

Wide impact of a life begun here

Taranaki produces remarkable people - sons and daughters who spend formative years here, and then go away and change the world. There are few better examples than Bruce MacDonald Brown.

He will be unknown to most of you, but in his lifetime he wielded significant influence over ways New Zealand was perceived by the rest of the globe. He was our eyes and ears in a lot of countries, an adviser to some of our best-known 20th century leaders, and later a theorist and commentator on New Zealand's place in international relations.

Brown – who died in Wellington late last year – was born in New Plymouth in 1930 to carpenter John Albert Brown and his wife, haberdasher/corsetiere Caroline Maria Dorothea (nee Jorgensen). He went to Central School, where he was dux, and thence to New Plymouth Boys High School, excelling in academia and sport, in particular rugby and boxing.

He attended Victoria University in Wellington. He had to pay his own way, so during university holidays, he returned to New Plymouth and worked at the Waitara freezing works, cycling there and back every day.

His thesis for Master of Arts in History covered the early years of the Labour Party and was published in 1962. In an article he wrote in 2007 for the NPBHS 125th jubilee, he recalled to his surprise that it was still being used by Victoria as a textbook.

To aid his thesis research, in 1952 he got a job as assistant private secretary to Walter Nash, then Leader of the Opposition. When Nash's secretary, Geoff Datsun, left in 1955, Brown took over the position, which he filled for five years. The last three were after Labour won election in 1957 and Nash was Prime Minister.

Nash was difficult to organise, Brown remembered, because he kept his own pocket diary and sometimes forgot to tell staff about engagements. He once turned up to the Bata Shoe Club's annual ball thinking he was at the Petone Rugby Club one, and mystified those present with a speech on the moral and physical benefits of rugby.

Brown recalled his time with Nash "greatly diminished" any ambitions to enter politics, so he left in 1959 and began a diplomatic career with the External Affairs Department that lasted until retirement in 1992.

He was married to Edith Irene Raynor of New Plymouth, they had two sons, and had been living in Wellington for several years before undertaking their first overseas posting to Kuala Lumpur in 1960, where Brown served as first secretary until 1962. That was followed by time with the New Zealand Mission to the United Nations in New York between 1963 and 1967, where a daughter was born.

In 1971, the family moved to Canberra, where Brown was deputy high commissioner until 1975. Then he became our first ambassador to Iran until 1978. Next was the role of deputy high commissioner in London from 1981 to 1985, then ambassador to Thailand, Burma, Vietnam and Laos until 1988, and after that high commissioner to Canada.

Irene died during this Canada posting. In a eulogy to his father, son Steve Brown described this as a tragedy in more ways than one: "Dad was a well-educated, urbane, successful man with many talents, (but) living on his own and looking after himself were not among them.

He could espouse theories on foreign policies or political ideologies at the drop of a hat, but was normally defeated by anything more domestically challenging than boiling an egg.”

It was a low time for his father, but he was lucky enough to meet and in 1990 marry Françoise Rousseau, the widow of a Canadian diplomat. Their retirement in Wellington was short-lived, however; Françoise died in 1995. Brown was married a third time in 2006 to Josephine (Jo) Stenning.

Honoured for public service with a Queen’s Service Order in 1998, Bruce Brown ensured his influence on New Zealand foreign affairs lasted well beyond retirement.

He had been a key member of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs since the 1950s, and its first fulltime director from 1969 to 1971. He edited the third volume of ‘New Zealand in World Affairs (1972-1990)’.

He became an institute director again from 1993 to 1997, chairing the institute's research and publications committee. He edited and wrote notable commentary on New Zealand foreign policy in Asia and the Pacific well into the new century.

His life will be celebrated with a memorial service at the capital city's Wellington Club on Tuesday.