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Horacio de la Costa: Historian

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Horacio de la Costa, S. J. (1916–1977)

Horacio de la Costa, Historian

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER

In paying tribute to a man of such diverse accomplishments as Horacio de la Costa, there are many aspects which one could single out — the writer, the nationalist, the civic leader, the religious superior, the priest, the Jesuit, the unassuming, gentle friend of great human qualities which made him respected and loved by so many men and women not only of his own country but of many parts of the world. We have chosen his work as historian as the theme of this tribute not because it was most important to him — his life as a priest and Jesuit was far more important, as he showed in the way he put aside his historical work for the sake of administrative tasks he did not find very congenial, but which were asked of him by the Society of Jesus, and the way he answered many minor requests for his services as a priest, labors unknown to those who knew him only as an historian. But it was his work as historian which made him known to many here and abroad, and it was a work which he loved and for which he had outstanding qualifications. It has seemed fitting, therefore, that this tribute should be made up of articles by professional historians who were his associates, colleagues, and students in history, all writing in Philippine or Asian history, the areas he himself cultivated as a historian. It seems proper too to preface this volume with a brief account and preliminary evaluation of his work as historian.

THE EARLY PERIOD

Horacio de la Costa's first entrance into the historical profession came early in his career, when as a voracious reader of history he taught himself. In the description of his project on Jesuit history prepared for a university research committee in the late 1950s, he entered into the blank for "date begun" the year 1938. It was from

that time, if not even earlier, when he was finishing his M.A. in philosophy at Sacred Heart Novitiate in Novaliches, that he had begun serious work in Philippine history, though he had as yet had no formal courses beyond the undergraduate survey course in western civilization. The following year when he began to teach at the Ateneo de Manila, he was instructor in history as well as philosophy. Despite a full schedule of teaching, which included writing the scripts for numerous radio dramas presented on the Commonweal Hour of the Chesterton Evidence Guild, during those next two years he wrote a massive book of over 600 pages on the history of the Society of Jesus in the Philippines, 1859-1939, entitled *Light Cavalry*. This work, intended for popular consumption, is little known, since its printing was finished in 1942 when the Japanese war had already begun, and it was never actually published. It is of interest though, for it not only shows the extensive knowledge of the sources for modern Philippine Jesuit history which the author already possessed, but it also forms a contrast with the serenity characteristic of his mature historical writing. The biting wit which characterized some of his radio scripts against the anti-Catholic forces in Philippine society of that time is also found in his treatment of the anti-Catholic activities of hostile American Protestants, Masons, and Aglipayans with whom the Jesuits and the Church had had to struggle in the early twentieth century. Though the historical facts were true enough, the tone owes more to the Jesuit family pride of ardent youth in his predecessors' militant efforts to defend the beleaguered Church of the early twentieth century against her enemies than to the sober historian's effort to understand which would mark all his mature historical writing.

The war years saw him occupied with the study of theology until most of the seminary faculty were interned by the Japanese in 1944. This theological study was punctuated by risky trips to the provinces bringing assistance to American military and civilian personnel who were in hiding from the Japanese, an activity which earned him a term in the military prison of Fort Santiago from the Japanese and the Medal of Freedom after the war from the United States government. Though his activity as teacher of history and classics to Jesuit seminarians in 1944-45, amid the battle of Manila, must have left little opportunity for historical research, or even thought, the two years in which he completed his theological studies at Woodstock College, Maryland, in 1945-47, saw the writing and

publication of his first professional historical work, the classic article on the development of the native clergy in the Philippines. Though it does not yet show the complete command of the sources which would characterize his later work — he had not yet commenced formal historical studies —, the article already manifests the serenity and maturity of historical understanding that would characterize all his later writings, and as I have indicated elsewhere in this volume, it remains the fundamental work on the subject even today.

THE PROFESSIONAL HISTORIAN

Father de la Costa did his graduate studies at Harvard University from 1948 to 1951 with a concentration in Spanish colonial history. His Ph.D. dissertation, done under the direction of Professor Clarence Haring, was entitled "Jurisdictional Conflicts in the Philippines in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries." Though it was never published in book form, two chapters appeared in journals, "Church and State in the Philippines during the Administration of Bishop Salazar, 1581-1594," in *Hispanic-American Historical Review*, and "Episcopal Jurisdiction in the Philippines during the Spanish Regime," first in *Philippine Studies* and then reprinted in Gerald H. Anderson's *Studies in Philippine Church History*. The substance of most of the rest of the dissertation later formed sections of his book *Jesuits in the Philippines*.

Several months following completion of his studies were spent in Spain and Rome, gathering documentary materials on microfilm in preparation for his projected history of the Society of Jesus in the Philippines. Preliminary work had been done over several years by Fr. William Repetti, S.J., but failing eyesight had prevented its completion. De la Costa profited by Repetti's research, which made conceivable the completion of such a major study in such a relatively short time, but the completed book was an entirely different kind of work, and fully his own. The writing of this was interrupted not only by teaching but by a two-year term as Dean of the Ateneo de Manila College of Arts and Sciences. But from 1955 to 1957 Father de la Costa was again in the United States, completing the writing of what is undoubtedly his major work. *The Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581-1768* is no parochial history written only for Jesuits or ecclesiastics. It is indeed a labor

of love, written by one who felt himself in continuity with his Spanish brother-Jesuits who had worked for the Kingdom of God in the Philippines centuries earlier, but without concern for defensive apologetics, nor glossing over their failures. He tells their story with sympathy and appreciation, in a narrative which brings alive the dry official accounts from which it is drawn, turning an observant eye to the details revealing human behavior, and portraying them with understanding and gentle humor. But the book is more than a history of the Spanish Jesuits and their work; it sets this work against the background of not only the ecclesiastical but also the civil history of the times, and, for a general view, remains the best overall history of sixteenth to eighteenth century Philippines yet published. The second volume, intended to continue the story from 1859 to the present, exists only in the form of a massive amount of materials, but he never had the opportunity to complete it.

The years following Father de la Costa's return to the Philippines might be termed years of building — building a foundation for solid historical studies at the Ateneo de Manila, and helping to build the historical profession on a national level as well. As chairman, and originally sole full-time member, of the Ateneo history department, he began to build up a faculty, both young instructors whom he encouraged to pursue doctoral studies abroad, and older historians for whom the facilities of the Ateneo might provide a base for furthering their research. Among the latter was the late Gabriel Bernardo. On his retirement from the University of the Philippines, Bernardo became Rizal Professor of History at the Ateneo in 1957, so as to enable him to carry on his lifetime work of compiling a national retrospective bibliography of the Philippines. Though he died before completing his work, it was sufficiently advanced for others later to bring out two volumes within the Ateneo History department bibliographical series. Other bibliographical volumes which took their start from De la Costa's initiative were a bibliography of the Philippine sugar industry, and later a catalogue of the major Filipiniana library of the Augustinians in Valladolid, Spain. One of his own first tasks on returning to the Philippines in 1952 had been to compile a bibliography of all Filipiniana items in Jesuit libraries in the Philippines. In line with these bibliographical ventures was his active part in the Bibliographical Society of the Philippines, of

which he was president in 1960 and subsequently member of the Board of Governors.

Akin to his concern for bibliography as the foundation on which to build Philippine historiography were his efforts to assemble in the Philippines the documentation needed to write soundly based history. In the year in Spain and Rome after finishing his doctoral studies, he had assembled some 10,000 feet of microfilm of documents from the Archivo General de Indias in Seville and other depositories in Spain, as well as the entire Philippine section of the Jesuit Roman archives for the period prior to 1768. Among the Spanish materials were the two collections of over a hundred volumes each of documents from the Archivo de Indias and other sources, principally on the Society of Jesus, assembled earlier in the century by Fr. Pablo Pastells, S.J.; likewise the large amount of Philippine Jesuit material in the archives of the Jesuit Taragona province in San Cugat del Vallés. The importance of all this material to Filipino historians may be estimated from the fact that, even apart from the strictly Jesuit material, almost all of it except the San Cugat material is from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the period which is so scantily represented in the Philippine National Archives. With this collection the Ateneo de Manila possesses what is probably the largest and most varied collection in the Philippines of documentation on the early Spanish colonial period. Finally, as consultant for the National Science Development Board, in 1961 De la Costa spent another six months surveying the resources of European archives and libraries, and establishing contacts with Asian and European scholars interested in the Philippines. One result of this was another 15,000 feet of microfilmed material, mostly rare printed works, selected in large part in connection with his projected history of Manila.

The City of Manila project was conceived as a ten year effort to collect materials, publish bibliographies, and finally a history of the city for its fourth centennial in 1971. Though the first stages were completed, and some publication has taken place, or soon will, Father de la Costa's departure from the Ateneo history department in 1964 prevented its ever being completed.

He had hoped that the project would be carried forward by the Center for Asian Studies he envisioned, and for which he was engaged in active negotiations here and abroad during 1961-1962,

spending time to study the operations of such research centers as the School for African and Oriental Studies of the University of London and the East Asian Research Center of Harvard University. For De la Costa, Philippine history was not to be studied in isolation from other Asian cultures (or from Western cultures either, for that matter), a perspective he maintained right up to his death. At the time he was drawing up plans for the Asian Center in 1961, he had plans to begin the study of the Chinese language himself during the following summer vacation, and through the years he carefully followed events in mainland China through the *China News Analysis*, which he so frequently recommended to younger men. In later years he lent his expertise and support to groups promoting Chinese-Filipino integration, such as the Pagkakaisa sa Pag-unlad, while insisting on the importance of uniting integration with a concern to preserve the Chinese cultural heritage. When he returned to the classroom in 1976, he requested a course in Japanese history, to give him an opportunity to start updating himself in Asian history. It is not without significance in this connection that one of his early publications was a small book entitled *Recent Oriental History* (Manila: Ginn and Co., 1958), intended as a supplement to the *History of the Orient*, a textbook by Steiger, Beyer, and Benitez, published before the Japanese War by the same publisher.

This textbook also represented the concern he always felt for adequate textbooks for undergraduate teaching. Convinced of the importance of Filipino students being placed in contact with both Asian and Western cultures, he envisaged textbooks in those areas written from the Filipino point of view to supplant those in common use written for American students. But most of all he was concerned for the lack of any adequate textbook in Philippine history. It was out of this concern that his *Readings in Philippine History* grew, a book that has in some ways been the most influential of all his publications, and not merely for undergraduates. The opportunity for the book came from a Research Associate's position that he received from the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London in 1962-1963. The research into Spanish, Roman, French, and British Archives that year afforded him is evident in the great variety of sources revealed in the footnotes to the *Readings*. More important, perhaps, events come alive in the sparkling translations and the witty asides which characterize the

book. Unfortunately, it has never been widely used as a textbook, since only a brief three chapters encompass the twentieth century. The reason for this may be seen in the date of the Foreword, 8 December 1964, the date on which he became Provincial of the Society of Jesus in the Philippines and was forced to retire from serious academic work. The time left him to complete the book after his year of research abroad had not been sufficient to achieve the depth of treatment for the twentieth century which characterizes the earlier chapters. Conscious of this weakness, he made the chief of his projects after his return to academic life in 1976 the completion of a new edition in which the twentieth century would have been considerably revised and enlarged, a project unfortunately not completed.

If the volume did not have the success as a textbook that it deserved, it has served, however, as a source book for almost every historian who has written on the Spanish period since. In fact, it is much more than a student's textbook, based as it is on a vast range of reading in all kinds of sources, many of them unpublished heretofore. And what is perhaps even more important, it has achieved the purpose which its author set for it in the Foreword, saying that "it has been put together primarily for the enjoyment of those who do not necessarily have to pass an examination in it."

De la Costa's efforts during these fifteen years, without losing sight of the accomplishment signified in his two major published works, can perhaps best be characterized as years of building for the future. This building took place not only in the Ateneo de Manila, but on a national level as well. He excelled in bringing others together to cooperate in larger projects than any one individual would be likely to carry out. His part in facilitating the continuance of Professor Gabriel Bernardo's bibliographical work has already been mentioned. When he himself became president of the Bibliographical Society of the Philippines in 1960, he did his best to encourage collaborative bibliographical work on the part of other institutions. Together with Dr. Domingo Abella he was one of the organizers of the international meeting of Asian historians sponsored by the Philippine Historical Association in 1960 and held at the Ateneo de Manila. At the end the delegates from nine countries decided to form the International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA), electing Dr. Abella president, and Father de la Costa secretary. Subsequently a Philippine Chapter

of IAHA was organized and a series of meetings in different Asian capitals in following years succeeded in creating an awareness of what other Asian scholars were doing.

Finally, mention should be made for this period of the work of Father de la Costa for the Ateneo quarterly, *Philippine Studies*. Having been associate editor from the time of the founding of the journal in 1953, he became its editor in 1959. Though it was a scholarly quarterly of general interest, under his editorship one can say that it became one of the most important, if not actually the principal journal for Philippine history, at least as far as quality of articles was concerned. Numerous articles by Filipino, American, and European scholars on all periods of Philippine history appeared during his editorship, many of them of lasting value.

WRITING FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In December 1964 Father de la Costa was appointed Provincial of the Society of Jesus in the Philippines, the first Filipino to hold such a position in any of the internationally based religious orders, and probably the first Asian to do so in East and Southeast Asia. Though his work as religious superior and administrator was to be of great importance to the Philippine Jesuits and to the Church, it meant an end to his career as a teacher and scholar in history. It was not, however, the end of his career as historian. Though the succeeding years would not see any further major works of scholarly research, the historical perspective would never be absent from the numerous speeches and lectures which he would give in his ten years in administrative positions. In his years as Jesuit Provincial, both because of his position and his reputation as a thinker and speaker, he was widely called on to talk before civic, cultural, business, religious, and other groups, apart from occasional specifically historical lectures. A good number of these talks have been published in one form or another; far more of them remain unpublished. But in all of them one is conscious of the historian speaking. Whatever the topic or problem, he approached it from its historical background and context. One might conjecture that even more people were given a sense of historical perspective by his talks on these disparate topics than those reached by his formal historical works.

After finishing his term as Provincial in 1970, he looked to return to the University, but the opportunity was not to come. Hardly had he taken a period of rest from the strenuous years as Provincial when he was made General Assistant and Consultor to the Father General of the Jesuits in Rome, a position he held until 1975. Even less was he able to engage in historical work during this period. Many of his talks in these years were given at international meetings of various kinds, principally concerned with Jesuit apostolates, with problems of liberation, justice, and human development, of inculturation and pluralism in the Church. These were far from academic concerns, but urgently practical in their import. Nonetheless, one finds ever present the historical perspective, attempting to trace the roots of today's problems in the past, so as to find proper approaches to their solution in the future. As he had earlier done in his work in the Philippines and in the wider world of Asia, so likewise in Europe and America his writings manifest a sense of continuity with the past, and a sobriety and reasonableness in dealing with the contemporary.

After finishing his term in Rome, he returned to Manila. Though he continued to be called on, both publicly and privately, for advice and consultation on a wide range of problems in civil society and Church, and continued to receive invitations to international meetings of various kinds, his real desire was to return to the classroom and to research. Though he soon had commitments for several books to be written over the next ten years, he was also anxious to continue to teach, general undergraduate courses as well as graduate students in history. At the same time, he could not say no to the countless calls on his time, not only as an historian, but as a priest, and as a religious and civic leader. The time remaining to him was too short, and he was not given the opportunity to make the many contributions he still had to make to Philippine historiography.

QUALITIES AS HISTORIAN

The writing of history has always been afflicted by two perils—the facile popularizer whose brilliant rhetoric tries to conceal the lack of solid research behind his historical interpretation, and the diligent scholar and researcher whose ponderous style leaves

his scholarly tomes unread. My own perception of De la Costa as historian is that of the scholar who sought above all to get to the documents; for that purpose he spent so many of his active years as historian in gathering the documents which might make possible the truly scholarly multivolumed history of the Philippines about which we often spoke. But no one who has read his writings will doubt that even those who cannot appreciate their scholarship will enjoy them as lively, perceptive, witty, and simply well-written pieces of craftsmanship. To a rare degree he combined profundity of scholarship with an attractive and readable English style.

The last quality I would mention concerning De la Costa's historiography was perhaps a manifestation of him as a person just as much as it was a characteristic of his approach to history — his effort to understand and to sympathize. He was far from uncritical in his approach to the past, but his primary purpose in studying the documents was to gain understanding and insight into why men acted as they did. No real villains appear in his narrative even when his sympathies are clearly on one side. The notion of history as advocacy, or worse, as a weapon, distressed him, and he found the efforts to use history for ideological purposes which have appeared in recent years profoundly repugnant. But by the same token, as far as I know, he never engaged in polemics as an historian; even his profoundest disagreements were expressed in a way which hardly betrayed his feelings. This is the more striking since, as has been remarked in connection with his youthful writings, he had considerable talent for polemic, and had displayed a mastery of biting wit at the expense of those he then perceived as enemies of Church and nation. But in his mature historical writing no sign of such polemic ability ever appears; the historian tries to understand, to explain, and to convey that understanding to his readers.

This concern to understand the other's point of view, in personal life as well as in the writing of history, was undoubtedly one of the qualities which attracted to Father de la Costa so many friends, not only in his own country, but wherever he lived and worked. The tributes to his memory which have appeared in scholarly journals since his death have been many, and all have emphasized his combination of historical scholarship and deeply attractive human qualities. Many have wished to join in contribut-

ing to this memorial issue honoring him. We have thought to give it a certain unity by limiting its subject to Philippine and Asian history, the two fields in which Father de la Costa principally wrote. The historians who were invited to contribute represent his former students as well as his colleagues, both in the Ateneo de Manila and elsewhere. Professors Tubangui and de Jesus had been his graduate students at the Ateneo de Manila; and he had directed the Ph.D. dissertation of Professor Scott for the University of Santo Tomas. Fathers Arcilla, Cushner, and Schumacher had likewise been his students, in a more informal but real way, as he helped to guide them to graduate studies in history during their younger years as Jesuits. His colleagues at the Ateneo included Professor Gomez as well as Professors Tubangui and de Jesus and Fathers Arcilla, Cushner, and Schumacher. Among his fellow students at Harvard were Fathers Sebes and Chan. Colleagues from his stay in London were Professors Boxer and Cummins. Representative of his associates from other universities in Manila in the IAHA and the Philippine National Historical Society is Professor Foronda, currently president of the latter organization. Finally, representing his Roman years is Father Correia-Afonso, like De la Costa an historian who spent years with him in Rome in an administrative capacity, as regional assistant for India to the Father General of the Society of Jesus.

It may be thought that these articles pay tribute not only to the historical scholarship of Father de la Costa, but to the friendship with him which all their authors and many others, historians or not, cherished. All historians who work on the Spanish period of Philippine history will continue to be tributary to his historical scholarship, and so too will many Filipinos who never took a graduate course in history.