

Modest Everyman

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Tim Rowse

Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life

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NUGGET COOMBS never accepted a knighthood. The reason, he told his one-time English teacher, the essayist and academic Sir Walter Murdoch, was that it would be 'out of character' for him to do so.

There is no shortage of calculated modesty in Australian public life. We cultivate it. Even the most self-absorbed of our sporting heroes can manage a spot of winning self-deprecation. But in Nugget Coombs — public thinker, public servant, economist, social reformer, Governor of the Reserve Bank, Aboriginal advocate, cultural initiator and great Australian — modesty was the genuine article. He was a man with enough distilled wisdom to know himself and enough shrewdness to know what fitted. And he was right: 'Sir Herbert', or, worse, 'Sir Bertie' would have been risible. In any case, the man already had unique distinction in his emblematic and most Australian of nicknames. It is telling that Tim Rowse's resolutely discreet and impersonal biography, in which initials are used as a matter of course, should carry as its title simply 'Nugget Coombs'. To name the man any other way would be pedantry. And to explain, as Rowse does, why 'Nugget' is so apposite, is to give a vivid short-hand lesson in Australian history.

That does not mean that Nugget Coombs is best remembered as a fixed quantity, however golden-knobly or estimable. Energy characterised him. So did the ability to look back and forward, to adapt, to change — the man was mercurial as well as nuggety. Coombs had a public career of almost sixty years' duration; he served successfully with men (and occasionally women) who were often radically different from him in both temperament and political stance. By what traits did he manage the necessary accommodation? And why? When you talk to people who knew him well, they often list the requisite qualities and rationale as though revealing a mystery. Rowse quotes one such. Jock Phillips, who was Coombs's successor as Governor of the Reserve Bank, listed the Coombs virtues that only close workmates saw:

the warm humanity of his approach to all problems, his ready sense of humour, his ability to see the central core of a problem through all the superficial complexities, and his energy and inventiveness. He always had on his desk — turned towards himself — a quotation from Cromwell saying 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, to think it possible you may be mistaken'.

(Such a man might run the ABC, even though the Cromwell quotation betrays a certain élitism in the reference frame, and a wobble in the will to win.)

It is intriguing that the author, in introducing Phillips's list, should corral just praise under the rubric of 'virtue'. We don't like such terms any more, so it is all the more telling that it should slip in, all unrepentant, as a heading for the qualities that made the man.

Elsewhere, Tim Rowse's account of his subject is hedged in disclaimer. This is a dense study — 419 pages of text and notes in smallish type — but it does not, Rowse insists, tell the reader what made Nugget Coombs tick. Rowse seeks warrant for this lack by invoking an observation of the Australian philosopher John Passmore, who knew Coombs for over half a century. When asked by Rowse if *he* knew what made Coombs tick, Passmore replied: 'No, I never knew. I just saw him as a series of admirable projects.'

By their works shall ye know them: it may serve as scriptural truism, but it is an odd modesty in a biographer. And it is an even odder procedural technique in a writer who had access to the man himself before Coombs's death in 1997, and potential access to so many who knew him intimately, for all his modest carapace. One can respect Rowse's discretion regarding family and Coombs's wishes that they not be interrogated. One can also see why Rowse would recoil from cult of personality excesses, even from nostalgic or fulsome praise — clearly inappropriate for a man who was in the habit of quoting Ecclesiastes. And there is a certain consonance between Rowse's and Nugget Coombs's own diffidence. 'Perhaps Coombs's persistent tactics of self-effacement are part of the truth of the inner man,' writes Rowse. Perhaps. And more of such speculation (which sounds suspiciously like a stab at 'what makes him tick') would have made this

substantial study a more palatable and approachable work, one that would attract and hold more readers. The man was, after all, a story. But story is what Rowse is so reluctant to tell. The book has so much matter and yet so little narrative shape or drive. The frustration for the reader is that Rowse, for all his objective scrupulousness, is so unusually equipped to tell the story. He has the material at his command, but will not take the risk that is the biographer's union due.

So what does the book yield? In fairness, a great deal. Rowse, fittingly if not to riveting effect, devotes chapter after detailed chapter to Coombs as economist and policy formulator, arts bureaucrat and social reformer. Any student of banking history and policy, or indeed of the public service, will find the material invaluable. We can also trace, in the crannies of chapters on Coombs's education and career, the formative impact of the times in which he lived. The Great Depression is central (as indeed it was to so many economists and social architects of Coombs's generation). In London, studying at the LSE, Coombs supplemented his pittance by teaching East Enders. He saw firsthand, as Rowse notes, the impact of unemployment. He also saw that 'the Labour Party had failed these people'. Rowse attributes to him a determination arising out of these experiences: 'His quest, as for so many liberals of his times, was to find a way to bring social justice into a society which privileged the private ownership of the means of production, without sacrifice to liberty or reason.' 'Quest' is not the impersonal language of 'a series of admirable projects'. Tick, tick.

Rowse also structures an account of Coombs as a reforming, rational, liberal economist (no slave to Keynes) with great powers of mediation and an intellectual flexibility that enabled him to work on through changing circumstance. A particular kind of Everyman. He rejects the view that consigns Coombs to a golden, never-to-be-repeated past, while stressing, with Coombs himself, that the circumstances which formed those stellar postwar public servants could not be repeated, nor would anyone sane want to repeat them — 'desperate, bloody and wasteful years for so many'. But, if the circumstances were unique, the moral and intellectual wherewithal to deal with them, and with other circumstances, was not. Coombs had that wherewithal — in spades.

It is that sense of Coombs's intellectual inventiveness and moral sanity that prompts Rowse to propose him, the rational economist and liberal reformer, as a counter example to the conception of the end of the Australian settlement that Paul Kelly posits in his book *The End of Certainty* (1992). In Rowse's view, Nugget Coombs, with his breadth of concerns, his finely tuned ecological, cultural and economic antennae, and his technical competence, is the fit, in fact a better, prophet for any viable new Australian settlement. It is a provocative claim but, if taken up and argued with proper seriousness, then Tim Rowse's account of this extraordinary Australian will have done its proper work.