

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***SOMETHING TO DECLARE: A MEMOIR*** **BY SIR JAMES GOBBO**

(The Miegunyah Press, 2010) 345 pages  
ISBN 9780522857313 (hbk)

#### **OSCAR I ROOS**

This book is something of a disappointment. Sir James has led a full and distinguished life, but *Something to Declare* lacks spark. Overall, it is competently written, but unfortunately it reads as a largely lifeless retelling of facts, rather than as a document which consistently engages the interest of the reader.

The first nine chapters of these memoirs focus on Sir James's early life and his legal career. In itself, it is a remarkable journey. Sir James was born the second son of Italian migrants in Carlton in the midst of the Great Depression and rose to become Governor of Victoria. Along the way, he spent a few years of his early childhood living in Cittadella in the Veneto region of Italy, attended five schools, gained entry into law/arts at the University of Melbourne, won a Rhodes Scholarship, completed his legal studies at Oxford University while winning a blue at rowing, became a prominent QC at the Victorian Bar and ultimately a long serving justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria.

In Chapters 1, 2 and 3, Sir James paints an affectionate picture of his family and of the small Italian community that lived in Victoria prior to the Second World War, before the boom in post war migration. The Gobbo family apparently brought the first Italian espresso coffee machine into Melbourne when they remigrated to Australia in 1938, and used it to set up a restaurant in Victoria Street, North Melbourne, alongside the Queen Victoria Market. 'Australian' stall holders would be served in the front room of the restaurant from an 'Australian menu' comprising mainly endless variations on steak and eggs, while the Italian growers would feast on pasta and wine out the back.

Arthur Calwell, who was the Gobbo family's local federal Member of Parliament, is one character who comes out particularly well in these early chapters. Although Calwell is perhaps better remembered as an electorally unsuccessful Labor leader, and as a diehard advocate of the White Australia Policy, Sir James reveals his long and principled support for the Italian community, particularly during the course of the Second World War when many Italian-Australians faced internment.

As to Chapters 4 to 9, which focus on Sir James's university studies and legal career, apart from the usual university japes and legal 'war stories' from the Bar and the Bench, I was surprised to read the Sir James was offered a position on the High Court of Australia in 1982, an offer that he selflessly turned down on the basis that the move to Canberra would be too disruptive to his family.

Chapters 10 through to 15 focus on some of Sir James's numerous interests and commitments outside of the law. Chapter 10 details his involvement in the Italian community, particularly the Italian welfare agency known as Co.As.It. One is reminded of the regional nature of Italian identity and the fractious nature of Italian politics, both of which appear to have been transplanted into Australia. Chapter 11 deals with Sir James's service to a number of hospitals and hospice boards and his membership of the Order of Malta, a medieval Catholic order devoted to serving the sick. In Chapters 12 ('Immigration: Reform and Refugees'), 13 ('A Multicultural Australia') and 14 ('One Special Legacy') Sir James provides a personal perspective on the history of immigration and multiculturalism in Australia after the Second World War. There is much to admire in these three chapters, and they form one of the more interesting portions of the book. In 1959 Sir James was one of the founding members of the 'Immigration Reform Group' which advocated for the abolition of the White Australia Policy, and in 1975 he was appointed to the Federal Immigration and Population Council by the Fraser government and proceeded to do sterling work to combat public prejudice during the 'boat people' arrivals of the late 1970s. From 1982 he chaired the Multicultural Task Force and was instrumental in setting up the Australian Bicentennial Multicultural Foundation, which he subsequently headed from 1987. Perhaps surprisingly for someone who is often put forward as an exemplar of Australian multiculturalism, he has his reservations about it. While he is an obvious enthusiast for the contribution of migrants to Australian society, he sees multiculturalism as a 'policy for transition', and feels that 'a truly multicultural Australia does not need this "ism"'. Finally, in chapter 15, Sir James details his work for the Palladio Foundation (later renamed International Specialist Skills) which provides opportunities for Australian artisans and craftspeople to travel overseas to develop their skills.

Chapter 16 ('A Busy Retirement') briefly recounts Sir James's activities after he retired from the Supreme Court in 1994 prior to his appointment as Governor of Victoria in 1997. This includes his service as chair of the Banking Industry Ombudsman council and a directorship on the board of Coles Myer.

Chapters 17 ('Government House') and 18 ('Crisis and Controversy') detail Sir James's experiences as Governor of Victoria from 1997 to early 2001. Chapter 18, in particular, provides an interesting insight into the role of the Governor in the aftermath of the 1999 Victorian State election, which resulted in neither major party having a clear majority in the lower house of the Victorian Parliament. As is well known, the end of Sir James's governorship was marked by controversy when the new Bracks Labor government declined to extend Sir James's term beyond its initial three year period. Sir James maintains that he was formally appointed in 1997 by the Kennett Coalition government only to the end of 2000 on the verbal understanding that, if the 1999 republican referendum were unsuccessful, his term would run on for the normal five years. This agreement was not honoured by the Bracks Labor government. Sir James's primary grievance is not that he was denied a full term as Victorian Governor, nor that Labor welched on a deal, but that the new government was not frank in its dealings with him concerning its plans for his replacement, and that the poor handling of the transition by the government led to controversy. At the time Sir James was replaced, some nasty rumours circulated in the Victorian media concerning his partisan involvement in a 'Rumour Tank' of conservative business figures. Sir James deals with these allegations with a straight bat and one is left with the impression that a good man was caught up in the maelstrom of politics and mauled by the media with its insatiable appetite for controversy.

The final four chapters of the book deal with Sir James's post gubernatorial life. He was able to reengage with Italy in his capacity as Victoria's first commissioner for Italy in 2001, as detailed in chapter 19 ('Italy Revisited') and become involved with the Order of Australia and the National Library of Australia, through appointments made by the Howard government, as detailed in Chapter 20 ('National Treasures'). He rounds off his memoirs by focusing on his love for the Veneto region in Italy, where he spent a portion of his childhood, and the city of Venice (in Chapter 10, entitled 'A Venetian Love Affair'). Then, in the final Chapter 22 ('Blessings and Reflections') he details the life of his immediate family, including his five children, and reflects on the opportunities afforded to him by his Italian heritage and his Australian homeland.

In *Something to Declare* Sir James comes across as a thoroughly decent, hardworking and selfless man, committed to his career, his family and to the community. Unfortunately, however, admirable qualities and good deeds can rarely, of themselves, sustain a reader's interest. Ironically, it is often the subject's struggles with his or her darker side which make biographies, and sometimes autobiographies and memoirs (if the autobiographer or memorialist is candid enough), interesting. One can admire Sir James, and his achievements, without finding much to relate to in these memoirs.

Part of the problem is that *Something to Declare* provides only a superficial insight into the subject's inner life. One senses that the qualities that made Sir James an extremely capable barrister, an admirable judge, an ideal governor and a tireless servant of the community (those qualities of restraint, equanimity, fairness and reserve) are not the qualities which are needed to convert a life story into a rollicking good read. For example, Sir James writes of his long involvement with the Catholic Church at an official level, and it is obvious that his Catholic faith is a deep source of spiritual support to him, but he tells us nothing of his own views on the great controversies which have beset the Church over the last few decades, such as clerical sexual abuse, the role of women within the Church and the Church's teaching on birth control, abortion and human sexuality. Similarly, despite his extensive involvement with immigration and multiculturalism over many years, he does not offer his insights on current issues, such as mandatory detention, Australia's current treatment of refugees and Islamophobia.

To the extent that Sir James does touch upon anything controversial in *Something to Declare* (such as euthanasia, or the combating of terrorism) he almost invariably takes a somewhat muted conservative line. The one area where he does make his views plainer is in his well-known opposition to an Australian Bill of Rights. However, he does not really engage with the contemporary debate and the arguments mounted by current Bill of Rights proponents.

The best that can be said about *Something to Declare* is that I found the example of Sir James's life and indefatigable service to the community to be vaguely inspiring, and that, while reading it, I felt myself to be in the company of a good and learned man. The chapters on Sir James's experiences as Victorian Governor will be of some interest to historians, political scientists and constitutional scholars, as they lift the lid, as it were, on the inner machinations of the Victorian Executive government during a moderately controversial period in its history. But the prose of *Something to Declare* does not sing, and a mass of detail weighs the text down. A remarkable life, but unfortunately an unremarkable read.