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**Tales of the Barrio:**

**Children of the Ash-Covered Loam and Other Stories**

**by N. V. M. Gonzalez**

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## TALES OF THE BARRIO

CHILDREN OF THE ASH-COVERED LOAM AND OTHER STORIES. By N. V. M. Gonzalez. Manila: The Benipayo Press. 1954. Pp. ix—209.

No one has the right to offer any solution to the nation-wide problems of the Philippines (whether educational or economic) who does not know how the people live in the little villages in the hinterland or on the islands far away from Manila. In these places, people live crudely, primitively, off the recalcitrant soil or off a river, with little or no religion to ennoble their existence but with plenty of superstitious beliefs and practices to debase it. In such places, the comforts of modern civilized living are unknown, as are privacy or the rules of hygiene. Such is the life of these "children of the ash-covered loam," and if one has no acquaintance with it through personal knowledge, one can at least have vicarious experience of it through Professor Gonzalez's stories.

He is a good writer, and the chief virtue of his craftsmanship is his attention to detail. This gives to his stories a local color that is authentic and a vividness that is almost photographic. One gets from these stories an impression of wet earth and swampy river, of *batels* crowded with passengers and of nipa huts congested with sleeping bodies at night, of pigs grunting in their pens and traveling vendors opening their *tampipis* to disclose gaudy treasures of cheap merchandise and holy pictures.

For this reason, one reads the seven stories in this little volume with fascination—albeit (one must add) not always unmixed with disgust: for it is not always aesthetically pleasant to contemplate in detail such matters as porcine belching or human parturition or the massaging of a woman's belly by a primitive midwife. There are, after all, certain intimate things connected with "the human condition" which one would prefer to pass off with a word, or (better still) to take for granted. It is the human condition that is important, not the messy details that attend it.

It is, however, on aesthetic, not on moral grounds that one objects to these crudities. The stories in this volume are free from the unhealthy eroticism that permeates so much of contemporary literature. Professor Gonzalez faces the realities of life and calls them by their names; his stories are of the earth, earthy;

but their preoccupation is not with concupiscent flesh. If, therefore, the fastidious will find some of these stories painful to read, the moralist will at least not find them objectionable.

In point of technique, these stories are excellent—except, perhaps, the first two: the first (“Children of the Ash-covered Loam”) seems insufficiently focused, and the second (“Lupo and the River”) seems soggy with detail. But there is one story which appears to this reviewer as superior to the rest. It is called “The Blue Skull and the Dark Palms.” It is in this story alone that the author seems to have drawn a character with sympathy and with affection.

Not all of these stories are laid in primitive surroundings. The one just mentioned (“The Blue Skull”) is laid in a little provincial town, and “Where’s My Baby Now?” — delicate bit of satire—is laid in the city.

One notes with satisfaction that several of these stories were previously published abroad—in America or in England: in *The Sewanee Review*, *The Hopkins Review*, *The Pacific Spectator*, *Stanford Stories*, and *Life and Letters*. We congratulate Professor Gonzalez on his share in bringing the attention of the English-speaking world to the existence of a Filipino literature in English.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

## ROLL OF HONOR

DICTIONARY OF PHILIPPINE BIOGRAPHY. By E. Arsenio Manuel. Quezon City: Filipiniana Publications, 1955. Pp. xiii-511. ₱40.00

This is the first volume of a projected five-volume work of Mr. E. Arsenio Manuel of the Faculty of the University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.

There are in this volume one hundred and fifty-five biographies, averaging some two or three pages. There are a few rather long studies: T. H. Pardo de Tavera has the longest, running to thirty pages; Nicanor Abelardo's runs to twenty-eight (but is largely a list of his compositions with the score of one unpublished piece); Juan Crisostomo Soto, the Pampanga writer, has sixteen pages;