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Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-Creation of Andres Bonifacio.

By Glenn Anthony May. Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies and Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1996. 200 pages.

Historiography is actually the search for the truth that outlasts time and space. But historical truth is not identical with metaphysical truth for paradoxically, change characterizes history, which is the delicate balance between external stimuli and the corresponding human reaction.

History is also distinct from other academic sciences since its object no longer exists, except what survives from the past, the "relics" or sources of history. Basically, then, historiography is an intellectual process, a mental creation that is reined in by the available sources—personal diaries, letters, memoirs, speeches, clothes, medals, official documents, etc. Unless based on these "objects" that are "out there" independent of one's thinking, what one writes, no matter how stylistic, cannot be "history" but instead fiction.

The primary task, therefore, is to look for the sources of history and verify them. Only after finishing this preliminary search and evaluation can one put these disparate sources of information together and create an intelligible pattern which we call history.

Glenn Anthony May wanted to write a biography of Andres Bonifacio. Instead, he ended up writing a "bizarre story about a famous man," bizarre because he believes the hero has been "posthumously recreated . . . given a new personality and a childhood that may bear little resemblance to his real one" (1).

This is a rather strong statement, and has immediately provoked an equally strong reaction. But May was stymied by the sources he studied. He found them to be "problematic . . . seriously flawed," sources that "appeared to contradict each other often, sometimes on matters of small detail and sometimes on important issues" (2). For three years, he dropped his plan until he decided to write an essay on the sources of Bonifacio's life instead. The result is as the book's title expresses it: Bonifacio is a hero "invented" by the first authors who wrote about him.

That Bonifacio lived, founded the Katipunan, was forced to rise up in arms against the Spanish colonial government in the Philippines, and was

executed, however, are incontrovertible facts. But to May, the real problem is who the hero was. It is this problem that the book tries to analyze. It is like trying to answer the question facing every biographer: do deeds confirm the doer's personality? Or do actions logically flow from one's personality? The two are different, as the Mexican Nobel Prize winner, Octavio Paz, has observed. Life does not completely explain one's works, and vice-versa. There is a wide gap between the two and this gap can be called creativity (Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana de la Cruz o Las Trampas de la Fe* [Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982], 13). Thus, for May the question has no answer, because there is a lack of reliable information on *who* Bonifacio was.

The first writers about Bonifacio were Epifanio de los Santos, Manuel Artigas, and Jose P. Santos, son of Epifanio. These three have been almost exclusively the source of our present knowledge about the national hero. Artigas was 45 years old when he wrote Bonifacio's biography in 1911 (14 years after Bonifacio's death), de los Santos was 48 when he published an essay on Bonifacio in 1917 (21 years after Bonifacio's death) in the *Philippine Review*, and Santos wrote in the mid-1930s. Artigas and Santos wrote in Spanish, while Santos, the son, wrote in Tagalog. The first two were Bonifacio's contemporaries and had possibly known him personally, the third was not.

Artigas was literally a pioneer in Bonifacio historiography. Unlike the case of Rizal who had been immediately rehabilitated by the new American government, there was little writing about Bonifacio, and it was generally derogatory. An early history book for the schools under the American government, for example, had devoted four pages to the first, but only one to the second. Some Filipinos themselves were ambivalent toward the latter. In their perception, Bonifacio had been a revolutionary killed by fellow revolutionaries, likely a failure, for it was Aguinaldo who had brought to term the successful struggle against the colonial masters. Moreover, in contrast to the abundant literature that gave a clear picture of who Rizal was, even basic information about Bonifacio was lacking.

May thinks Artigas, not always a reliable writer, wanted to fill the lacunae: the date of Bonifacio's baptism, his family, the Katipunan. But of the 90 pages Artigas had written, about 45 were copies of documents of the Katipunan, revolutionary manifestos, and his own negative criticism of other books about the revolution. Bonifacio's youth and early adulthood filled only two pages.

But a more serious defect, according to May, was the absence of footnotes and acknowledgment of the sources Artigas had used. Of course, explicit footnotes are not always needed in a good book; on the other hand, many bad histories are crammed with them. If judged, however, from his other books, Artigas was uncritical in the use of sources, careless in transcribing documents and, although preserving for later historians many precious documents of Philippine history (e.g., documents on the Cavite Mutiny of 1872), he has not done so with his brief book on Bonifacio. It seemed

that Ortigas was too prolific a writer, to his own loss. In 1911 he published four books and in 1912 two more, or six books in two years. Thus, May concludes that Artigas could "not have [had] sufficient time to do extensive research on all the subjects that interested him" (30). And so,

our examination of Artigas's oft-cited book does not suggest that we should place absolute faith in its contents. Artigas may have examined some documents...talked to some of Bonifacio's surviving contemporaries...based his accounts on details, possibly untrue ones, that had found their way into oral tradition...also have gotten some data wrong...All we can be certain about is that as an authority Artigas was hardly unimpeachable. (30)

Epifanio de los Santos's essay appeared six years after Artigas's book. Described as "the foremost Filipino scholar of his time," de los Santos worked in various government offices, but his most important appointment was as Director of the National Library and Museum from 1925 to 1928.

Like Artigas, de los Santos did not include footnotes or citations of his sources. But whether unconfirmed or not, verified or not, anecdotes (for example, the story that Bonifacio had read Eugene Sue's *The Wandering Jew*) have become standard fare for all Filipinos because of him. But one may justifiably ask, how did de los Santos know these episodes in Bonifacio's life?

This is the basic question May asks in his analysis of the early writers about Bonifacio. In this wise, he finds a clue in the Retana collection of documents on the revolution, which includes Pio Valenzuela's declarations before the court when he applied for and received amnesty soon after the outbreak of the revolution in 1896. Unfortunately, evidence has led historians today to believe that Valenzuela often changed his statements to save his skin, and is therefore an unreliable witness. De los Santos claims his information came from Valenzuela, probably in a letter (presumably now lost) or in several interviews. But what de los Santos included is found neither in Valenzuela's recorded testimony nor in his other descriptions of the revolution. "Why did that information," May asks, "only appear in the article by Epifanio de los Santos?" (33).

Jose P. Santos, the third of the early writers on Bonifacio, wrote in Tagalog, and his best-known book is *Si Andres Bonifacio at ang Himagsikan*. As in his father's case, the reader is justified in asking how the son came to know about the observations he put to paper.

Santos repeats practically the same information already given by the first two, but he also adds some of his own ideas on Bonifacio's writings. De los Santos credits Bonifacio with having written *Katungkulang Gagawin ng mga Z. Ll. B.*, a poem, *Pag-ibig sa Tinubuang Bayan*, and an essay, *Ang Dapat Mabait ng mga Tagalog*, while Santos the son adds a few others: the Decalogue for the Filipinos, a newspaper article, four poems, a translation

of Rizal's *Ultimo pensamiento* (more popularly, *Ultimo Adiós*), and a proclamation. Not only that, Santos the son also published what he claimed was the original Tagalog versions of these writings, except that of the Decalogue.

Like the first two writers, however, Santos neither cited his sources nor their provenance. Moreover, May points out contradictions in Santos's statements. For example, the latter claimed that two works, *Ang Dapat Mabaitid* and *Pag-ibig*, had appeared only in translation. He was now offering the reading public their original Tagalog text "without making any changes" to "show that our hero also possessed a great gift as a writer and a poet" (41). At the same time, Santos claimed some portions of the manuscript were illegible, torn, or obscured and he marked some portions of his transcriptions with question marks. But where these original gems had come from, Santos did not say.

Santos also announced that Bonifacio's Tagalog version of Rizal's poem had "been published numerous times before in newspapers and periodicals" (41). Retana, in his brief list of Rizal's works, mentioned Bonifacio's Tagalog translation of the poem but does not give a date (*Wenceslao E. Retana, Vida y Escritos del Dr. José Rizal* [Madrid 1997], 473). It is known that the poem, hidden in a lamp which the national hero had bequeathed to his sister on her last visit to her brother's prison cell, was immediately copied and distributed to some friends. One of these reached Hongkong, where Jose Ma. Basa had it published there in January 1897. A second printing came off a Hongkong press again in May 1897, when Bonifacio had already been dead. Before his death, did Bonifacio, already up in arms against the government when the poem was distributed among friends and continually moving or hiding have the time to, first, know about the poem and, second, translate it?

This is not May's question; rather, his concern is the provenance of the manuscripts of Bonifacio's literary works. He does not accept Santos's explanation of "white ants" that may have devoured portions of the manuscript. Instead, he flatly states that "Bonifacio's authorship cannot be credited for the simple reason that [Santos] provided not a scrap of evidence that the poems were authentic" (42). Bonifacio, then, "the literary master, the unschooled genius, the creator of timeless Tagalog prose, and the gifted poet ... may have been a myth" created and foisted on unthinking Filipino schoolchildren and scholars by "de los Santos and Santos, father and son, both makers of unproved claims, translators and transcribers of possibly bogus text[s]" (43).

Besides denying Bonifacio's literary works, May also refuses to accept as authentic the few letters also attributed to the founder of the Katipunan: two to Mariano Alvarez, and four to Emilio Jacinto. The Bonifacio-Jacinto correspondence reports incidents during the Filipino-Spanish fighting in March-April 1897 and the Tejeros Convention, which replaced Bonifacio with Aguinaldo as head of the revolutionary forces. There are two versions of the existence and discovery of the letters—one by de los Santos, the other by his son.

The first says that in 1917, de los Santos edited the correspondence in Spanish and shortly, he edited the English translation in the same magazine, the *Philippine Review*. Again, May questions why the original texts were never published. Teodoro Agoncillo, who edited the historical writings of de los Santos, explained that the latter tried "to 'play it safe' by putting into parentheses words or phrases he feared that he [de los Santos] might have translated wrongly" (60, citing de los Santos, Agoncillo's ed., *Revolutionists*, xii). But these inclusions only include the names of persons and places, repeating "letter for letter, the word or words that precede it" (60). May, however, remains unconvinced.

The second version of the letters' provenance comes from Santos the son. In 1904, some Filipinos agreed to prepare a history of the revolutionary period, for which documentation was essential. De los Santos the father finally located Bonifacio's widow and his other childhood acquaintances. Moreover, he eventually purchased for a sizable sum the correspondence and the acts of the Tejeros Convention from somebody residing in Tondo, Manila. Reportedly, Emilio Jacinto had kept them in a vase which he had buried in the ground under his house. This explains why even after an anti-Bonifacio group (the followers of Aguinaldo) had already burned Jacinto's house, the collection remained unharmed. Somehow, while in the keeping of the Santos family, it survived several accidents and calamities: a fire in 1907 which gutted the Santos residence in San Isidro, Nueva Ecija, floods, termites, the Japanese invasion, and the Hukbalahap atrocities. In other words, according to Santos, the continued existence of the papers was almost miraculous.

Santos, however, did include some Tagalog texts in a manuscript he had submitted as an entry for the Bonifacio biography-writing contest in 1948. However, when he compared the Spanish and the Tagalog texts, May found "a number of strange discrepancies...various words and phrases in the Tagalog version are not translated at all, and, on occasion, the Spanish translation seems to distort the sense of the Tagalog text. The Spanish version also includes a few passages that do not correspond to anything in the Tagalog text" (64).

Translation, as everyone knows, is tricky. It can be done in any number of ways that could try to preserve the meaning, even the "euphony" and stylistic flow, of the original text. May, however, concludes that this cannot be true of the Santos translations: "The differences between the two versions are too great. It seems likely, then, that Jose P. Santos made a conscious decision to edit the prose of the Bonifacio documents" (65).

Artemio Ricarte, the fourth writer, is also unacceptable to May. Ricarte was a schoolteacher-turned revolutionary who later went into self-exile in Japan rather than accept the American government. His *Memoirs of General Artemio Ricarte* was edited by Armando J. Malay and published by the Philippine National Heroes Commission in 1963.

What is wrong with this book? May says that, among other things, Ricarte's version of the Tejeros Convention shows Ricarte for what he is. May is not the first to say so, for others have already detected defects in the memoirs. For example, Agoncillo wrote that he had found "several obviously unreliable statements that documents, discovered later on, belied" (Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan* [Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1956], 85).

May bases himself on contradictions he found between Ricarte's documents and other contemporary documents, which include Santiago Alvarez's recently published *Katipunan and the Revolution*, Aguinaldo's published memoirs of the revolution, and unpublished documents. It is standard research procedure to evaluate necessarily limited and obviously prejudiced personal memoirs against the total historical context when they were written and which they only partially describe. Whether consciously or not, no man is a villain in one's eyes. May concludes, however, that Ricarte was one such "villain."

First, the latter's story of the Tejero's elections "may have been—and probably were—rigged." May points to evidence that even before they came together, the delegates to the convention had already apparently agreed to hold an election, with "non-Caviteños, and especially from the nearby province of Batangas" playing a key role. Almost logically, even when he later tried to nullify the results, Bonifacio had little support after the elections at Tejeros. At a later session in Tanza, "it was most unlikely...[that] Aguinaldo and the other delegates who had met there decided to announce that they had nullified everything they had done" (94–107).

Ricarte's "myth," therefore, presents many local political leaders at the Tejeros meeting who "suddenly and for no apparent reason...refrained from electoral politicking, arm-twisting, and dirty tricks." This could not be true, May writes, since Ricarte, "the national hero...was a dissembler. He may even have been a plotter" (110). Thus, the data about Bonifacio from the Ricarte memoirs are doubtful and unacceptable.

May also examines the information offered by two other writers, Agoncillo himself and Reynaldo C. Ileto, author of *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979). Agoncillo, according to May, offered two Bonifacios: a heroic, pre-revolutionary leader of the "Manila underground, the humble, quiet, honorable supremo of the Katipunan who commanded respect" and a later revolutionary leader, "the demon of the Cavite battleground, a man who seemingly underwent a psychological change in late 1896 once he left the city for the countryside" (114). On the other hand, Ileto whose attention centered on the possible motivations of the ordinary Filipinos for joining anti-government movements, only tangentially discussed Bonifacio's place in the entire Philippine revolutionary cycle.

One of May's more serious complaints against Agoncillo was the latter's uneven treatment of his subject. Agoncillo's fault was, for reasons of his own, his "faith in sources (usually, but not always, his interviews with Aguinaldo) that conveyed a favorable impression of the actions of Aguinaldo and his followers, and, he discounted others indicating that the Magdalo men exacerbated the conflict." That is why the "second part of *The Revolt of the Masses* amounts to nothing more than an apologia for Emilio Aguinaldo" (130).

Ileto, on the other hand, wanted to show that contemporary literature, especially the traditional and very popular narrative of Christ's Passion, could reveal the ordinary Filipino's perception of *kalayaan* and what it meant to struggle and die for it. Bonifacio's movement, therefore, was not entirely identical with that of the *ilustrado* campaign for political reforms and eventual political independence, a concept externalized by only one Tagalog word: *kalayaan*. Rather, the Filipinos familiar with religious images and aspects of biblical history popularized in the vernacular "were culturally prepared to enact analogous scenarios in real life in response to economic pressure and the appearance of charismatic leaders" (141, citing Ileto). In other words, the Philippine revolution was *the* Philippine experience, an important one in the contemporary millenarist tradition that characterized the last decades of the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia. "Almost overnight," May concludes, "Andres Bonifacio was transformed from a revolutionary 'plebeian' to the leader of a millenarian movement, a figure comparable not only with charismatic Filipino leaders like Apolinario de la Cruz and Felipe Salvador, but with a Javanese like Prince Dipanagara and a Burmese like Hsaya San" (144).

Ileto's thesis depends on an analysis of texts which he constructed "in such a way as to blur distinctions and link things that should not necessarily be linked" (146). This is clear in an effort to show a similarity existed between the Katipunan and the *colorum* society, which had hitherto been dismissed as having any serious connection with the 1896 revolution.

For his part, May denies the idea. He thinks that Ileto misread Alvarez's text describing an early cooperation between the two groups, which merely meant to show that the two were similar, since "in the early stages of both organizations the personal relationships among the members were similar" (150).

One of the questionable aspects of *Inventing A Hero* itself is perhaps its analysis of the motives of the early authors for writing about Bonifacio as they did. This is the heart of the book, and May knows he is treading on slippery ground here. But he takes care to prop himself up with an honest examination of the data available: the social and political contexts during which each author wrote, the internal evidence the sources themselves offer (from which contradictions and improbabilities appear), and the linguistic characteristics that determine the validity or invalidity of primary sources. Such an analysis is basic for serious historical study. One may not agree

with the conclusions or, perhaps, the evidence presented, but May deserves credit for what he has done.

As any respectable historian knows, conclusions are drawn according to each one's personal prejudices and mind-sets. Scholastic tradition describes it with the meaningful phrase "*quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur*" (literally, whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver). Precisely, the test of good history is whether or not, despite prejudiced writing, one can trace an intelligent pattern from the past. One has to admit that even "recognized" writers could have been in error and thus, their findings discarded. But to dismiss a book because one more "ugly American" has authored it is not only to miss the point but also to be intellectually dishonest. Attention should focus on the issue, not on personalities.

Inventing A Hero is important in another sense, for it reflects the present situation of Philippine historical literature. Save for a few exceptions, much of what has been accepted today as "history" is no better than propaganda and pseudo-scholarship. The ongoing celebration to commemorate the centenary of the revolution against Spain has revived, in a not-so-subtle way, the *leyenda negra* against Spain. Instead of trying to analyze and understand the issues that ended Spanish rule in the Philippines, the publications have tended to glorify the pseudo-heroes, so considered merely because they died during those years. Why they died, why some traditional figures continue to be honored as "martyrs," or who honored them as such are left unanswered or naively taken for granted. If history seeks truth, these questions should be faced squarely and answered clearly.

So far, Philippine revolutionary analysis has yet to admit that no revolution ever occurs overnight, or that people must first attain a certain level of political maturity before they could prefer death to an unacceptable social situation. Paradoxically, the Philippine revolution could not have happened had Spain not promoted this essential political maturity. But current writing has stressed the Spanish cruelty against Filipino bravery, forgetting that both Spaniards and Filipinos were both cruel and brave, for revolutions are times of instability, revealing both the worst and the best among the people. The point is not to say whether there are Filipino heroes or not; rather, an attempt should be made to show what makes them heroic.

Who is Andres Bonifacio? What external stimuli made him react the way he did? These are questions of fact that must be answered with facts, not fiction. Without an army of drumbeaters or propagandists, can he stand on his own merits and receive honor as a national hero? Precisely, what merits does he have? What evidence substantiates them?

Unless we know what these are, we would be like the blind leading the blind. Both would then fall into an academic pit, or worse, we would be glorifying fiction.