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28-88: A Line to the Times

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28-88: A LINE TO THE TIMES. Manila: Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company, 1988. 111 pages.

It is a combination that could raise eyebrows. A coffee table book on Philippine and world cultural history by a telephone company? Publicity gimmick? History trivialized?

"Gimmick" or not, *A Line to the Times* proves to be highly informative as well as entertaining. The book is a series of essays on events and developments in the Philippines and other parts of the world throughout the six decades (from 1928 to 1988) that the Philippine Long Distance Company has been in existence. Interspersed among these are "PLDT Highlights" that contain facts and figures on the company's performance for each decade.

One noteworthy feature is that the book manages to recreate, in both text and illustrations, the culture and temper of past years with a lightness of touch that entertains without trivializing. Furthermore, its contents have been so arranged as to project the sponsor without sinking to the level of pure advertisement.

All information on the company itself is kept separate from the historical essays. The "Highlights" are brief and strictly factual, but enlivened with photographs of scenes reflecting the company's technological expansion through each ten-year period. Also helping to convey the subliminal message are: the use of the company's current slogan as the book's title; the quiet elegance of the cover design (blue and silver on white); the masthead of the PLDT 1938 newsletter, reproduced on the end papers; a short biography of the first Filipino president of PLDT; and the management roster towards the end of the book. These features of book design and content create an image of solid, service-motivated organization, operating like a large extended family, and growing steadily through the years.

The reader could of course take such devices as one would take any other advertisement—with a grain of salt. But *A Line to the Times* also serves a purpose beyond publicity. The sections on the company itself definitely have research value. And the articles on culture and history that make up the bulk of the book are a goldmine of information and insights on the near and distant past.

A Line to the Times opens with Juan T. Gatbonton's introductory essay, "Modern Times," which sweeps through the past fifty years in the world's history, highlighting changes in the economic, political, and cultural lives of nations, and marking the most significant scientific and technological advances of the age. The reader is sucked into the whirlpool of change that constitutes modern times, witnessing at a glance the intense rivalry between the US and the USSR; the social turbulence in the Third World; the often tortuous paths that both Roman Catholicism and Islam have taken in responding (or reacting) to a rapidly secularizing world; the gradual dying out of this polluted earth's resources; and, on a more positive plane, the growing economic and political liberalization that Gatbonton sees in at least some parts of the modern world.

Six essays follow: by Nick Joaquin, Natividad Nuguid, Paulynn Sicam, Alfred Yuson, Alfredo Navarro Salanga, and Sheila Coronel. Joaquin's

"1928–1938: The Swingtime Years" begins with the peak of the jazz age and moves on into the Great Depression. Nuguid's "1939–1948: The War Years," describes the world as it was just before, during, and after World War II, ending with the beginning of the reconstruction period. In "1949–1958: A Giddy Fairy-Tale Decade," Sicam covers the postwar period, and Yuson writes of the hippie era in "1959–1968: A Generation in Full Flower." Salanga then discusses the next decade, with emphasis on the Marcos era, in "1969–1978: Into the Dark Years." The last of the historical essays, Coronel's "1979–1988: A Decade of Change," describes and assesses the events of the very recent past.

The historical essays are characterized by an apparent randomness in tone and presentation. Sundry details on an era's songs and fashions, politics and economy, triumphs and troubles, are dropped like confetti. The result is a picture of the past as not just a compendium of the great and glorious, but a real world in which mingled the commonplace and the extraordinary, the mundane and the momentous. Joaquin's vivid, blow-by-blow account of events at the inauguration of the Commonwealth, for example, merges the gaily trivial aspects of the celebration with greater tragedies unfolding:

That night there were fireworks at the Luneta, a public ball at Plaza Santa Cruz, and the bash at Santa Ana, where the entire cabaret had been turned into vast [*sic*] ballroom. The floorshow had Miami Salvador doing Hawaiian numbers and Bayani Casimiro hoofing it up with the Diaz Sisters.

The day ended as it had begun, with the weather very fine, clear and cold and crowds happily jostling downtown. Thus was inaugurated the Commonwealth of the Philippines, at a time when the Italians were invading Ethiopia, the Japanese were vandalizing China, and Hitler was raping Europe. (p. 31)

Despite their generally "confetti-like" nature, however, the essays do convey a coherent picture of each era, for there is structure behind the randomness. Each essay begins with a capsule characterization of the decade concerned, capturing the flavor or mood of the age in a catchy phrase or a telling paragraph.

Joaquin's opening paragraph mirrors both the carefree prosperity of the jazz era and the sense of doom that would come with the "swingtime of the Thirties" (p. 18); Nuguid begins her essay with World War II, "the main event of the decade 1939–1948" (p. 36); Sicam describes the fifties as "a period of innocence and hope" (p. 48); Yuson speaks of the sixties as "the decade of the startling image—of love-ins, men on the moon, miniskirts, the Berlin Wall, death-dealing seen live on television" (p. 60). Salanga sums up in his opening statement just what 1969 must mean now to those who lived through the "dark years": "We didn't know it then but 1969 was about the last time we could afford to be ambivalent about anything (p.74)." And Coronel describes the eighties as a time of "wrenching change" (p. 88).

Following these openers are the particulars of culture and history—sometimes delightful, sometimes hilarious, sometimes saddening or maddening. Readers who know only this fast-paced fastfood era will be amused to learn that sandwiches were once called *emparedados* (root word, *pared*, meaning wall—

an interesting image there), and that bell-bottomed trousers were not an invention of the sixties—men wore them too in the thirties. Song titles like “Flat Foot Floogie with the Floy Floy” and “Tipitipitimitipitom” challenge the curious, as do dances like the jitterbug, the *appalachicola*, or the Lambeth Walk.

Along with these frivolities, one also reads of the Sakdal and Huk uprisings, the bargaining with America for Philippine independence, the rise of fascism, the Second World War and the atomic bomb, the Vietnam War, the collapse of the Ruby Tower, the corruption and repression of the Marcos years, the Aquino assassination and its critical aftermath, AIDS and the Third World “debt crisis,” the shakiness of the present Aquino regime—the many sad and painful things that have dotted the lives of individuals and of nations through the decades.

In their accounts of the past, the writers often link apparently trifling details with more significant economic or political developments. Nuguid notes that the bikini, a fashion innovation of the post-war period, was “named after the Pacific atoll where the US was exploding bigger and bigger nuclear bombs. . . .” (p. 46); and Sicam exemplifies the “note of hope and joy” with which 1958 ended by juxtaposing the election of a new Pope (John XXIII) and the advent of stereo recordings (p. 58).

Another strategy for coherence is seen in Yuson’s essay, where the three “mighty typhoons” of 1964 (*Louise*, *Sading*, and *Sisang*) mentioned in one paragraph become a reflection of the “equally tempestuous” arena of Philippine politics in the next (p. 69)—two unrelated events becoming metaphorically linked. The songs or expressions of a particular decade are sometimes used to reflect the prevailing mood. Coronel recalls a catch-phrase of the year just past:

‘I can feel it,’ was the in-phrase, made popular by a soap commercial.

In many ways, that exclamation summed up how Filipinos felt about the tumult, the excitement and the pain of the Eighties. (p. 98)

Complementing the liveliness of these essays are E. Aguilar Cruz’s rough, spirited pen-and-ink drawings of famous personalities (including cartoon characters) and of scenes that mirror the politics and culture of every decade. For an older generation of readers, these sketches add to the nostalgia the essays provide. For younger readers, who have never seen an *autocalesa* or have no idea what “bobbysoxers” were, the sketches are an education, giving one the feel of a fifties cocktail party, or a seventies Mendiola riot, or images of the familiar eighties: “Edsa, February 1986,” “Taekwando at seawall,” “Luneta joggers.”

On the whole, *A Line to the Times* is worth adding to one’s library. For the researcher, or the nostalgia tripper, or the basic browser, it is definitely good reading; and, for the record, a worthwhile way to celebrate an anniversary.

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