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Aftermath of the British Invasion of the Philippines

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Aftermath of the British Invasion of the Philippines

CARLOS QUIRINO

The relative ease with which Great Britain took Manila in 1762 tempted other British quarters to repeat this conquest during the early years of Napoleon's meteoric rise in the Continent. The author recently acquired from a London bookseller contemporary copies of two letters written in 1804 to the chairman of the British East India Company bluntly urging the conquest of Manila in the global conflict against Napoleon.

The writer of these letters, a certain Eardley Wilmot Michell, must have been either a consular official in Manila at the close of the eighteenth century—for he speaks of having made observations in 1796—or a representative of some commercial firm. These were the days before the port of Manila was opened to foreign trade, when the Manila-Acapulco galleons monopolized Philippine trade with the outside world.

Rafael de Aguilar was then the governor general of the islands. Spain, under the aging Carlos IV, had sided with the French in their war against England. A royal order in 1796 transferred the naval base at San Blas de California to Cavite, and gave impetus to the creation of a permanent Spanish navy in the archipelago. The squadron in the Far East was placed under Admiral Ignacio de Alava, who pursued a British contingent in Asiatic waters in 1800-02 without results.

In 1803 the British, carrying the war against France and Spain in this part of the world, attacked and captured the island of Balabagan in northernmost Borneo, south of Palawan. British policy and action in southeast Asia was guided by the East India Company, a commercial firm founded some three centuries earlier for exploiting trade in India and the Orient. It is therefore not strange that the plan to invade Manila was first broached to the chairman of the East India Company in London, Sir William F. Elphinstone, the wealthy and influential head of the British government's alter ego in Asia.

These two communications, together with an annotation by a strange and unknown hand—perhaps by some official of the British Admiralty—appear hereunder.

I

Hurstmonceaux
3 December 1804

To Mr. Woolmore, Manila

My dear Sir:

Enclosed you will receive the Memorandum for the Chairman. If on the perusal, it fully meets your approbation both as to quantity and precision, be so good to forward it—if personally it might give Sir William (Elphinstone) an opportunity of asking an explanation on some points which your general nautical knowledge can easily resolve.

If Government are [*sic*] apprehensive that our China ships may be molested from the Naval Force of the Spaniards in Manila, this force can be annihilated by one Blow. Our ships might arrive in the Bay early in September and either destroy their Fleet in Cavite or follow them to their cruising station on the Coast of China. This effected, the Change of Monsoon would enable them to return to their original stations in India after a short absence. I feel confident this can be effected with little loss. The Fortifications of Cavitt to the Sea consist of a weak parapet with wide Embrasures and not tenable against a 50 gun ship. The Naval Force at Manila in February 1796 consisted of two Frigates lately arrived and 16 or 17 Gun Boats and Gallies.

Any further information which you may require that I am able to give, I shall feel myself happy in explaining.

I am, My dear Sir,
Your obedient & faithful servant,
(Sgd.) E. W. MICHELL

The following note has been added by a different hand:

Orders may be sent to the Com'm in chief in India to ascertain the Naval Force of Manila and Cavita and if there should be any line of battleships or Frigates at those places he may be further directed to make an attack for the purpose of taking or destroying them.

II

*To the Honorable W. F. Elphinstone, Chairman
of the Honble. East India Company, etc. etc.*

Sir :

In obedience to your Commands to commit to paper any circumstances which I can bring to my recollection of the situation from Manila in February 1796, I have now the honor to submit the few following Remarks to [sic] your perusal.

The S. W. Monsoon in the Bay of Manilla commences in May and continues till September, during which time the Anchorage in Manilla Roads is rendered unsafe from the frequent gales of W.S.W. Winds. These gales often occur in the two following months of October and November; therefore ships usually remain at Cavitt till the end of Novem. or early in Decem., from which period their situation at the Barr is perfectly secure. The Anchorage in Manilla Roads for large vessels is in 7 fathoms—Distance from the Fort 2 miles.—

The Port of Cavitt—so termed by the Spaniards—affords a most excellent shelter from the S. W. Monsoon, and here their Galleons are built and their ships repaired. The King and the Royal Philippine Company have each a Naval Arsenal of Marine Stores, which were tolerably well replenished from Europe in January 1796: but in the event of these supplies failing, their local advantages are superior to most countries in Asia, in producing materials requisite for fitting and repairing ships; as timber for every purpose of ship-building, and masts of the largest dimensions are procured in the neighborhood; and the adjacent islands furnish them with a species of hemp, well known in the Eastern Seas, called by them Havacka [abaca] which they manufacture into cordage of all sizes, and I may add to these advantages—that of completing any deficiency in their crews from the natives, who are known throughout India for their superiority over every other description of Asiatic seamen. The usual method of repairing ships here is by careening, with some

few exceptions, to their Galleons. Their wharfs and careening gear are on a large scale, and adapted to ships of all sizes . . . indeed the Spaniards excell most other nations in this art.

Ships anchor here in from 5 to 7 fathoms, at a distance of a mile or more from the fortifications, altho' in rounding the point, the works can be approached by large ships within pistol shot, but in this situation ships moored under these batteries for protection from an enemy, would be exposed to the violence of the western gales—and in no secure position could large ships with their stores on board, be materially protected by the fortifications. The Galleons when dismantled are worked up the Harbour, and generally take the mud at low water. In this situation they are partially secured from assault by the fortifications. The distance from the entrance of the Bay, where ships are first discovered, to Cavitt is 25 or 26 miles, and to the anchorage in Manila Roads 32 miles; but as ships from the sea, who arrive in the S.W. monsoon bring with them a strong breeze with smooth water, their approach is very rapid and affords but little time for preparation.

I have the honor to remain, etc. etc.
(Sgd.) EARDLEY WILMOT MICHELL

Note that Michell's first letter was written on the day after Napoleon Bonaparte had crowned himself at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris as Emperor of the French. The previous year, May of 1803, the treaty of Amiens had been scrapped and England and France were again at war. British feeling against Napoleon [and his Spanish ally] was running high and all sorts of proposals to defeat the alliance must have been submitted by responsible quarters to the administration headed by the younger William Pitt, the prime minister. This particular proposal must have been tabled or disapproved by the British Admiralty, for had not the British captured Manila in 1762 to lose it soon thereafter by a treaty? The Admiralty must have decided that the Spanish squadron in the Far East was not a real threat to their possessions in India and elsewhere—hence, why waste effort in such a venture? The lords of the Admiralty must

have decided that defeating the combined French and Spanish fleets in Europe was of primary importance, and the destruction of the enemy at the famous sea battle at Cape Trafalgar (near the Straits of Gibraltar) on October 21, 1805, proved them right: for Napoleon's dream to invade England was dispelled, and the long road that ended at Waterloo had started.