BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE PHILIPPINES

"One December morning the steamship *Tabo* struggled upstream along the winding Pasig, carrying a great number of passengers to the province of La Laguna. It was a ponderously shaped vessel almost as round as the native water-dipper, usually made of half a coconut shell, after which it had been named. It was rather dirty in spite of its pretensions to whiteness and managed to appear stately by dint of going slowly. For all that, it was looked upon with a certain affection in the region, perhaps because of its Tagalog name, or because it was typical of the country, something like a triumph over progress, a steamship that was not quite a steamship, changeless, defective but an indisputable fact, which, when it wanted to look modern, was perfectly happy with a new coat of paint.

"The ship was genuinely Filipino!"

So begins the 1889 novel *El Filibusterismo* by José Rizal, a brilliant *ilustrado* physician and writer from a prosperous Chinese *mestizo* family who is the Philippines' national hero. He fostered the idea of a "Filipino" identity.

This book, published in America as **The Subversive** (Indiana, 1962, cloth; Norton, 1968, paper), and a previous novel, *Noli Me Tangere* (**The Lost Eden**, Greenwood, 1968), were written in Europe. There Rizal led the Propaganda Movement, a group of émigrés who sought to "awaken the sleeping intellect of the Spaniard" to native ambitions. Biting portraits of life under Spanish rule, the books were banned in the islands but read anyway. Although Rizal did not advocate revolution, the nationalism he fueled spurred rebellion. A Spanish firing squad made him a martyr for the *insurrectos* in 1896.

The islands' first settlers arrived long before Ferdinand Magellan landed on Samar in 1521. Asian Pygmies called Negritos may have come on foot from the mainland, crossing over "land bridges" that sank 25,000 years ago when the sea rose after the last Ice Age. Indonesians, Malays, and others followed by boat. During the 15th century, Islamic immigrants landed from Brunei. The islands might be mostly Muslim now had not the Spanish made Manila Bay their Far Eastern strongpoint.

As David Joel Steinberg notes in **The Philippines: A Singular and a Plural Place** (Westview, 1982), the people that the Spaniards found were not primitive. The natives had developed an alphabet system and ways to make iron and glass. Yet the islands were "unlike Indonesia, Thailand, or Vietnam, in which great cultures and societies flourished prior to the arrival of the Westerners." Divided by geography and language, few islanders left the *barangay*, a community of families that was the basic social unit.

John Leddy Phelan's **The Hispanization of the Philippines** (Univ. of Wisc., 1959) and Nicholas P. Cushner's **Spain in the Philippines: From Conquest to Revolution** (Ateneo de Manila Univ., 1971) deal with Spain's efforts to rule the islands for the benefit of the king's coffers and (more successfully) his missionary friars. Peter W. Stanley's **A Nation in the Making: The Philippines and the United States, 1899–1921** (Harvard, 1974) is the standard work on the early U.S. period. Readers may also consult Stuart Creighton Miller's **"Benevolent Assimilation"** (Yale, 1982), Leon Wolff's **Little Brown Brother** (Longman, 1961; Kraus, 1970), Glenn A. May's **Social Engineering in the Philippines** (Greenwood, 1980), and **Philippines: A Country Study** (U.S. Govt., Dept. of the Army, 1984), a taut survey edited by Frederica M. Bunge.

Theodore Friend's **Between Two Empires: The Ordeal of the Philip-**

pines (Yale, 1965) deals with Filipino independence efforts. In **Philippine Collaboration in World War II** (Univ. of Mich., 1967), David Steinberg examines a trauma that widened postwar fissures in Filipino society. So, from another angle, does Benedict J. Kirkvliet in **The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines** (Univ. of Calif., 1977, cloth; 1982, paper), a sympathetic view of the rebels who emerged during World War II.

Frederick L. Wernstedt and J. E. Spencer's **The Philippine Island World: A Physical, Cultural, and Regional Geography** (Univ. of Calif., 1978) is a key work on its subject. Others are Eric S. Casino's **The Philippines: Land and Peoples, A Cultural Geography** (Grolier, 1982); Andrew B. Gonzalez's **Language and Nationalism: The Philippine Experience Thus Far** (Ateneo de Manila Univ., 1980, cloth; Cellar, 1980, paper); and John Nance's **The Gentle Tasaday: A Stone Age People in the Philippine Rain Forest** (Harcourt, 1975), a classic look at a remote tribe.

In **The Philippines** (Prentice-Hall, 1965), Onofre D. Corpuz asserts that, despite its "borrowed" elements, there *is* a "distinctively Filipino" culture. Even what Westerners view as corruption has deep historical roots.

Another writer who examines that subject is Ferdinand Marcos. **The Democratic Revolution in the Philippines** (Prentice-Hall, 1974), a defense of his 1972 imposition of martial law, makes interesting reading in the light of its argument that (as Carlos P. Romulo wrote in a foreword) Philippine society was on a "march towards destruction" that Marcos was "destined to stop."

"An exploration of man's agony" in seeking meaning in life, notes B. S. Medina, Jr., in **Confrontations: Past and Present in Philippine Literature** (National Book Store, 1974), is "central to the Filipino tradition." No one has agonized more than the prolific Nick Joaquin, whose plays, novels, and essays are preoccupied with the past, particularly the Spanish era. His widely known short novel, **The Woman Who Had Two Navels**, included in a collection titled **Tropical Gothic** (Univ. of Queensland, 1972, cloth & paper), treats the nation's identity problem allegorically.

The heroine, Connie Vidal, is the thirtyish child of an adulterous mother and a weak father (America and Spain?) who drifts through life angered about betrayals of trust. Finally, she decides to do something on her own, though that something is to live with a married man. "It is better," she decides, "to be free and wicked than not free and good."

Yet much of Philippine life remains immune to past or present vicissitudes.

In his biography of Douglas MacArthur, **American Caesar** (Little, Brown, 1978, cloth; Dell, 1982, paper), author-historian William Manchester observes that even in late 1944, when U.S. and Filipino forces were retaking the islands from the Japanese, in hills near Manila "warriors hunted game with bows and arrows, monkeys chatted in the banyans, and lithe Filipinas strode past rice paddies with pitchforks balanced on their lovely heads. Out beyond the crumbling stone churches lay jungles, grassy uplands, fertile valleys, and baking lowlands—a countryside of scenes which might have been taken from a Tarzan movie, with waterfalls cascading in misty rainbows, orchids growing from canyon walls, and typhoons lashing the palm-fringed beaches from time to time."

This was the essence of the Philippines, "its beauty torn by violence, its volcanoes still building the land. None of that had been changed; none could be."