

Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life. *By Tim Rowse*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. ix + 419 pp. Illustrations, references, notes, index. Cloth, \$70. ISBN 0-521-81783-8.

Reviewed by Simon Ville

When I arrived in Canberra in 1991 to take up a senior lectureship at the Australian National University, I spent the first couple of years living in a university flat. One of my neighbors was a short, elderly, somewhat unkempt man who walked to the university carrying an assortment of plastic bags. Unbeknown to me at the time, here was someone who had once dined with John Maynard Keynes in London, had been taught by Richard Tawney and Harold Laski at the London School of Economics, had played a formative role in the establishment of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), had governed the Commonwealth Bank for several decades, had advised a series of postwar Australian governments, and for decades had been on first-name terms with Australia's political, business, and cultural establishment. But not until a couple of university researchers knocked on my door asking if I had seen Nugget Coombs did I begin to learn about the important accomplishments of this man who was my neighbor.

Tim Rowse, in an excellent biography of Coombs, completes the story. The main strength of his book is its full and vivid picture of the economic, political, financial, and cultural milieu in which Coombs carried out his work. Indeed, this biography could just as well serve as a useful history of twentieth-century Australia, testimony to the central role played by Coombs in the country's development. At almost every critical juncture of Australian history the diminutive Coombs figures large. In youth he was tied to the modernizing forces of the railways (his father was a railway man) and public education (his first job was as a teacher). He studied for his doctorate at the London School of Economics in the early 1930s at a time of intense debate among economists and political scientists over the causes and nature of the so-called Great Slump. When he returned to Australia, where the views of professional economists were being eagerly solicited by business and government, he joined the Commonwealth Bank as an assistant economist. In wartime he was director of rationing, and in the ensuing peace he became director

general of the Department of Postwar Reconstruction. Coombs traveled overseas as part of Australia's negotiating team posted to various postwar supranational bodies, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and GATT. In 1949 he became governor of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia at a time when questions about whether the bank should be nationalized and whether it should function as a regulatory or a competitive reserve bank were being resolved. Coombs contributed to the formation of the Australian National University and the development of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and he participated in resolving a range of economic issues. In retirement Coombs committed a good deal of time to questions of Aboriginal rights and to the arts. He was the founding chair of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs and of the Australian Council for the Arts. Nuclear energy, feminism, the environment, and the resolution of Australia's maritime boundary with Papua New Guinea were further areas of interest and activity.

Rowse describes the qualities that Coombs brought to public life: skills as a negotiator, team manager, and diplomat; clear and reformist thinking; and a prodigious work ethic—in his final years Coombs complained about having to cut back to an eight-hour day.

However, his private life is something of a black box, hindering our understanding of Coombs the man. Rowse notes his subject's reluctance to reveal aspects of his personal life, and he respected these feelings by agreeing not to interview family members, including Coombs's wife. Despite being a brilliant public figure, Coombs was a private enigma to his contemporaries, characterized by "amiable impenetrability" (p. 288), and the book does little to illuminate the private figure behind the public genius. This is not to say that there is a lack of colorful anecdotes, as we read about Coombs's overly anxious descent from the train on his first day at school and his manner of handling missiles during an amateur dramatics performance. Nor was I the only person to notice his collection of plastic bags: Coombs once responded to a query about them by remarking that even bankers have to have some real assets. It would be unfair to finish on a critical note—this is an important and highly readable account of the life of a major public figure in twentieth-century Australian history.

Simon Ville is professor and head of the School of Economics and Information Systems at the University of Wollongong, specializing in the teaching and research of the economic and business history of Britain, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. He is president of the Economic History Society of Australia and New Zealand and was editor of Australian Economic History Review (1997–2003). Recent publications include The Rural Entrepreneurs: A History of the Stock and Station Agent Industry in Australia and New Zealand (2000); The Development of Modern Business (with Gordon Boyce, 2002); The Big End of Town: Big Business and Corporate Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia (with G. Fleming and D. Merrett, 2004).