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## Bookselling In Manila

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# Notes and Comment

## *Bookselling In Manila*

Bookselling, true bookselling, is an important and congenial occupation. But it is not for the man who wants to make a mint. Besides its joys (which are not financial) the business has its hazards and difficulties. Some of the hazards are "part of the job" and harass booksellers at any time, in any place; but even these common risks are intensified in the Philippines because of the transitional stage our culture is going through. And there are no difficulties anywhere equal to the straitjacket of restrictive measures into which the government has at present laced local booksellers.

True bookselling is the catering of general reading materials to general readers. Wholesale bookselling or the selling of textbooks to schools is not, in this view, true bookselling, which supposes a genuine bookstore undertaking to sell books and nothing but books and to sell every kind of book to every kind of reader. Such a bookstore does not sell stationery or greeting cards or lampshades or yo-yos or children's dresses or toys or any of the hundred and one other articles that have often been introduced; it sells books. Judged by this standard there is today not one single genuine bookstore in the Philippines. This is not the fault of the booksellers: they have to deal in textbook handling and sometimes also in the retailing of other commodities to stay alive. In the circumstances true bookselling has become, unfortunately, a sideline.

This dearth of genuine bookstores is due partly to the fact that our general education seems not yet to have reached the stage where there is widespread interest in reading. Another reason is economic—books are expensive and the ones who have the price don't have the taste while the ones who have the taste don't have the price. Yet, relatively to the mark-up on other imported items, books are the best buy in the country today.

If we had true bookstores, we would also—eventually—have thriving second-hand bookstores. A much-travelled Filipino journalist has

said that this is the measure of a country's degree of civilization: no country can be considered truly civilized until it can support a trade in second-hand books. He is thinking of the row on row of bookstalls in European cities, particularly those on the left bank of the Seine. But all our second-hand bookstores, chiefly those along Azcarraga Street in Manila, are second-hand *textbook* bookstores, buying from, and selling to, students.

What the true bookseller has to sell is thought and imaginative vision, both of them items immensely profitable to a country, especially a young country. So along with frustrations he has deep satisfactions too. There are other joys in the job. The bookdealer who does not merely stay huddled up with his accounts meets all the truly interesting people there are: the reporter with a taste for letters, the businessman whose hobby (or perhaps real vocation) is art, professors in varied fields and of many-faceted personalities, the retired *hacendero* who is tracking down a point in Spanish colonial history, the engineer who wishes he were an architect, artists and *artistas*, scholars and dilettantes, in short, as the old rime goes, "doctor, lawyer, Indian chief" (the last is by no means impossible). If he has any sense, these folk start out as customers but end up as friends. There is no stronger bond than a common love for books.

Discussions with these people can be a liberal education. Preparation for such discussions (which are a valuable service to the customer as well as a friendly gesture) is also a liberal education. The conscientious bookseller has to read announcements of new books and a variety of reviews on them. This may start out as a chore but it soon becomes a preoccupying interest; unless he is resolute, he may eventually discover he is enjoying his work!

Besides the spur of interest there is also the intellectual challenge of difficult calculation. The bookseller must buy books that are not only interesting in themselves but are interesting to readers here in the Philippines in 1960 and he must buy them in just the proper numbers. The standard American magazines (TIME, NEWSWEEK, THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE) carry reviews and lists of current best-sellers; so do British magazines (THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT). But what appeals in the United States and in England will not necessarily appeal here. The bookseller must marshal insight into local tastes and especially into the interests of his clientele and then make his own careful estimate of what will go, what will not. That's half the job. The other half is figuring the extent to which each book ordered will go: for some books a hundred copies will be too few, for others six or even three copies will be too many. If he guesses much under the right number, he misses business chances; if he guesses much over, he is stuck with one or many books. A grocer with an unsold can of beans can at least eat it for breakfast. But although many people talk about eating their words,

few do it when the words are on paper and bound in buckram. All one can do is clear the shelves by selling the dead books to a paper-mill for pulp, and take the loss. One can see why a visiting American publisher, shown the San Lazaro Hippodrome and asked if he ever bet on the races, replied pointedly: "I do not have to. I am a book publisher."

Bookselling in the Philippines is also difficult because it has to depend largely on import from foreign countries, mostly from the United States and England. This country has no general book publishers to speak of. As if the inherent problems (e.g. of time consumed in ordering and delivery) were not bad enough, government restrictions, one after another, in the forms of exchange and import control and new taxes, have cropped up during the past ten years to hamstring the booksellers.

The local book trade enjoyed almost unrestricted freedom up to 1950, when exchange control first came into effect. Next came the imposition of the 17% foreign exchange tax in 1951. There was a sort of book famine from 1950 to March 1955, when the Informational Media Guaranty Program Agreement with the United States was first implemented. The IMG Program permitted the payment of book imports from the United States in pesos which the U.S. government converted into dollars to pay the publishers. The IMG has been a boon to the local book trade.

The I.M.G. Program operated smoothly until the enactment of the 25% margin fee law on the sale of foreign exchange. Since last July, the U.S. government has frozen all IMG allotments to publishers because it demands that ₱2.50 be paid to the dollar on the ground that the 25% margin fee law in effect devalued the peso; with which opinion, of course, the Philippine government disagrees. Pending the resolution of this impasse between the two governments, the importation of books has been limited to a trickle by the paltry amount of dollars the Central Bank doles out to booksellers. Every importation of books from the U.S. has to be submitted to the Central Bank for approval, despite the fact that books are classified in the decontrolled category of commodities.

Prior to the enactment of the 25% margin fee law, the 17% exchange tax was converted into the 17% special import tax in accordance with the Laurel-Langley Agreement. In order that imported books be exempted from this tax, a certification has to be obtained from the Secretary of Education to the effect that they are texts, references, scientific, technical or religious books — which means, of course, that general books for general readers are not considered at all. After obtaining the certification, it still has to be submitted, together with other documents, to the Central Bank for approval in order that the books can be exempted from the payment of the 25% margin fee.

It is very frustrating to note that all these restrictions are being imposed on the importation of books in spite of the fact that the Philippines is a signatory to the UNESCO Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Articles and Materials.

Contracting States of the UNESCO Agreement are bound to do the following: (1) Not to apply customs duties or other charges on, or in connection with, the importation of educational, scientific and cultural materials. (2) To grant the necessary licenses and/or foreign exchange for the importation of such materials. (3) To give every possible facility, and simplify the administrative procedure, for their importation. (4) To facilitate the expeditious and safe customs clearance of educational, scientific and cultural materials.

Instead of abiding by these international commitments, our government in most instances has been doing just the opposite, to the discomfiture of booksellers, who are practically helpless to overcome the official indifference to their plight since they are few and financially incapable of making their influence felt. They cannot afford to put out full-page advertisements "so that the people may know" and thus arouse public sympathy. One way to get out of this "straitjacket" would be for school officials, scholars, professionals and book lovers to take concerted action in pointing out to our lawmakers and to the administrative officials concerned the absolute need of books in our present-day culture, with the request that the rules for their importation be liberalized. Any such step taken by the booksellers themselves is likely to be misconstrued as purely self-serving. That of course is true to a certain extent, but it is also true that quite apart from his natural desire to stay in business the bookseller is of positive value to the nation because what he sells is a broadened mental outlook.

Before the last war, the bookselling trade in the Philippines was practically dominated by two foreign firms. Since 1945 many Filipinos have gone into the trade although the number is still far from commensurate with the size of our population. The restrictions now being imposed on the importation of books is bound to stifle any further growth, and this at the precise time when there should be more booksellers to keep up with our growing population. As a people grows in numbers it should also grow in knowledge and vision, or else what you have is simply a larger pool of stagnant water.

The bookseller is now so heavily saddled with the paperwork required by control and tax regulations that he hardly has time to get acquainted with his customers, much less meet their real need for good reading, all on account of meager dollar allocations and high taxes.

Unless the restrictions which have recently been heaped on the book trade are lifted, bookselling in the Philippines will, perhaps, not die; but it will settle down into being insipid run-of-the-mill peddling instead of evolving into the imaginative art which it is meant to be and, in a modern country, must become.

JOAQUIN PO

### *From Hamlet to Bayanihan*

By a fortunate coincidence, New York and Washington theatergoers were treated to the best of England's Old Vic and the Philippines' Bayanihan Companies within the short space of ten months. Although it may be presumptuous at this early date to compare the fledgling Bayanihan Dance Troupe with the more than a century old traditions of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* at the Old Vic, still the reviews and comments of the theater-hardened New York and Washington critics augured well for the future of the Bayanihan group and the Philippine theater in general.

Comparisons between the Old Vic and the Bayanihan are inevitable. Both companies were at Brussels last year, and both toured the United States under the aegis of S. Hurok, who has continued to make the best in the foreign theater available to American audiences. Both companies, too, are in a sense national theater companies, and they represent a serious attempt at presenting and communicating what is best in their native cultures. England, of course, has Shakespeare, and it will be a fortunate Philippines indeed that comes even close to matching in any media the poetry or drama of the Bard of Avon. With such riches to work on the Old Vic has a running start on any competitors. The Old Vic, too, has a history that dates from 1818, and in recent years it has had the advantage of the direction of men like Ralph Richardson, John Burrell and Laurence Olivier. The present company has the experienced skill of John Neville, Barbara Jefford and Laurence Harvey in a tradition of acting that goes back almost a hundred and fifty years.

Matched against this sort of ivy-clad history the Bayanihan Company has little to offer in the way either of tradition or experience. The earliest origins of the Bayanihan can be traced back no more than five years, and most of the company have had relatively little experience in the theater. But young as it is, the Bayanihan yielded not at all to the Old Vic in the caliber of the performance it pre-