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Priests on Trial

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Book Reviews

PRIESTS ON TRIAL. By Alfred W. McCoy. Australia: Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1984. 259 pages.

The wealth and timeliness of his subject leads Alfred W. McCoy, scholar and lecturer in southeast Asian history, to a lively blending of dissertation material with devices drawn from journalism and the novel.

Priests on Trial was written and published in four months flat for a hungry captive market—an international paperback audience eager for the whole story of the sensational arrest, imprisonment and trial of two Columban foreign missionaries to the Philippines—on the charge of murdering the mayor of Kabankalan town in Negros Occidental.

No wonder then that this 'hot' story begins like a novel, with a red Ford pickup truck speeding through Kabankalan's foothills at dusk. At the wheel is Mayor Pablo Sola, out on bail for the murder of seven peasants from a nearby village. "As the truck crested the ridge and passed under the boughs of a camomsil tree, fifteen communist guerillas opened up with a blaze of M-16 and M-2 carbine fire from the high grass above the road. Several seconds and 100 rounds later, the truck crashed to a halt, most of its occupants dead instantaneously from multiple wounds." (p. 1)

With this vivid image provided by a novelist's omniscient point-of-view, the account transforms into an investigative reporter's narration of the background and the consequences of the murder. "Clearly, the murder of Mayor Sola was just one more bit of violence in the revolution which has been sweeping much of the central and southern Philippines over the decade past. But these days in the Philippines almost nothing is as simple as it seems. On 25 February 1983, Captain Galileo Mendoza, an officer in the same Task Force Kanlaon that had captured the NPA guerillas responsible for killing Mayor Sola, formally charged an improbable group of Catholic conspirators with the mayor's murder — six Filipino layworkers, a Filipino parish priest, Irish missionary Fr. Niall O'Brien, and Australian missionary Fr. Brian Gore." (p. 2)

With an incredible situation thus unfolded, the social historian in McCoy then takes over, naming the main characters and the societal factors that become the "*mise en scene* for *Priests* – twelve years of dictatorship, the cumulative results of its corruption, a steadily degenerating quality of life in Negros and elsewhere in the country, a high-living, conscienceless martial law oligarchy and most significantly, a new adversarial relationship between a post-Vatican II Catholic Church and a paranoid State beginning to see it as an ally of the communist movement.

Thus, *Priests* tells us at the end of Chapter One, are men of God caught "between dictatorship and revolution." (p. 49)

Chapter Two begins with a second murder – this time of a plantation cashier by the plantation cook's son. Here, McCoy puts to work his previous research into Negros' sugar monocrop history to create a bird's-eye view of the interplay between local and global socioeconomic forces and how they have inexorably brought the island's poor into virtual slavery.

The dynamics of ill-researched lending by the World Bank and the IMF come into direct and disastrous relationship with a greedy Filipino elite. Technological advances in the sugar production of Queensland, Australia become the threatened displacement of 400,000 Filipino sugar workers. The expiration of a favored quota for Philippine sugar on the U.S. market, bartered for military base concessions 60 years ago, now forces that sugar into competition in the world open market and "The future of the Negros hacienda seems clear – 100 percent mechanization, a world market standard of efficiency, and elimination of 90 percent of the present work force." (p. 72)

Where Chapters One and Two have been alternately gripping and informative, Chapters Three and Four become sheer delight for partisans of the underdogs of Philippine history.

Three begins with history and counterhistory in almost Marxist fashion, juxtaposing the beginnings of present-day Negros society on the neighboring province of Iloilo as seen from the viewpoint of the planter elite and the same story told from the viewpoint of Columban scholar missionaries who focus on the victimization of the little people.

McCoy's 'history with a conscience' becomes crystal clear as he eschews a scholar's traditional impersonality to give full play to a passionate Columban study. The sugar aristocracy hails the mid-nineteenth century British consul and colonial merchant Nicholas Loney as the 'father of the sugar industry.' The Columbans accuse him of destroying Iloilo's healthy weaving industry with unfair competition from the same mechanized looms in Manchester, England that a Gandhi-led Indian resistance movement once fought against.

Loney, McCoy quotes the Columbans, "put an end to a way of life that had developed over the generations . . . The silenced looms had given him an educated elite of small capitalists and an army of hungry and jobless workers

for the sugarcane fields. He inflamed the appetites of the elite with stories of the vast fortunes to be made from sugar and gave them generous crop loans. He led them and their private armies to sparsely populated Negros round the slopes of 8,000-foot Kanlaon (volcano), where settlers from Panay had been farming small but viable lots for generations. But now they were forcibly driven from their land to make way for the invaders, who bought for a pittance or land-grabbed their holdings, and set up the Hacienda or sugar-farm system which lasts up to this very day." (p. 76)

Chapter Three is all of this in detail, covering the rise of planter power in collusion with State and Constabulary in an entwined history of Negros and Iloilo, touching upon the growing price paid by the common folk for the ostentatious luxury of a few, the hapless resistance offered by a folk religious revolt in the 1890's, the quick turnover of Visayan planter loyalty from Spanish masters to American protectors at century's end, the desperate fate of the region's first modern labor union, the *Federacion Obrera de Filipinas* in 1928.

By the time we get to Chapter Four, the Augustinian Recollects who flit through Chapter Three, working closely with the Spanish governors, Nicholas Loney and the Visayan elite unto the slaughter of pagan hill tribes and the enforcement of compulsory labor, must now come full face with the late twentieth century's new breed of religious, the priests to the poor.

In this chapter, the Catholic Church is coming to slow but increasingly deeper and more dogged grips with a history of cumulated misery for Christ's beloved poor on islands like little Negros. In the light of multiplying signals from the Vatican, especially after the Second Council, sin was coming to a new theological definition, no longer confined to private infractions against a Loving Father but now incorporating a social dimension—the sin of unjust structures wherein the many are lifelong debt slaves while the few dine with golden spoons. "For these islands, sugar was the original Third World sin that tainted everyone who touched it." (p. 85)

In a book that gives us glimpses into the precolonial animist worship of Negros and narrates the phenomenon of the first folk religious revolt, there is a special excitement in the slow unfolding of a common people's consciousness that there need be no recourse to miracle to deliver them from nearly four centuries of slavery.

Chapter Four takes us through this quantum leap in the souls of Negros' poor—from discipleship in the anticommunist union-building of the Jesuit-led Federation of Free Farmers back in the witch-hunting fifties to the eventual founding of the Christians for National Liberation by the sugar scion Fr. Luis Jalandoni in the early seventies. The CNL is an affiliate of the communist-led National Democratic Front, a radical departure from the traditional church alliance with the ruling elite, a clear call to violent revolution by and for the poor.

In the whole right—to left-wing spectrum where many Filipino priests have been struggling for social justice since the late sixties, is where we discover the immediate environment for the individual stories of Fathers Gore and O'Brien.

With remarkable sensitivity to both sociology and theology, McCoy takes us through this spectrum before delving deep, with Chapter Five, into the leavening effect of the radical new theology on Fr. Gore, Fr. O'Brien and their mountain mission in Kabankalan. This leavening occurs from the most rudimentary to the most exalted levels. On one hand, it takes Gore into carabao, duck and fishpond projects to improve the mission's livelihood. On the other, his peasant parishioners begin to see "that they were not merely passive objects of history but subjects of history who could shape their own destiny." (p. 162)

O'Brien gradually moves away from a scholar's theology into the more flesh-and-blood organization of basic Christian communities whose day-to-day problems he begins to incorporate into a new liturgy. "The rejection of Satan and his works in *baptism* was given a new social dimension—'Do you reject landgrabbing and usury?', 'Are you willing to stand up for your rights?'" (p. 169)

This leavening and its social consequences are what finally bring the two priests, their assistant Fr. Vicente Dangan and their six layworkers into confrontation with the Kabankalan power elite, their military allies and the oligarch and Marcos crony, Roberto S. Benedicto.

Priests on Trial, in the sixth and last chapter, establishes a powerful case against Benedicto as the priests' real enemy, mastermind of the fake murder charges, sponsor to the trial judge and the bribed witnesses, the devil himself.

The book has taken the side of the oppressed and the exploited and events have finally conspired towards the acquittal of the Negros Nine on a face-saving legal technicality. If *Priests* were a *bona fide* novel, the reader would be heaving a gratified sigh at the happy ending and the triumph of good over evil.

But this book is a social document that has only told its part of an open-ended, still evolving story. It is to McCoy's credit that the scholar has conspired with a Christian conscience to leave us an integral tale to go by as we agonize with Negros' present-day struggle for survival.

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Malaya and Veritas