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Cracks in the Parchment Curtain

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Book Reviews

CRACKS IN THE PARCHMENT CURTAIN. By William Henry Scott. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982. 300 pages

Talk today moves from Glenn May's scalding review of Constantino's *A Past Revisited* ("A Past Revisited, A Past Distorted," *Diliman Review* 31 [March-April 1983]) to the rather general questions involved in doing a "nationalist" history: how does one manage to establish a "people's" perspective, given the fact that the major documents involved in Philippine history are the records not of the Filipino people, but of the foreign colonizer? Are there new sources to be tapped, or new ways of using old ones? How much "propagandizing" is necessary to counteract the built-in colonial mentality of most readers of Philippine history so that the end result will be a nationalist interpretation, but not a distortion, of the country's history? Or must nationalist history by definition involve distortion? Then naturally enough, someone mentions William Henry Scott, and *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*, and this book, perhaps the high point of Dr. Scott's twenty-five year career as a writer in Philippine history, offers many of the answers. It is in fact most fascinating and most instructive as just that — an extended essay on how best to do a nationalist history of the Philippines.

The central idea of the title essay, and a major theme throughout the collection, is simply that a Filipino perspective *can* be established and maintained through careful attention to the "cracks" in the "parchment curtain," which is, like the Iron Curtain and the Bamboo Curtain, a metaphor for the type of government control of information which makes it impossible for outsiders to learn much about the "true condition" of those *inside* the curtain. In this case modern Filipinos are cut off from learning much about the state of their ancestors by the fact that their history is revealed only in Spanish documents, written from a Spanish perspective, and, in fact, centering on Spanish concerns.

"Yet," says Scott,

There are cracks in that curtain, chinks, so to speak, through which fleet-

ing glimpses of Filipinos and their reactions to Spanish dominion may be seen. These are more often than not unintentional and merely incidental to the purpose of the documents containing them. Original letters and reports, bickering complaints about *conquistadores*, appeals for support, reward, and promotion, long-winded recommendations that were never implemented, and decrees inspired by local obstruction of government goals – all these contain direct or implied references to Filipino behavior and conditions. These insights do not generally appear in the official histories which are based on the documents (p. 1).

What this means in terms of history methodology is simply careful, painstaking and imaginative attention to documentary source material. It means having a fine eye for detail, and a mind alert to the significance of the incidental. It also means that Spanish documents *can still* shed new light on Philippine history, that there are still rich sources for new insights and new perspectives in the old, traditional materials.

The great care with which Scott works is perhaps best illustrated by his attention to class distinctions and terms which designate the emerging majority/minority dichotomy in Philippine society. He makes no facile generalizations, jumps to no hasty conclusions as he sorts through basic sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish documents, pinning these terms down in context and making cross reference to the dictionary meanings of various Spanish and native words descriptive of the class structure or the rights, privileges, and responsibilities accorded a particular class. The first of the two long essays devoted to this matter ends with the conclusion that Spanish records themselves show the inadequacy of the three-class analysis the Spaniards used in describing the Philippine situation: economically there seemed to have been but two distinct classes, while socially the situation was much more complex and the classes were really not distinct at all but seemed to “shade off into one another confusingly.” In the second essay on class, entitled “Class Structure in the Unhispanized Philippines,” he concludes that there are at least four basic types of social organization among the unhispanized: There are classless societies with no distinctions; warrior societies in which skill in battle is the major path for recognition; petty plutocracies in which social position is inherited as an adjunct to real property; and principalities in which the hereditary rights of a ruling class are recognized.

Scott uses similar methodology – that is, close attention to terminology as it occurs in various documents – in “The Creation of a Cultural Minority” to trace the beginnings of the majority/minority distinction which still troubles us so much today. He deftly illustrates how this distinction comes into being as part of the colonial process, which acculturated some groups and alienated others, and which thus “divided the Filipino people into two categories – the submissive and the unsubmissive, the faithful and the faithless, the good and the bad” (p. 40).

The "minority" mountain people of Northern Luzon are of course Scott's special interest, as he has lived and taught in Sagada for many years, and still considers that "home." Many of the essays in the book deal with the local history of Scott's area: "The Creation of a Cultural Minority," "An Ilocano-Igorot Peace-pact of 1820," and "Semper's Kalingas 120 Years Later." In the first of these, Dr. Scott traces the development of the minority/majority concept in colonial history, finding that the Spaniards at first differentiated mainly between themselves and *all* Filipinos, later distinguishing between Filipinos who were *dociles* and those who were *feroces*, and only slowly learning to distinguish between those well-hispanized (all those who had the same king – the Spanish King) and the others, who simply by maintaining their original characteristics became minorities. The third describes Scott's own impressions of a group of "Kalingas" (not as in Kalinga-Apayao) comparing his own findings with those of a German naturalist who visited them 120 years ago. Scott finds that although there have been changes, the virtues of the non-hispanized life-style are still intact:

Meanwhile, however, that simple culture appears not merely to have survived, but to be flourishing. It is a rough life style of limited horizons and steady demands on physical labor. But it is not without a certain dignity and independence and does not entail the raw exploitation experienced by the Philippine peasantry and proletariat. It is true that Ipiyak receives no modern medical or dental care, and that his children do not go to school – but then, young Kalingas in Dilumi have full sets of teeth as solid as ivory, and do not face such modern fate as the three one-armed dynamite fishermen I met among their better educated neighbors. All in all the struggle for existence and pursuit of happiness in the Katalangan Valley today is probably not significantly different from what it was a century ago (p. 176).

Five other essays deal with the history of the Ilocos region: "The Nine Clergy in Segovia," "Struggle for Independence in Candon," and three essays on Isabelo de los Reyes, who was, in addition to being the "Father of Philippine Folklore," an ideal provinciano nationalist, fighting against two colonial regimes (the Spanish and the American) through his radical and outspoken press. Taken together these five essays – the first two dealing with a pre-revolution incident in which several Filipino priests were framed by nervous and rather vicious Spanish priests and then imprisoned, tortured, and made to confess a revolutionary plot – serve very nicely to illustrate the interrelationship between local and national history. Isabelo Abaya's nationalism as leader of the uprising in Candon is northern in its roots, but truly Filipino in its working-out. It refuses to take cognizance of the artificially-imposed majority/minority distinction. This is shown when Abaya fled from Candon into the mountains and there recruited Igorots into the Revolutionary

Army which fought against the Americans in 1899. The local struggle thus connects with the national struggle – and also provides some excellent data for working out various questions relating to the degree of people's participation in the anti-colonial wars.

It might be in order at this point to reiterate the fact that Dr. Scott's history is *Filipino* history, from a distinctly Filipino perspective, notwithstanding the fact that he is dealing for the most part with the traditional Spanish documents and records. People who know Dr. Scott know his political beliefs and positions, strongly held and truly lived. But explicit political statements, explicit calls to nationalism, etc., are almost completely absent from this book. Dr. Scott is a master writer, scholarly and yet readable, subtle, and understated. His criticism is restrained:

To read the "Martyrdoms of the Nine Clergy of Nueva Segovia" from beginning to end is a little ordeal in itself, one that shakes the reader's faith in the nobleness of human nature. Under a new colonial regime, however, the Filipino people themselves were spared this faith-shaking ordeal, thanks to an American school system that suppressed all details of history that might expose the less pleasant aspects of colonialism (pp. 199-200).

He is suggesting in effect a radically new viewpoint for the consideration of Philippine history. His view of what is the "real Filipino," is diametrically opposed to the more popular views of the Manila-bred: today's "majority" is actually composed of these who allowed themselves to be hispanized, while today's "minorities" are more like everybody used to be. The mountain people provide the base data, and the changes brought about by colonialism can be measured against this base.

Yet Scott's approach to Philippine history, radical and nationalist as it is, is always subtle and low-key, and it is so for one very good reason, which is simply that he has faith that the data speak for themselves. After we have gone through the assembled data on the case of the nine priests of Segovia, and that in the essay called "Colonial Whip – a Filipino Response to Flogging," we do not need anyone to belabor the evils of Spanish rule – nor the creative response, at least on some occasions, of the Filipinos. When Scott provides a document signed by sixty-one eyewitnesses attesting to the heroism of Isabelo Abaya in the struggle against Spain, we do not need to be urged to believe that there was nationalism outside Manila. Scott's perspective is clear and the implied value judgments nearly inescapable in the face of the painstakingly gathered and carefully and creatively assembled data, but the whole effect is smooth and easy. This is "committed" history at its finest.

Susan Evangelista