information — and altered forever the lifestyle of the nation.

For Press baron Frank Packer, it was a moment of triumph to see his station, operating from a makeshift studio in a Sydney suburban church hall, go on air first, although the programs beamed out in stark black-and-white on that historic night were certainly most forgettable: ‘The Johnny O’Connor Show’, ‘Campfire Favourites’, ‘What’s My Line?’, and ‘Accent on Strings’, liberally interspersed with advertisements.

Undoubtedly, it was those not-so-brief advertising interludes which Packer must have remembered best, for they held the golden key to success in the new industry called commercial television.

The earliest public demonstration of television in Australia took place at the studios of the radio station 3UZ in Melbourne on 10 January 1929. But it was a pretty primitive affair, with mechanical scanning able to produce only silhouettes and animated cartoons.

Then, a mere five years later, the country’s first licensed television transmissions took place from an old convict tower in Brisbane.

Starting with a transmitter made of, among other things, pieces of car-tyre inner tube and parts of a Meccano set, pioneers Dr Val McDowell and Tom

Elliot developed techniques to transmit increasingly more sophisticated pictures, but were forced to close down when their licence was revoked with the outbreak of the second World War.

By then various countries, including Britain and the United States, had full-scale television services, and it was generally assumed that Australia would follow suit when the global conflict came to an end. Instead, the whole issue was kicked around the political arena for another ten years.

In 1948 the Australian Broadcasting Control Board recommended that television stations be set up in each State capital.

The Labor Government announced the following year that a national, non-commercial service would be established, but before anything could be done to implement this, Chifley was defeated and replaced as Prime Minister by Menzies.

After various bodies, including a Royal Commission, inquired into the matter, the Government announced late in 1955 that it would introduce a dual system, similar to that of radio broadcasting.

This meant a national service, run by the A.B.C., operating side by side with commercial channels in each State. Media organisations, particularly newspaper owners, were remarkably successful in obtaining the first commercial licences.

Some seven weeks after Packer's Channel Nine went on the air, the A.B.C.'s first station, ABN-2 in Sydney, opened.

Television sets in the early days sold for between £200 and £300, a sub-

stantial sum at the time, but this did not deter about 3000 Sydneysiders determined to watch the first transmission in their own living-rooms.

Another 97 000 were estimated to have watched the first night's production through shop windows, at the homes of more affluent friends, in clubs, and even in town halls.

In Melbourne, where live screening of the Olympic Games was an added attraction, more than 10 000 sets had been installed in private homes by the time transmission began.

By early the following year, Sydney's and Melbourne's four commercial and two national stations were each screening about forty hours of programmes a week.

Although a £5 annual licence fee had been introduced (this was abolished in 1974), the number of set owners grew at such a rate that by mid-1959 over 600 000 licences had been issued.

At that time the most popular programmes were, according to the *TV Times*, 'Mickey Mouse', 'Cheyenne', 'Wells Fargo', 'Gunsmoke', 'Perry Mason', and 'Sunset Strip', while the younger generation wriggled their bodies to the beat of 'Bandstand' and 'Six O'Clock Rock'.

Despite the Government's insistence, through the Broadcasting Control Board, on programs of a 'high standard' with a substantial Australian content and due regard for the needs of children, it was soon obvious that commercial stations were generally dishing up only what would attract the masses. The ratings, not quality, were all that mattered.

Soon, however, the success of A.B.C. productions such as 'Four Corners' and 'This Day Tonight', indicated to commercial stations that current affairs, too, could be a money-spinner.

This resulted in popular programmes like 'Sixty Minutes' and the various Mike Willesee shows. News and sport were important drawcards from the start, providing an opportunity for station identification at a time when a glut of American and British programs made one commercial station seem very much like the other.

The amount of advertising also caused concern early on, but it was not until 1975 that a Tasmanian station was briefly closed down for persistently refusing to reduce its advertising content to an acceptable level.

Nor, in the main, did commercial operators meet the requirements for Australian content laid down by the government. What went on air often was — and still is — soap operas with little, if any, artistic merit.

When colour television was introduced in 1975, there were more than eighty national and about 150 commercial stations in operation which, together with repeater and translator stations, have brought 'the box' within reach of most Australians, even those in remote outback areas.

Despite its shortcomings, television has become the country's main means of entertainment and an important source of news and educational material. More importantly, perhaps, it has helped to demolish the barriers of distance and sparse population to link Australians with each other, and with the world, as never before.

Melbourne hosts the Olympics

For seventeen glorious days in the summer of 1956, Australia was the focal point of world sport as 4500 athletes from sixty-eight countries vied for the cherished Olympic medals in Melbourne.

It was the first time a country outside Europe and the United States had been chosen to host the Games, but Australians poured out extra-liberal helpings of traditional hospitality to prove just how right International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) chief Avery Brundage and his colleagues had been to move the great contest south of the equator.

In competition, too, Australian athletes showed what they could do, and finished third (behind Russia and the United States) with thirteen gold, eight silver, and fourteen bronze medals — still Australia's best Olympic performance.

Australia was one of the founder members of the modern summer Olympics, first staged in Athens in 1896 when twenty-two-year-old runner Edwin H. Flack brought home gold medals for the 800 metre and 1500 metre events. It took more than fifty years, however, before Australia was awarded the right to stage the Games.

From the outset there were many who doubted the country's ability to do so — and for a time it seemed as though they would be proved right. Preparations were so slow (some said non-existent) that in April 1955 Brundage arrived for a personal inspection and warned:

I can tell you that more than ever they would think a mistake has been

made... We would be very embarrassed if we took [the Games] away from Melbourne. I would like to leave Melbourne knowing the job will be done. I say it can be done. But even at this late stage three of four cities would still take the Games.

Melbourne took the hint and speeded up arrangements. But more problems, this time political, continued to mar the Games.

Russian tanks rolled into Hungary to suppress an uprising in a manner which horrified the world. While the 113 Hungarian athletes made their way half-way around the world singly or in pairs, the Netherlands announced its team's withdrawal in protest at the Russian aggression. So did Spain.

Others who refused to attend were Egypt, still smarting over the Suez crisis, because the 'cowardly aggressors' (Britain and France) would be there; Communist China because of Taiwan's presence; and Lebanon, which objected to Australia's attitude towards the Middle East situation.

On Thursday, 22 November 1956, the Duke of Edinburgh officially opened the thirteenth modern Olympiad at a spectacular ceremony watched by a crowd of 103 000 and viewed live by millions more on television.

Four thousand pigeons fluttered into the air; a twenty-one-gun salute thundered out; and Australian miler Ron Clarke carried into the arena at the Melbourne Cricket Ground the Olympic flame which had been brought by air from Greece to Cairns, and then by athletes overland to the Victorian capital.

Australia soon proved her dominance of world swimming by winning every

medal in the men's *and* women's 100 metre freestyle events, as well as earning gold medals in the men's 400 metre freestyle, 1500 metres freestyle, 100 metre backstroke, and 4 x 200 metre relay events, and the women's 400 metre freestyle and 4 x 100 metre freestyle contests.

While the world applauded swimming stars Dawn Fraser, Lorraine Crapp, and Jon Hendricks, young Betty Cuthbert sprinted to victory in the 100 metre and 200 metre events, and Shirley Strickland took a gold for the 80 metre hurdles.

The team of N. Croker, F. Mellor, Cuthbert, and Strickland next set a world record for the 4 x 100 metre women's relay event.

Australia's thirteenth gold medal was won by cyclists I. Browne and A. Marchant in the 2000 metre tandem race.

In water polo the Hungarians took their revenge on the Russians before going on to win the gold medal with the Soviet team taking the bronze.

The Russian distance champion Vladimir Kuts won the admiration of all with his magnificent victory against Briton Gordon Pirie in the 10 000 metre race, considered by many the highlight of the Games.

When the Olympics ended on Saturday, 8 December, forty-six Hungarian athletes chose to remain in Australia. Many among the thousands of competitors, officials, and spectators wept openly as the Olympic flame flared up one last time before going out.

As they gradually made their way home to the four corners of the world,

these men and women took with them greater knowledge and appreciation for the small nation on the huge southern continent. That, perhaps, was the greatest triumph of the Melbourne Olympics: it introduced Australia to the world, and the world to Australia.