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Poems of Choice, by Tonogbanua

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POEMS OF CHOICE. By Francisco G. Tonogbanua. Edited by Ninfa T. Jardinico. Manila: Delna Enterprises, 1986. x, 89 pages.

Francisco G. Tonogbanua is one of the pioneers of Philippine poetry in English. He was born in 1900 and finished his Ph.B. in Journalism at the University of the Philippines where he was among the first five English majors to graduate from the State University. He completed his B.S.E. in English in 1928 and spent two years at the University of Wisconsin where he graduated with an M.A. in English in 1930. Twenty years later he received his Ph.D. in Philosophy and Letters from the University of Santo Tomas. He had been writing poetry since 1918 but his collections of poetry only began to appear in book form after 1950.

Tonogbanua is certainly among the most prolific of the early Philippine poets in English. There are over 700 entries for him in Abad and Manlapaz's *Index to Philippine Poetry in English, 1905-1950* (National Book Store, 1988). His collected works include the verse trilogy: *Green Leaves* (1954), *Brown Leaves* (1965) and *Fallen Leaves* (1951), as well as *Forty-One Christmases* (1959, 1965), *A Stone, A Leaf, A Door* (1963), *Sonnets* (1964, 1966), *My God, My Mercy* (1967, 1972) and *Christmas* (1984). Tonogbanua is also the author of *A History of the Knights of Columbus in the Philippines* (1981) and half a dozen textbooks in English, as well as several books of essays.

Poems of Choice, therefore, is a significant contribution to the scholarship on Philippine poetry in English. The volume collects seventy-six Tonogbanua poems and with each poem a note by editor Ninfa Jardinico gives the bibliographical data for each poem—original locus of publication and date, as well as subsequent publication details. The notes also contain biographical details and critical comments, which unfortunately are more often laudatory than critical. There is a short biography of Tonogbanua and a complete list of his publications in the end papers of the volume. The Foreword lists some secondary material—Leopoldo A. de la Cruz's thesis on "Filipino War Poetry in English" (Far Eastern University, 1951), Estrella Floro-Aguas's thesis on "A Survey of Filipino Nature Poetry in English, 1900-1950" (Far Eastern University, 1965), Amador M. Lualhati's thesis, "An Analytical Study of the Sonnets on Love of Francisco G. Tonogbanua" (Golden Gate College, Batangas City, 1969) and Martha Galang-Acosta's thesis on "A Critical Study of the Christmas Poems of Francisco G. Tonogbanua" (Golden Gate College, Batangas City, 1970). The notes for each of the poems also include a number of valuable references to other secondary material.

The critical "Commentaries" at the end of the volume (pp. 79-88) on the six earlier volumes of Tonogbanua's poetry are less helpful, for they are mostly journalistic reviews and do not touch the specifics of Tonogbanua's poetry.

Poems of Choice is a valuable collection for the future scholar of the poetry of Francisco G. Tonogbanua, being a representative survey of his poetic work. (The other selection of Tonogbanua's corpus is *A Stone, A Leaf, A Door*, edited by Alberto Florentino in 1962). The volume is also a survey of the poetic background of the period in which Tonogbanua wrote, and represents the type of poetry that was being written in the period, as well as the influences

on Tonogbanua (Newman, Sara Teasdale, William Henly, Elizabeth Perry, William Ellery Leonard). There are a good number of poems on religion and on nationalism, as well as nature and love, and innumerable occasional poems written for ". . . the commemoration of important events . . . for dedications and other memorable happenings" (p. v).

In the midst of the traditional themes and representative forms, there are flashes of Tonogbanua's poetic gifts. Among the best is "Why?":

Why did you smile on that fair night,
When the pale moon gleamed all aglow?
Why were your dear eyes soft and bright,
If you but meant that I must go?

Why did you let me dream and hope,
And give me your dear hand to kiss?
Why did you say "love" when you spoke,
If you had not dreamed of love's bliss?

Why did you join me in my dreams,
And swear to me we'd never part?
Why did you love me by that stream,
If you but meant to break my heart?

Tell me to go now, if you will,
And I shall go fore'er again
O'er the ridge of the farthest hill:
But tell me now, you loved me then!

Another little gem is "My Daughter's Eyes":

My daughter's eyes are amber pools
Of fluid loveliness.

Dear Lord, let not their depths
Be stirred by sorrow or distress.

But if it must be . . . keep her from
An after bitterness!

"A Hymn of Peace" was included in Rodolfo Datu's first anthology of *Filipino Poetry* in 1924. "To My Love" and "Arise" appeared in the first volume of *The Literary Apprentice* in 1927. He was one of the thirteen founders of the Writers' Club of the University of the Philippines in 1925. *Poems of Choice* is a valuable volume for the literary historian who in the years to come will have to pay more attention to Tonogbanua and his colleagues who, in a very literal sense, created Philippine poetry in English.

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