

The Historian as Inventor

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Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-creation of Andres Bonifacio. BY GLENN MAY. Quezon City: New Day Press, 1997.

The Philippine edition (New Day) of *Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-creation of Andres Bonifacio* by Glenn May was launched this year at the Far Eastern University. The American edition, published by the University of Wisconsin's Center for Southeast Asian Studies, was released earlier, in 1996. In this book, May's thesis is that the national hero, Andres Bonifacio, "is mostly an illusion, the product of undocumented statements, unreliable, doctored, or otherwise spurious sources, and the collective imagination of several historians and a memoirist."

According to May, our knowledge of Bonifacio was shaped by, first, questionable works and spurious documents purportedly written by Bonifacio; second, by the memoirs of Artemio Ricarte; and

third, by the historiographic works of Manuel Artigas y Cuerva, Epifanio de los Santos and his son Jose Santos, Teodoro Agoncillo, and Rafael Ilete. May declares that these "mythmakers" have bent the canons of historical disciplines in their desire to make Bonifacio the national hero of the Philippines. He states that:

In addition to being historical studies, and contributions to an ongoing nationalist discourse, [their narratives] are, at their core, modern-day Philippine varieties of 'hero myths' – stories in the tradition of Greek tales about Theseus and Herakles and Indian ones about Krishna and Kama... the exposure of hero myths invariably cause pain, since all of us, regardless of our nationality, have a deeply felt need for heroes. Doubtless admirers of the mythical Bonifacio will find it difficult to accept the notion that he was probably not the humble ple-

beian, the literary master, and the super patriot he has long been thought to be.

ORAL HISTORY

Glenn May deplors the biographical material of Bonifacio by de los Santos, Artigas, Kalaw and others of their generation, who did not provide footnotes and citations. But while they are called the “pioneer historians,” the early writers were actually not trained in historiography. In writing their *kasaysayan* (story/history), the *marunong* or *may pinag-aralan* – such as Mabini, Isabelo de los Reyes, Sofronio Calderon, and others – sought to give an overview of the events (*salaysay*) and their interpretation (*saysay*) from the standpoint of personal authority rather than academic expertise. Their oral history was not footnoted while their interviews were not structured and specified. As Bonifacio’s contemporaries, Artigas, de los Santos, Cecilio Apostol, the brothers Leon and Fernando Guerrero, Clemente Jose Zulueta, and Rafael Palma were also writing as participants and witnesses of the Revolution. In seeking to transfer information from the realm of remembrance to the permanence of documentation, they were racing against failure of memory.

Furthermore, the readers knew that Artigas, de los Santos and other writers had access to Espiridiona Bonifacio Distrito, Andres’ sister who died in the late 1950s, and Gregoria de Jesus, Bonifacio’s wife who later married Julio Nakpil, head of the office of the *supremo* in late 1896. There were also Ladislao Diwa, an original founder of the Katipunan; Briccio Pantas, cabinet member in the Balintawak government; Pio Valenzuela, Aurelio Tolentino, Guillermo Masangkay and other intimates of

Bonifacio. These personalities were quite vociferous when they disagreed with “facts” published by writers in the early decades of this century.

AUTHENTICATION OF SOURCES

May also attacks the two sets of primary sources used by Filipino historians. One set consists of the literary and political works that, according to him, have been attributed to Bonifacio without conclusive proof. The other set consists of actual documents, particularly letters, which he finds unacceptable on the following counts: first, provenance; second, language; and third, penmanship.

That most of Bonifacio’s literary and political works are not physically present and that we know of them only through attribution “without conclusive proof” are the main points raised by May. He cites, for example, *Ang Dapat Mabatid ng mga Tagalog*, which appeared in the Katipunan newspaper *Kalayaan*. It was transcribed and attributed to Bonifacio by Wenceslao Retana and also referred to by Manuel Artigas y Cuerva and others. But no copy of the original publication has been located while the National Library copy is presumed to have been destroyed during World War II. For May, a historian must himself be able to examine the evidence, not the reportage of previous historians, none of whom are reliable. Thus, because no manuscript or printed copy of Bonifacio’s works can be physically examined, May casts doubt on their having been authored by Bonifacio himself.

However, the Tagalog language of that time lived largely through its oral tradition. In fact Apolinario Mabini had in his head (*cabezado* or *isinaulo*) the whole *Florante at Laura* which he transcribed. As participants in that culture, those who had the language also knew who was the

author of which work. It was not even necessary for the printed version to have the author's byline. Indeed, in the case of revolutionary propaganda, it would have been folly for the author to affix his real name to any work that was intended to rouse political unrest.

Glenn May even finds unacceptable the documents that *are* physically present. He attacks, in particular, the set of letters Bonifacio sent to Emilio Jacinto. These were kept by Jacinto whose heirs sold them to Epifanio de los Santos early in this century. They were then passed on to Epifanio's son, Jose Santos, and then to his granddaughter, Teresita Santos Pangan. In the early 1980s, Pangan offered to sell them to the government. Serafin Quiason, then the Director of the National Historical Institute, told her they had no money and referred her instead to his friend, the antique dealer Severina de Asis. In the early 1990s, two private collectors, Jorge de los Santos (no relation to Epifanio) and Emmanuel Encarnacion, purchased part of the lot from de Asis.

May wonders: "Given the central place occupied by Bonifacio in Philippine history, the limited number of surviving sources concerning his life, and the widely recognized historical value of the Bonifacio-Jacinto correspondence, one might expect that the four letters are safely preserved behind bullet-proof glass or inside a theft-proof vault in one of the Philippine Republic's official manuscript repositories. But they are not. Nor have they ever been." Nevertheless, what is so strange to May is very comprehensible to Filipinos. Countless documents, including the transcripts of Bonifacio's trial (later returned through the efforts of Encarnacion), have been pilfered from the National Archives and the National

Library. From the beginning, Epifanio de los Santos recognized the importance of the Bonifacio letters to Filipino history, and believed that the best way to safeguard them was to keep them himself.

What is incomprehensible is that May did not even physically examine the Bonifacio-Jacinto correspondence. The authors of this article introduced May to the present custodian of the letters, Emmanuel Encarnacion, who was very willing to show them to him. May said, however, that he had no time and that, anyway, he had photocopies of them. In the book, May himself asserts that "after examining the photocopies... [he concluded]... that the famous Bonifacio letters were, in all likelihood, forgeries."

Having passed such kind of judgment on the provenance of the Bonifacio documents, May then takes a shot at linguistic analysis. In this, May is merely taking his cue from his colleague, Ambeth Ocampo, who was the first to point out the discrepancies between the language of the actual documents now in the Encarnacion collection and the Agoncillo transcriptions appended to *Revolt of the Masses* (1956). To this puzzle, May adds another: the transcriptions which he attributes (mistakenly) to Jose Santos (1948) also differ from the language of the actual documents. May speculates that Santos "had doubts about their authenticity." He also declares that Santos, having come to the conclusion that the Bonifacio letters in the family's possession are fakes, had published rewritten versions of the forgeries which are themselves flawed because their language is not of the nineteenth century. (At this point, shouldn't Santos have destroyed these documents and perpetuated only his own transcriptions?)

May then goes into an elaborate dis-

cussion of “goal-focus” versus “actor-focus” verbs. He alleges that the 1948 “Santos” transcriptions were an attempt to bring the language closer to the “authentic” language of Bonifacio’s time, which “tended to be more actor-focused.” Virgilio Almario, Director of the UP Sentro ng Wika, dismisses May’s arguments: the shift of focus from goal to actor is integral to the language, and is not specific to any historical period.

May also tries his hand at graphology. He recounts how one of the authors of this critique “was taken aback and hesitated to concede” that one of the letters was written with a different hand from the others. But “Villegas’ protests became muted” as they compared the formation of letters. This flash of insight led to (May’s) “unsurprising conclusion...that it seemed highly doubtful that the Bonifacio ‘originals’ owned by Encarnacion were authentic.” But in the next paragraph, he himself knocks down this line of reasoning by admitting that “any scholar familiar with nineteenth century Philippine bureaucratic documents knows that a large percentage of them were written by scribes.” Bonifacio, as *supremo*, would have had a number on call. After presenting his case in such a manner, May is still unable to prove his allegations beyond reasonable doubt. We can only agree with May that the provenance of the documents needs to be investigated, that several hands indeed penned the letters, and that, certainly, Tagalog has curious quirks.

Next, May attempts to disprove historian Reynaldo Ileto’s thesis in *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (1979). In that work, Ileto linked Bonifacio and the Katipunan not to the reformist program shaped by European liberalism, but to

the millenarian tradition developed through peasant uprisings and articulated in a language based on the *pasyon*, the Christian religious epic chanted during Lenten rituals. May claims that “there are major flaws in Ileto’s discussion... No reliable evidence links the Katipunan [and] Bonifacio to the *pasyon* and the Philippine millenarian tradition...” Among these “major flaws” is Ileto’s translation into English of *Ang Dapat Mabait ng mga Tagalog* from what May assumes to be Jose Santos’ re-translation into Tagalog of Retana’s Spanish translation from the original *Kalayaan* article.

Here, May again attempts a critique of linguistic nuance. For example, he disputes Ileto’s translation of *ang araw ng katuiran* into “the sun of reason,” which May says may not be valid since the Spanish translation is *el dia de justicia*. In Tagalog, there is only *araw* for both “sun” and “day” whereas in Spanish it could be *sol* or *dia*. To a Filipino, however, Ileto’s translation may be validated by context.

Ileto translates *katuiran* as “reason,” which May claims is *justicia* in the Spanish version. Nonetheless, May should also have known that the root word of *katuiran* is *tuid*, or “straight,” which is *derecho* in Spanish. *Derecho* in that language also refers to justice and law, equity and reason. The translation of *katuiran* to *justicia* indicates a European translator, since the nuance of that word in that social order is based on the rule of law and not of men. Ileto’s translation is reasonable to a Filipino, for whom social order is based, instead, on the individual’s intellect and moral rectitude.

It is quite apparent that May’s arguments rest on unreliable transcriptions, mistranslations, verb foci, penmanship,

the paper, the ink, the ownership of these papers, photocopies, etc. But what about what they say? What about what they mean? May has not proven the Bonifacio papers to be false in terms of content and internal evidence, which is, in the final analysis, what counts.

NATIONALISM

May says that Artemio Ricarte, upon whose memoirs historians have based part of their accounts of the Tejeros Convention, was a dissembler. That his memoirs served to hide his being a *ba-limbing*. That he continued to be allied with Bonifacio even as he was preparing to assume the post to which he was elected in the convention. But that is not new information. Memoirs are precisely a personal account and need to be verified by other sources.

But since we have been discussing speculative allegations, we may as well posit another: Could May have been skeptical of Ricarte's memoirs because, of all the revolutionary generals, Ricarte went into self-exile in Japan rather than live under the American flag? Is it because Ricarte's sense of nation was able to resist the personal comfort and accommodation which the American colonial masters provided to all the revolutionaries who surrendered? It is this same notion of nation which runs through the works of Filipino historians that so offends May's idea of historiography. The "nationalist school" (the quotation marks his) "have tended to glorify the past exploits of native Filipinos, especially Filipinos of humble origins, and they have criticized severely the policies and actions of both Spanish and colonial overlords." May singles out Agoncillo:

We should remember that Agoncillo produced [*The Revolt of the Masses*] shortly after the Philippines had finally achieved independence.... In that historical context, Philippine historians were particularly inclined to rethink and rewrite their country's past, and one event that would have been a likely candidate for rethinking was the revolution of 1896, a struggle that, while it had been previously honored by home-grown nationalists like Artigas, de los Santos and Santos, had not always received favorable treatment from earlier clerical, reactionary and American writers.

Agoncillo's book might be seen, then, as an effort to valorize the revolution, rescue it as well as its heroes from the critics and reiterate – and to a certain extent update – the celebratory message of earlier generations of Philippine nationalists. Perhaps, for that reason, it was important for Agoncillo to present the revolution of 1896 as a popular, mass movement, even though his evidence was not especially compelling....we must recognize that at bottom *The Revolt of the Masses* is a misleading account of Andres Bonifacio. The Bonifacio depicted in that book is Teodoro Agoncillo's invention....

Glenn May's own characterization of Bonifacio is that of a man who "squabbled with fellow katipuneros in Manila." And if Bonifacio is divested of his mythified properties, May says, "I do not know if he will still qualify for inclusion in the ranks of national heroes." It is in

passages such as these that May's agenda becomes clear. It is not to seek the truth about Bonifacio and the events of 1896. It is not to analyze the historiography of early twentieth century Filipino writers.

What May fails to understand is that Bonifacio was not a creation. Indeed Bonifacio is a national hero *in spite of*, and not because of, Filipino historians and their fellow elite. The 1911 monument to the Revolution of 1896 in Kangkong was erected by public subscription. Even Guillermo Tolentino's magnum opus in Kalookan is not considered a national monument by certain officials of the National Historical Institute. In fact, those who would seek redress for their grievances flock to the unattended and grimy Bonifacio monuments not because they have read Artigas, de los Santos and Santos, Agoncillo and Iletto. The common folk have a simple but profound understanding of their country's history. Fathers told sons that it was Bonifacio (not del Pilar, Rizal, Mabini, Aguinaldo or anyone else) who initiated a national and democratic revolution against what was once the largest empire in the world. That is the ineluctible fact of Philippine history. Heroes cannot be foisted on a people. Historians can only dig out records, seek first-hand accounts, analyze facts. But they cannot change history.

And if, in the process of writing the

history of a nation, they are labelled "nationalist" as if it were a dirty word, then so be it. The Filipino historians which Glenn May writes about with such condescension are certainly not perfect and totally innocent of hidden agendas and personal motivations. But May presents no proof at all that any one of these historians, much less as a "nationalist school," wove historical narratives for the purpose of manufacturing myths. In his determination to support his hypothesis, he faults Filipino historians for lack of method or for using flawed methodology. But his own work is littered with presumptions and allegations, each one prefaced by conditional terms such as "if," "probably," "could have," "in all likelihood," "presumably," "maybe," "may" or "might."

In presenting his arguments, Glenn May reveals his own misunderstanding of historical method. Ironically, the Filipino models of investigative historiography are studies by two American-born historians: those of William Henry Scott on the so-called *Code of Kalantiaw*, and of John Schumacher, on the alleged Fr. Jose Burgos documents. Both writers were able to prove through internal evidence, as well as through graphology and questionable provenance, the unreliability of the particular sets of documents they had scrutinized.