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George Ade's edited by Perry E. Gianakos

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GEORGE ADE'S "STORIES OF 'BENEVOLENT ASSIMILATION'."
 Edited, with an introduction by Perry E. Gianakos. Quezon City: New
 Day Publishers, 1985. 82 pages.

In this thin volume, Perry Gianakos of Michigan State University gathers in one collection George Ade's sixteen stories of "Benevolent Assimilation" which first appeared in the *Chicago Record* where they ran weekly from 8 July to 18 October 1899, at the height of the Philippine-American War. According to Gianakos, they had never been collected in a single volume, and even Ade himself was not sure whether his works were published outside of this newspaper.

Before one reads the collection, one must commend Gianakos for his introduction which provides the historical context for Ade's writings. George Ade was a staff reporter for the *Chicago Record* in the 1890s. He had established a reputation then as a humorist and satirist, writing a regular witty column entitled "Stories of the Streets and of the Town." Fortunately for *Record*, its artist, John T. McCutcheon was with the squadron of Admiral George Dewey which sailed into Manila on 1 May 1898. McCutcheon stayed on in the Philippines and covered the American takeover of the islands and eventually, the Philippine-American War. McCutcheon kept sending dispatches to the *Record* describing the events in the new American possessions, and it was from these dispatches that George Ade fleshed out his stories. He relied almost solely on newspaper accounts, as he himself visited the Philippines only in 1900, almost a year after his stories first appeared.

These stories came out as numbers of a weekly column, but can be read as separate sketches. Collectively, they describe the efforts of Washington Conner, the "travelling representative of the civilization of the United States of America and advocate of the doctrine of 'benevolent assimilation'," (p. 6) who had been sent to the Philippines to try to civilize and convince a Tagalog family, the Kakyaks, to adopt the ways of American life. As is well-known, in December 1898, President McKinley announced his administration's policy with regard to the Philippines:—"it should be the earnest and paramount aim of the military administration to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines. . . by proving to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation." (p. 5) Actually, this was just a euphemism for annexing the islands at a time when Emilio Aguinaldo and his revolutionary army were already setting up a republic. George Ade was one of the opponents of this "Benevolent Assimilation" program and he attacked it through fiction and humor. Ade has been described by a fellow alumnus from Purdue University, Professor James McKee, as a writer who "just thought the idea of trying to transform the Filipinos into Asiatic carbon copies of American democrats was almost too absurd for words." (p. 1).

Hence, his description of the missionary Conner, the "con-er" from Wash-

ington, is both interesting and amusing. Conner vainly attempts to transform the entire Kakyak family—Mr. Bulolo Kakyak, his wife, Luneta, their sons, Patricio and Francisco, and their only daughter, eighteen-year old Eulalie—into civilized citizens under the protection of the United States of America. He engages in endless discussions with Mr. Bulolo over the American constitution and the rights and obligations of citizens, forces Mrs. Kakyak to wear tight-fitting corsets and American head-dresses, and finds himself being attracted to Eulalie, with her “quizzical baby face” and “soft persuasions.” (pp. 25-26) As time goes by, the Kakyaks still stubbornly refuse to become American, and it is Conner who finds himself being assimilated. He begins to shed off his woolen coat, to smoke tobacco frequently, and to enjoy the slow-paced life of a people used to a tropical climate.

Finally, Conner reports on his progress to the War Department in Washington, D.C.: “It may require a century or so to transform the Tagalos into good Americans,” (p. 68) but he obediently decided to carry on with his mission. Soon, he discovers that Eulalie, and the whole Kakyak family, in fact, had been in contact all along with Josefo, a Filipino “insurgent” and that the two Kakyak children were about to join the rebel forces. Convinced that he had been deceived, Conner returns to the United States, nursing the opinion that the Tagalos are indeed not capable of self-government and that the glorious task of benevolent assimilation would be better carried out by the United States Army.

As one reads the stories, one will be amused by Ade’s wit, humor, and satirical tone. Nevertheless, one must admit that Ade had some shortcomings as a writer. As Gianakos points out, the reader will discover that the Filipino family, the Kakyaks, “think and act like plain-speaking American agrarian democrats with a respectable helping of common horse sense.” (p. 7) Since Ade had never been to the Philippines before he wrote these stories, he probably knew little of rural Filipinos aside from what he read in the newspaper accounts. Thus, the confrontation between Bulolo Kakyak and Washington Conner is essentially an American situation: “the wise, rural equalitarian versus the sophisticated and patronizing city slicker.” (p. 7). Although Ade speaks through supposedly Filipino characters, it is mainly an American’s perception of the events in the distant Philippine islands.

Indeed, Ade’s Filipino characters are difficult to believe. Rural Filipinos who could question an American missionary word-for-word over the tenets of the American constitution, just did not exist at that time. Nor were there articulate, English-speaking Filipinos in the rural areas, since the vernacular and Spanish were the languages being used. In fact, one of the bigger problems of that initial encounter between American soldiers and rural Filipinos at the turn of the century was communication. In reading Ade, therefore, one must realize that Ade was not writing a well-researched social history reflected in fiction, but simply making a commentary, partly limited by his

personal background and inadequate sources.

Still, this does not detract from the value of his work. As Gianakos points out, as a popular writer, George Ade makes an interesting subject for the study of American thought and American imperialism at the turn of the century, especially for historians who try to include insights from social psychology in the writing of revisionist histories. The *Chicago Record* for which Ade wrote enjoyed the support of the Anti-Imperialist League; although he himself was not categorically an anti-imperialist, his opinions were sympathetic to those of the League's and he probably had quite a number of constant readers. By studying Ade's writings, one can perceive that the American response to their country's imperialism was quite varied and diverse. George Ade was and is, as the back cover states, "a delightful reminder that not everyone at the turn of the century took the beginnings of America's 'Day of Empire' too seriously."

Very true, indeed, but for those Filipinos (and Americans, too) whose lives were shattered in the course of carving out that empire, perhaps Ade's stories, written miles away from that bloody confrontation, would not have been something to laugh about.

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