



*Nuggett Coombs*

## *Nugget Coombs (1906–1997)*

Herbert Cole Coombs—‘Nugget’ Coombs—was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities, the Australian Academy of Science and the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, a Visiting Fellow of the Australian National University and an Honorary Fellow of the London School of Economics.

In the words of the Governor-General, Sir William Deane:

His life and his work influenced Australians and helped shape modern Australia more than virtually anyone else of his time and generation. ...He was a gifted and consummate ‘public servant’ in the very best meaning of that term—arguably our finest. He was a supporter and helper of the arts. He was a teacher, an author and a broadcaster. He was a leader who fearlessly spoke to our consciences of the consequences of environmental neglect, of the new economic underclass, of global over-population, of multiculturalism, and of the need for justice and true reconciliation between the indigenous peoples of our country and Australians as a whole.

Nugget was born in Kalamunda. His father was a country stationmaster. His mother’s influence was reflected in his life-long rejection of racial and religious intolerance. She ensured that, notwithstanding his considerable sporting enthusiasms and ability, books and reading were from the beginning part of his life. As a young rural teacher from Teachers Training College he began his university studies by correspondence. In 1931 he completed his MA at the University of Western Australia, the only free university in Australia, won a Hackett scholarship to London and married Mary Alice Ross—‘Lallie’—a fellow student and teacher.

Nugget seemed destined to be a central banker. Because Australia had no central bank, the State Savings Bank of New South Wales closed its doors in 1931 and was taken over by the Commonwealth Bank. In 1934 Nugget was awarded a doctorate at the London School of Economics for his thesis on central banking, *The Dominions’ Exchanges*. In 1935 Nugget was appointed an assistant economist at the Commonwealth Bank’s head office in Sydney. The student who used to dine with Keynes on the other side of Piccadilly from Green Park now regularly met the Keynesian economists from the Commonwealth Bank and the Bank of New South Wales in Repin’s coffee shops.

On the outbreak of World War II he was appointed Economist to the Treasury. Two years later, JB Chifley became his fourth Treasurer; they had met in 1936 and 1937 when Chifley was a member of the Royal Commission on the Monetary and Banking Systems of Australia. One of John Curtin’s first acts as Prime Minister was to appoint Coombs to the Commonwealth Bank Board. At an Australian Rules match in Canberra in May 1942 Curtin

asked Coombs to be Director of Rationing. In December 1942, a year after Pearl Harbor, Curtin made Chifley Minister of Post-war Reconstruction.

During and after the War Nugget was engaged in the Keynesian Crusade for a new international economic order. It involved various organizations, companions and places—FAO, GATT, IMF and World Bank, Chifley, H V Evatt and John Dedman, Washington, New York, London, Paris, Geneva and Tokyo. In January 1949 Nugget was appointed Governor of the Commonwealth Bank.

In December 1949 R G Menzies was restored to power and came to rely on his Seven Dwarfs, Henry Bland, Allen Brown, Stanley Carver, Nugget Coombs, John Crawford, Richard Randall and Roland Wilson. All except Coombs were transformed into knights. (In June 1975 Coombs was among the first Companions of the Order of Australia. Knighthoods were introduced in the Order in May 1976 and Coombs resigned from it a month later.)

In *Trial Balance* (1981) Nugget gave a valid and vivid account of his relations with the seven Prime Ministers whom he served, three Labor (Curtin, Chifley, and Gough Whitlam) and four Liberal (Menzies, Harold Holt, John Gorton, and William McMahon). Menzies had little interest in any of the Arts. Nugget, no doubt inspired by the example of such bankers as Keynes and the Medici, became a patron of the arts. In 1954 Nugget turned the first visit by the Queen to brilliant account by securing Menzies's blessing for the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust; Nugget remained chairman of its Board till 1968. Nugget's splendid art collection was exhibited at the Reserve Bank in Martin Place in 1992.

The Reserve Bank was established in 1959. As the first Governor, Nugget had to broach the ambivalent official attitude towards wheat exports to China:

It seemed to me that the Bank should make its own assessment of Chinese intention and capacity to meet its commitments on the transaction. This seemed a suitable opportunity to try to establish communication with the People's Bank of China. I told Holt, who was then Treasurer, of my intention and he asked me to talk to the Prime Minister about it.

Menzies too was worried. The visit would attract Press and Opposition attention; be interpreted as contrary to the Government's foreign policy; would disturb our American allies. However, I persisted, pointing out that the Government did not have to accept responsibility for my movements. Reluctantly he said he would raise no objection but asked that we avoid publicity.

Nugget and Lallie made the visit in October 1961.

In May 1967 Holt submitted the Aborigines referendum which Menzies had resisted. He sought advice: 'You know, Nugget, I've never spoken to

one. I don't think I've ever met one'. In September Holt announced a Council for Aboriginal Affairs and in November an Australian Council for the Arts. Nugget was to chair both. Nugget found that Gorton's interest in the arts centred on films and television. He showed how to extend the role of the Council for the Arts in that area. He retired as Governor of the Bank in July 1968.

McMahon asked Nugget to accompany him on his visit to Washington, New York, and London in October 1971. In September 1972 the Council of the Arts prepared a confidential paper for Whitlam, the Leader of the Opposition. In November, on Whitlam's initiative, Nugget agreed that it should be known that he was as willing to advise Whitlam as he had been to work with McMahon.

Whitlam inherited from his father the habit of walking to work with Nugget. These walks led to the one billion dollar Budget savings recommended by the expenditure review task force appointed in March 1973 and chaired by Coombs, the 25 per cent tariff cuts recommended by the committee appointed in June and chaired by Alf Rattigan and the Green Paper on Rural Policy prepared by the working group appointed in December and chaired by Stuart Harris. Fred Gruen, who died on the same day as Nugget, was a member of the Rattigan committee and the Harris group.

In October and November 1973 Nugget and Lallie accompanied the Whitlams to Tokyo and Beijing. In Australia Nugget arranged many meetings for Whitlam with Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines. In August 1975, after the Parliament had passed acts to establish the Aboriginal Loans Commission and Aboriginal Land Fund, to override Queensland's discriminatory laws and to enact the 1965 United Nations Racial Discrimination Convention, Nugget arranged for Whitlam to visit Daguragu. He drafted the words with which Whitlam ceremoniously poured some soil into Vincent Lingiari's hands.

In 1976 Nugget presented the report of the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration, which had been appointed in June 1974 under his chairmanship, and retired as Chancellor of the Australian National University, a post he had held since 1968. For the next two decades Aboriginal issues were the principal focus of his life and work. From 1989 he spent the winter months at the North Australia Research Unit which the ANU had established in Darwin. He argued passionately for the welfare of Aborigines and for their right to be different, in Sir William Deane's words,

different in their human, material and spiritual relationships—to each other and to the land and its resources. To be part of and have equal access to non-Aboriginal society if they chose; but also, as he put it, for 'the right to be on land which they believe is theirs, and to be able to conduct their society in accordance with their ways of thinking, educate their children in relation to that and to conduct their own ceremonies'.

A novel and memorable service of thanksgiving was held in St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney on 14 November to celebrate Nugget's life. Dean Anthony Doherty described the occasion as a national rite of passage. Bishop David Cremin welcomed the packed congregation. John Coombs QC quoted Nugget's words 'Don't let them be gloomy, son, I have had a great innings'. Nugget had wanted it known that the choice of a Catholic church should not be taken as a sign of a deathbed conversion.

Father Frank Brennan SJ said 'his funeral instructions were simple: Bach at the beginning, *Waltzing Matilda* at the end, and no God-bothering in between'. Nugget had consented to a State funeral because others had deemed it appropriate and had consented to St Mary's because Lallie would delight in it.

The service commenced with a Yolngu Funeral Rite conducted by Galarrwuy Yunupingu. Prime Minister John Howard read Isaiah, chapter 25, verses 6–9. Eulogies were paid by Sir William Deane, Gough Whitlam and Mick Dodson, for whose tribute to 'solid Gold Nugget' there was sustained applause. The Coombs family were followed by the painted Yolngu people and then the other dignitaries in the recessional, *Waltzing Matilda*.

*E G Whitlam AC QC*