

# THE AUSTRALIAN

## Love blooms in the afternoon

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Nugget Coombs and Judith Wright photographed in 1989. Source: Supplied

**IT was the kind of open secret unimaginable in today's world of social media, with its viral transmission of gossip: a decades-long affair between Australia's greatest living poet and one of its most influential public figures.**

But thanks to the recent lifting of an embargo on letters between Judith Wright and Nugget Coombs held at the Australian National Library, we now know that the pair, though often physically apart, were inseparable from 1972 until Coombs's death in 1997.

Theirs was an emotionally rich and intellectually expansive relationship, a late-life passion sustained by words and ideas as much as bodily presence.

The reasons for their secrecy may seem old-fashioned today. Coombs was separated from his wife but refused divorce, to which stigma still attached, for his children's sake. For a man of his eminence, so closely associated with the political powers of the day and involved, during the 1970s and 80s, in delicate and long-running negotiations over the establishment of the Australia Council and the push for a treaty with indigenous Australians, Coombs was probably right to be discreet in his private life: his public reputation required it.

But it turns out Wright was the real stickler. She believed their shared work on environmental issues, the arts and indigenous justice was too important to be undermined by scuttlebutt. Her determined activism met with a patrician distaste for vulgar scandal, and it was she who maintained stricter quarantine controls throughout their relationship, even to the tragic point of burning much of Coombs's early correspondence with her.

The great virtue of *Love & Fury*, an ABC television documentary built around the remaining Wright-Coombs correspondence, is that it respects the reticence on which the couple's relationship was founded.

The direct involvement of Wright's daughter Meredith McKinney in the documentary is proof that its makers not

only wished to set the record straight, but that they wished to do so with proper care and regard for their subjects. The result is admirably direct, though without a hint of prurience.

Most importantly, beyond providing the requisite context, *Love & Fury* permits its lovers to speak for themselves. And it helps in this respect that Wright and Coombs possessed such clear and lovely voices. Wright was not only an immensely significant poet - a giant to set beside Kenneth Slessor, AD Hope and Gwen Harwood, whose work opened readers eyes to the diversity and strangeness of the Australian environment, and who set feminine experience at the heart of her poems - but also a vivid, tough minded prose writer.

In several memoirs Wright recalled her early life, lived in the long shadow of her pastoralist forebears, significant figures in the opening up of the New England district of NSW for agriculture. Yet her evident admiration for these generations was not unalloyed: she acknowledged and decried their acts of ecological despoliation, their wilful blindness to the treatment meted out to the original owners of the land on which their wealth was built. The love of country so exquisitely notated in her poetry was hemmed round by a conqueror's guilt.

Her activism, which initially focused on environmental issues but in the light of her relationship with Coombs also came to focus on indigenous concerns, eventually crowded out the poetic impulse. She later gave up poetry to concentrate on changing her corner of the world. Her letters, sober and direct, reflect the fierce ethical imperative under which she placed herself.

Coombs, a London School of Economics-trained Keynesian who was governor of the Commonwealth Bank and then the first governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia on its creation in 1960, comes out of *Love & Fury* as a gentler, more romantic figure. Even so, long experience as the nation's foremost public servant, working for governments from John Curtin's to Gough Whitlam's, meant he was far from guileless.

Coombs's passion for indigenous rights was also modified by his contact with Wright - he too developed an interest in environmental issues. It was these shared concerns that provided the professional basis for contact: mutual admiration that soon shaded into love.

Wright first introduced Coombs to her daughter in 1972 as the new love in her life. She was 57, a widow for six years. Coombs was 66. The bittersweet nature of *Love & Fury* emerges from the autumnal nature of their connection. As Fiona Capp, younger friend of Wright and author of a fine, sympathetic essay on this late amour - *In the Garden*, published by *The Monthly* in 2009 - observed:

By the time of their relationship, their public personas were set in stone: the distinguished yet down-to-earth statesman and the famous poet-cum-activist. Appropriately, for a couple dedicated to social reform, their love affair began in the year the Whitlam government came to power. As heady a time as it was, however, their new responsibilities immediately put pressure on the relationship. Given the personal investment of family, friends and colleagues in the documentary - McKinney is interviewed at length, and there are briefer interviews with Capp, writer on indigenous issues Nonie Sharp, Wright scholar John Hawke and Coombs's biographer Tim Rowse - it is fearless in isolating the difficulties the pair would bump up against in the years to come.

The initial optimism of the Whitlam years, for instance, gave way to the bitter controversy of the Dismissal. In a voiceover from an old radio interview Wright is scathing about events. She suggests the conspiracy to sack Whitlam extended even beyond Australia's borders.

But even afterwards, when Coombs had left politics proper to concentrate his energies on indigenous issues, Wright felt his industriousness exceeded his natural stamina. Her letters are filled with appeals to Coombs to slow down, to husband his energies. Even her scolding is a species of care.

We learn that Coombs's health was to become a real issue. After decades spent on Queensland's Tamborine Mountain, Wright moved to a forested block near Braidwood in NSW in 1975, in order to be closer to Coombs in Canberra, where he was a visiting fellow at the Australian National University after 1976.

But yearly bouts of pneumonia during the capital's frigid winters forced a change of venue: he began spending six months a year working directly with indigenous communities in the Top End. It is out of this enforced separation that much of their correspondence grew.

*Love & Fury* reinforces Wright's sense of isolation with archival film of her Braidwood property, which shows the poet as a wandering solitary in the scrub and trees around her home: Eve alone in her garden, as Capp once observed.

There is a darker skein to this story. Wright's activism had provoked bitter responses from some mysterious figures. She had received threatening notes and feared her house was under surveillance. Now elderly and increasingly deaf, her well-founded concerns tipped over into paranoia.

In the early 90s, and much to Coombs's horror, Wright burned his side of the correspondence, worried it might fall into the wrong hands and expose them both. The scenes in which these events are related, via readings of the letters in which Wright explains her actions to a distant lover, are wrenching. Only Coombs's letters dated from after this time survive.

Nonetheless *Love & Fury* describes a relationship more often marked by gaiety and lightness. If encroaching age is the dominant note, then the pair's responses are philosophical and wry, and entirely lacking in self-pity. Responding to some admission about the fading of his body and faculties from Coombs, Wright replies that the best thing to do is stoke the fire and drink red wine. There is a sprightliness about them both that defeats the ravages of time.

The question inevitably asked about documentaries concerned with words is how can they be shaped to work for the screen. *Love & Fury* solves this problem with a combination of archival footage and finely rendered audio accompaniment.

Helen Morse and Paul English read the letters with the kind of elegant restraint that enlarges the spirit of the letters rather than drowning them in the actor's ego. Ramona Koval's narration has a welcome minimalism, and the pieces to camera from various subjects are artfully chosen.

I defy anyone watching the footage of Whitlam pouring dirt through Vincent Lingiari's fingers (Coombs's suggestion, that) to the accompaniment of Paul Kelly's *From Little Things, Big Things Grow* not to feel their chest tighten a notch or two.

But mainly it is the footage of those places and people sacred to Coombs and Wright that swells the meaning of their words. Wright's poetry is so much concerned with the natural world that it deserves the kind of visual extrapolation ventured here.

The effect of looking back at some aspects of 20th-century Australia is often unintentionally comic, such are the differences between then and now. Early on-camera interviews with Wright bear this out: she looks like a Moonie Ponds housewife in her twinset and horned-rim glasses. Her plummy voice seems to come from the distant Received Pronunciation past.

Her earnestness and intelligence is palpable, however. Time drops away as she rehearses anger and anxiety about her country and its various myopias, concerns that have not abated in the intervening years: that indeed, have become even more urgent through time.

But, as Noni Sharp explained in a piece for *Meanjin* after the release of the Wright-Coombs correspondence, it is not only politics that endures:

Today, a decade on, their voices go on speaking to us of the mystery of all life, and in their later years, of strength even in frailty. Wright's understanding speaks not only to the loves of her days. It speaks to us all, especially today. Relationship, she said, is what matters: body to earth, heart to mind and the integrity of things created or imagined. Now we may know something of what there is to know, some words may pass down their lives in a new farewell to them both from all their friends - and perhaps also to a love without an ending.

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*Love & Fury*, April 23, 10pm, ABC1.