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Bikol Blend, by N. Owen

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Am teenagers sashaying on stage. There are actors (Paolo Montalban), musicians (Cecile Licad), artists (Salvador Arellano), correspondents (Ronnie Alejandro), and athletes just as there are businessmen and businesswomen in the book. There are stories of family ties, trips, and even insightful stories about balikbayan boxes themselves. There are personal remembrances just as there are speeches of all sorts. The icons are discussed, like Jose Garcia Villa, and issues brought up.

A particularly bittersweet element is the piece by the late great National Artist NVM Gonzalez, a speech in which he discusses language and identity. The erudite piece begins with the pronouncement that “we Filipinos have indeed journeyed to distances undreamed of.” In an excerpt calling for proper perspective and reflection regarding identity and culture, Gonzalez participates in a discussion that outlived his own significant life.

The welter of articles is accompanied by a fusillade of amazing photographs, all of which tell their own story, whether they are accompanied by an article or not. Look deep into the eyes of a beterano in his twilight years or explore the smiles of a Pinoy family on a sightseeing trip. These photographs are part of the Fil-Am story.

Perhaps the only truly difficult thing about “Fil-Am” has to do with its having been designed like an ungainly yearbook, with the ads nudging the articles within the book’s pages, making it harder for the reader to find them or refer back to others.

Yet that size is precisely the point as it may not be enough to contain this story. The sheer size of this undertaking indicates the hidden history of the Fil-Am, a secret narrative that has always been there but is being written about actively just now. In fact, Yuson notes that a sequel is in the works, that *Fil-Am* may just become an annual. Thus, the book is but a step into unravelling that mirror of a puzzle for a people.

With its breathtaking breadth and dizzying diversity, the book comes as a celebration not only of the Fil-Am experience, but of the Filipino one as well. For as Yuson himself concludes: “What makes us essentially Filipino, Filipino American, Filipino Canadian, or whatever else, certainly enhances our eventual sense of distinction and unity as a wonderful, adventurous and determined people.”

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The Bikol Blend: The Bikolanos and their History. By Norman G. Owen. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1999. xiv + 308 pages.

The brief chapter that closes the book, *Bikolanos and Their History* perhaps best explains the book itself. The preceding chapters contain conclusions about

Kabikolan, but Mr. Owen warns his readers that a number of them are liable to correction once more precise data are available.

The *Bikol Blend* is a collection of 10 essays previously published in sundry journals, the oldest in 1974. The essays are the author's answers to a few questions he could not include in his doctoral dissertation, subsequently published in 1984 as *Prosperity Without Progress*. To appreciate this collection, therefore, it will help if the reader is acquainted with this book. Incidentally, the present spelling of Bikolanos with a "k" instead of "c" is not yet fully accepted.

An underlying theme in all these brief studies is perhaps what the Catalan historian, Jaime Vicens Vives, had once indicated—that the real actors of history are the men and women on the streets. The chapter, "Subsistence in the Slump," is a case in point. Bicol economy was based mainly on abaca and coconut exports, but when for various reasons beyond local control, the fiber no longer commanded a world market, the region naturally suffered an economic slump. Mr. Owen is intrigued that, unlike others in central or northern Luzon, the Bikolanos did not mount a massive public protest against their chronic poverty.

But neither were the Bikolanos paupers or in a state of destitution. A clue, the author hints, lies in their deep, almost inborn religious values, a factor not too easily quantified. Would this belie the well-known Protestant ethic that praises work as the key to happiness? Following the recent papal declaration of the importance of work as a humanizing element, however, one has to ask what "progress" or "prosperity" means.

The chapter, "Americans in the Abaca Trade," is quite interesting. Mr. Owen shows that except for one or two who remained in the country, the foreigners who traded in mid-nineteenth century Philippines failed to lay aside their racist attitudes. Was it too early to expect otherwise? Even some of the Americans who had arrived after the turn of the century came with their prejudices. This is a sensitive point for a Filipino reader, who should be gratified to realize that racism is not due to race or economic status. It is due just to human nature. The Filipinos themselves are not innocent of racism. One can easily trace this in Philippine historiography or current writing, when undeserving individuals, just because they had fought or died during the revolution, are extolled as "unsung heroes."

History teachers will do well to read this book. They will learn historical method it capably exemplifies, besides understanding that history has expanded its horizons. It covers not just political developments, which in the first place would not take place unless based—and aimed—for the good of society, and for the man or woman on the streets.

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