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# Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

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## Obituary

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Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.

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# Obituary

## Glenn Anthony May 1945–2020

Glenn Anthony May will most probably be remembered in Philippine historiography for his controversial book published amid the fervor for the centenary of the Philippine revolution against Spain. The book appeared in 1996 in the United States, and a Philippine edition came in early 1997. An exercise in historical methodology, *Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-Creation of Andres Bonifacio* (May 1996, 1997) questioned the historical basis for the conventional knowledge about Andrés Bonifacio, asserting this image was founded on unverifiable or forged documents. The “Bonifacio myth,” May said, was a fabrication. Not surprisingly, the book became the object of irate reactions for its perceived irreverence against the nation’s icon. In 1999 the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* invited me to review the book, and I scored it for its inconsistencies in logic (Aguilar 1999). Rather than getting annoyed with me, Glenn, whom I did not know personally at that time, reached out to me. My critique had become a bridge. That experience was an eye-opener to the possibility that individuals could disagree at the level of ideas but be collegial in person. In this part of the world not too many make that distinction.

May was a veteran at upsetting his readers. After initially enduring “the most boring five months” of his life reading legal cases at the Stanford Law School (as he said in an email on 11 March 2011), he returned to Yale



At the 2006 conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, Makati City.

Photo courtesy of Michael Charleston "Xiao" Chua, <https://xiaochua.net/2013/04/16/xiao-time-15-april-2013-dokumento-ng-pagkatalaga-kay-emilio-jacinto/>

University, where he had done his undergraduate studies and then obtained his PhD in History in 1975. Building on his doctoral dissertation, he published his first book five years later. *Social Engineering in the Philippines: The Aims, Execution, and Impact of American Colonial Policy, 1900–1913* (May 1980) examined US efforts at political education, formal education, and economic development in its new colony. Contrary to the prevailing view at that time that the US was a “successful colonial power” (ibid., xvii) and, unlike its European counterparts, had achieved something exceptional in the Philippines, *Social Engineering* argued that US colonial policy failed: The poor remained under an oligarchy; the country remained economically dependent on the US; and reforms in the education system were inconsistent and ill conceived and executed. Deflating the Americans’ self-congratulatory claims about the success of colonial education was particularly provocative. Without using the term, Glenn asserted that US colonial policy in the Philippines failed because it was essentially racist.

In 1987 he published under the imprint of New Day a collection of nine essays under the title *A Past Recovered*, which he described as “either explicitly revisionist or otherwise overtly provocative” (May 1987, vii). The title was May’s riposte to Renato Constantino’s (1975) *A Past Revisited*, which Glenn described as “a mixture of propaganda and advocacy” rather than history (May 1987, 11). Although he conceded that to some extent he could be “guilty of mindless positivism,” he nonetheless endorsed the nationalist agenda and admitted “a good deal of admiration” for Constantino as well as Teodoro Agoncillo (ibid., vii–viii). He was concerned, he said, that the country should “produce a generation of nationalists who are able to think critically” as a result of learning not “a new dogma” but the rigors of historical methodology, imparting to them “the critical use of sources and a healthy skepticism about received wisdom” (ibid., 24).

A significant essay in *A Past Recovered* examined forty-two municipal elections in Batangas between 1887 and 1894. “Civic Ritual and Political Reality: Municipal Elections in the Late Nineteenth Century” described electoral rituals as well as “the techniques employed by the rival factions [that] were just as creatively illegal as those that we have come to know in the twentieth-century Philippines” (ibid., 46). Moreover, in analyzing the local elite, May argued that the officeholders were of modest economic means, and the true power brokers were wealthy men who operated behind the scenes. The economic transformation of the colony in the late nineteenth century gave way to this bifurcation between the political and economic elite.

May applied his ambition to “recover the past” by spending about a decade researching the social history of Batangas province and the Philippine–American War; he eventually deposited his research materials in the Archives West of the Orbis Cascade Alliance in Eugene, Oregon (<http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv614959>) for others to use. The product of this scholarly labor was *Battle for Batangas: A Philippine Province at War* (May 1991 [Philippine ed. 1993]), arguably his best book. It received high praise in numerous reviews.

The main narrative of *Battle for Batangas* is told in four parts. The first part examines the socioeconomic conditions of the province during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the effects of the Philippine revolution against Spain. The second part takes an in-depth look at the US invasion in January 1900. The third part views guerrilla warfare from the three perspectives of the Americans, the Batangueños, and the residents of the provincial capital. It was an ugly guerrilla war on both sides, but especially because of the US army’s concentration policy in Batangas, which resonated with the Strategic Hamlet Program in the Vietnam War. May also explains the “demographic catastrophe” from 1896 to 1902 as having been “triggered not only by human agents—American, Spanish, and Filipino—but also by ecological factors and by the peculiar relationship between mosquitos and carabaos” (ibid., xiii–xiv). US military operations took their toll, but malaria as well as smallpox and cholera, diseases in existence prior to the war, had devastating effects. Although partisan readers would interpret this finding as exonerating the American aggressors, May is clearly not an apologist for the US. The fourth part of the book looks at the changes in the nature and scope of the war in Batangas and the US military’s co-optation of the native elite who were tired of the war and its determination to quash those who remained obstinate.

In a historiographical essay that appears after the epilogue, May (ibid., 286) underscores that *Battle for Batangas* “takes issue with a widely held view about the Philippine past: the notion . . . that the Filipino resistance during the Philippine–American War was a mass-based phenomenon.” On the contrary, he offers convincing evidence that “the anticolonial struggle was both directed and assisted by members of local elites” (ibid.), who had been pictured otherwise as “relentlessly collaborationist” (ibid., 289). Rivalries among these elites also frequently interfered with the efficiency with which they pursued the fight against the Americans. May admits that “the sources do not allow us to answer many key questions about the occupants of the lower rungs,” but they “had the *potential*, under the right circumstances,

to rally enthusiastically to the anticolonial cause” (ibid., 288), as when they mobilized around Miguel Malvar during the final desperate stages of the war. May finds continuity more than anything else: “although the war was responsible for manifold disruptions, it did not alter—and, in some respects, merely reinforced—certain fundamental realities of provincial life” (ibid., 290). At the end of that essay, in a “curious” plea, he modestly tells readers not “to place inordinate weight” on his book’s “findings” because “it is not a definitive account of the revolutionary period in the Philippines, or even perhaps of the revolutionary period in Batangas” (ibid., 292). The archives have not been exhausted, he says, and he counsels that “much of the story remains to be told” (ibid.).

Five years after *Battle for Batangas* was published, *Inventing a Hero* appeared. Years later May (2013, iii) would write, somewhat nonchalantly: “my relations with members of the nationalist school of Philippine historiography, while far from cordial, fell well short of combat . . . Sure, some blood was spilled, much of it my own.” He continued to do research but veered away from “the agenda of nationalist historians,” saying that was so because “for more than a decade the nationalists and I haven’t really paid much attention to each other” (ibid., iv). He was still in search of mythical dragons to slay, particularly John Leddy Phelan’s (1959) thesis on the “Hispanization” of land tenure in the Philippines; originally published in this journal, May’s (2004) critique of Phelan opens *A Past Updated*, a collection of his later essays (May 2013, 5–30). Regrettably, his reputation had been tarred by *Inventing a Hero*. *Battle for Batangas* was a casualty, eclipsed by the furor over the book that followed it rather too soon before it could gain a wide readership in the Philippines.

May shifted his attention to an issue that was closer to home in Eugene, where he had resided since 1983 when he joined the Department of History of the University of Oregon. In 2011 he published *Sonny Montes and Mexican American Activism in Oregon* (May 2011). A biography of Montes, Oregon’s leading Chicano activist and a former migrant farmworker from South Texas, the book recounted Montes’s role in enlarging the network of Mexican American activists and allies in the state during the 1960s and 1970s. May traced the migrations of people and ideologies between the Southwest and Northwest, which influenced how Montes and his colleagues imagined and carried out their protests.

May’s analytical lens in studying Montes was social movement theory. Not surprisingly, his study of Mexican American immigrants kindled his

interest in the history of Filipino migration to the US. He was not shy about asking for help with the literature. After he read my journal article “The Riddle of the Alien-Citizen: Filipino Migrants as U.S. Nationals and the Anomalies of Citizenship, 1900s–1930s” (Aguilar 2010), he unhesitatingly admitted (in the same email cited above), “I did appear to get just about everything wrong.” His only publication on Filipino migration was on Larry Dulay Iftiong (May 2013, 131–49). But he had already made substantial contributions to Philippine historiography, which deserve to be read and reread dispassionately, appreciated when he made a cogent point, and critiqued where he was off the mark—he would not have minded.

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