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Richard B. Meixsel

Frustrated Ambition: General Vicente Lim and the Philippine Military Experience, 1910–1944

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Book Reviews

RICHARD B. MEIXSEL

Frustrated Ambition: General Vicente Lim and the Philippine Military Experience, 1910–1944

Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. 351 pages.

Together with Josefa Llanes Escoda and Jose Abad Santos, Vicente Lim is memorialized in the Philippines's 1000-peso banknote. But sadly, no in-depth biography over the past decades has been written about him by any Filipino scholar or historian probably due to the lack of written sources. The closest to a biography there was on Lim was the compilation of his letters to his wife and sons, *To Inspire and to Lead* (1980), which was published privately by his granddaughter Nieves Lim Ledesma. It is thus commendable that an American military historian, Richard Meixsel, has written a biography on Lim: *Frustrated Ambition: General Vicente Lim and the Philippine Military Experience, 1910–1944*. The author is an associate professor of history at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA. Meixsel has also written articles on Philippine and US military history, and he is the author of two books, *Clark Field and The US Army Air Corps* (2002) and *Philippine–American Military History, 1902–1942: An Annotated Bibliography* (2003).

Frustrated Ambition contains eleven chapters that trace Lim's military career and his involvement in every significant military development in the Philippines. Unlike the standard biography where the focus is on a

single person's life, this book juxtaposes Lim's story with the formation of the Philippine Army. The amount of detail on the history of the Philippine Army and the various personalities involved with the institution is both the book's strength and weakness. While the idea of interspersing facets of Lim's story with that of the Philippine Army is an interesting one, it overwhelms the reader with too much information on the Philippine Army, leaving too little on Lim in most chapters. This difficulty can be gleaned for instance in chapter 4, where the author provides a lengthy discussion on the origins of the Philippine military system and then, toward the end of the chapter, merely quotes a lecture that Lim delivered arguing that the Filipinos recruited to the Philippine Army should be military-minded (91).

From these eleven chapters, the information pertaining directly to Lim can be summarized as follows: Born on 5 April 1888 in Calamba, Laguna, Lim graduated from the Philippine Normal School and later taught for six months at a public school in Santa Cruz, Laguna. In March 1910 Lim began his military career when he was accepted in the US Military Academy at West Point, New York. He was the first Filipino to graduate from West Point, after which he received his commission as a second lieutenant.

After Lim returned to the Philippines in 1914, he joined the Philippine Scouts and was subsequently assigned to Fort San Pedro in Iloilo. During his stay at the fort, Lim disclosed that he was not happy with the way his American commanding officer was treating him, but he neither explained how nor stated the reason why he was treated that way. He reported the American officer's behavior to higher authorities, and the officer was relieved (33).

Although membership in the Philippine Scouts represented the peak of one's career for both Filipino officers and American enlisted men, Lim was not satisfied with this achievement; he kept looking for opportunities to expand his military education and experience. In 1916 he was attached to the Philippine Constabulary (PC), then the country's militarized national police. Lim had hoped to head the PC. However, the US War Department turned down Gov.-Gen. Theodore Roosevelt's request for Lim's leadership of the PC not because of his qualifications but probably because of his character (72–73). Lim had a temper, and he lacked tact, allegedly not an easy person to get along with (105).

The National Defense Act of 1920 permitted Filipino Scout officers to attend service schools in the US. Lim took advantage of this opportunity to further improve his military education. From 1926 to 1927 he attended the advanced infantry officers' course at Fort Benning, Georgia, and in 1928 he graduated from the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. During his third and last year in the US, he was permitted to attend the Army War College in Washington, DC, a feat not attained by any other Filipino before the Second World War (48). When he returned to the Philippines in October 1929, he became the commandant of cadets at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran. He stayed there until his retirement from the US Army in 1936 (57).

When the Commonwealth government was established in 1935, Lim wanted to become the chief of staff of the newly created Philippine Army. He had a lot of ideas then on how to reform the army and how to improve the skills of its members. However, Gen. Douglas MacArthur bypassed him in favor of Paulino Santos. Later on Pres. Manuel Quezon did the same to Lim when he appointed Basilio Valdes. Lim was then just the deputy chief of staff with the rank of brigadier general (104–5). These episodes illustrate the “frustrated ambition” signaled in the book’s title.

In October 1935 MacArthur, Quezon’s military advisor, headed a military mission to the Philippines with Dwight Eisenhower and James Ord as members. MacArthur and Quezon were close friends, but, according to Meixsel, the president was later disenchanted with the American general and wanted him to leave the Philippines. Meixsel reveals that, unknown to many, Lim played a part in creating the “unreceptive environment” between MacArthur and Quezon (114–15). Lim and other Filipino army officers convinced Quezon that MacArthur had placed too much effort in recruiting a lot of men even if there were only very few trained officers who could instruct these recruits (127).

When the Second World War broke out in December 1941, Lim commanded the 41st Division, which was assigned to defend the Abucay line in Bataan when the US Armed Forces in the Far East retreated there. The American advisor of the 41st Division was Gen. Malcolm Fortier, whom Lim relied on with regard to strategy and military tactics (207). This division was reputed as the best Philippine Army division that fought the Japanese in Bataan, with Lim as its best commander (181).

Lim's division did not participate in the later battles in Bataan and was not part of the Bataan Death March. The Japanese however brought him to Camp O'Donnell in Capas, Tarlac. In July 1942 the new colonizers released him from the camp, after which he went to a hospital to recuperate. He had plans then of starting an underground resistance movement against the Japanese. When he left the hospital he tried to escape in a *batel*, a large sailboat; unfortunately, the Japanese found him and brought him to Fort Santiago in Manila. He was believed to have been executed later by the Japanese. His remains were never identified, and the day of his death was never ascertained (264–65). Although Lim never attained his ambition to put his mark on the military history of the Philippines, his death at the hands of the Japanese made him a hero worthy to be memorialized.

Meixsel states in the introductory part of the book that his goal in writing *Frustrated Ambition* was to provide a new perspective on military affairs in the Philippines during the American occupation, a perspective that “return[s] some agency to Filipino soldiers who attempted to affect the course of their own country’s history, a history from which they have, for far too many years, remained largely absent” (8). The way that he sets about achieving this goal may not appeal to every reader who may be looking for a biography on Vicente Lim, as the book’s title announces, but is then inundated with information on the Philippine Army. A proper biography of Lim remains to be written, and toward that goal Meixsel’s book will serve as a very useful resource.

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OTTO VAN DEN MUIJZENBERG, ED., TRANS.

Colonial Manila, 1909–1912: Three Dutch Travel Accounts

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016. 262 pages.

Otto van den Muijzenberg has translated three Dutch travel accounts about the Philippines that were written around a decade after the start of the