

### Part II of "More-than a Century of Filipino Writing in English"

One of the first Filipinos to write in English was Isabelo (Don Belong) de los Reyes (1864-1934). He was a great Filipino nationalist leader elected to the pre-war Philippine Senate and the father of Filipino folklore. He was also the founder of the Philippine labor movement and cofounder of the Philippine Independent Church. He translated the Bible from Spanish to Ilocano. While he wrote principally in Spanish, he wrote also in Ilocano and Tagalog and in several European languages, including English. On Dec. 30, 1901, aided by knowledge gained from his exile in the European continent during the Spanish regime, Don Belong founded the first labor union in the Philippines. He called it the "Union de Impresores de Filipinas." He owned several printing presses in Manila at that time.

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In August 1902 the labor federation organized by Don Belong had enough support to mount Manila's first general strike in demand for wage increases. The labor petitions to the American colonial authorities were written in English. When the labor unions struck against the Manila Electric Railroad Company in 1903 Governor General Taft unleashed American troops to break the strike. Don Belong was arrested for sedition and was convicted and sentenced to prison. Taft had Don Belong brought to him and they talked in English. The American governor general offered the labor leader pardon, but Don Belong elected to serve his sentence. Eventually Governor General Taft banished him to Spain.

It can be said then that the first Filipino writing in English consisted of manifestos written by Julian Gerona and labor petitions produced by the country's revolutionary and labor leaders from 1901 to 1903.

Don Belong said that many Filipino students in Spain and he learned English but they preferred to write in Spanish. Why? The Filipinos in Spain did not really master the English idioms and many of them learned only conversational English.

The first biography written in English by a Filipino was published in 1903. Jose Batungbakal

wrote in English "*The Life of Cayetano Arellano*."

The Philippine Education Company founded the first modern bookshop in the Philippines in 1904. It was located on Escolta, which was the most prestigious street at that time in Manila. And thus began the love for English and American literature among the Filipinos in Manila and in the other cities or major towns.

A. Craig, an American, and Conrado Benitez, a Filipino, edited in 1916 the book, *Philippine Progress Prior to 1898*. It contained, in English, useful materials about the Philippines from pre-European times to 1898.

The first book written in English by a Filipino was "*A Child of Sorrow*." It was written by Zoilo Galang and published in 1921.

The first poetry collection in English to be published in 1922 in the Philippines was called "*Never Mind and Other Poems* ." Procopio Solidum compiled the poems.

**Song Writing**In the field of song writing the Americans decided in the 1920s that it would be better to take advantage of the Philippine national anthem's popularity, instead of banning it. The anthem had at that time Spanish lyrics. The English version of the Filipino national anthem was finalized in the 1920s. Camilo Osias and American composer M.A.L. Lane wrote the English lyrics. Osias was an educator who later became president of the Philippine Senate. The lyrics became known as "Land of the Morning," the anthem's first line. The English version of the national anthem was not strictly a translation of the Spanish lyrics, although the music was the same.

At about the same time, a University of the Philippines professor, Paz Marquez Benitez, translated into English the "*Tierra Adorada*" – or "*Filipinas*," as some called the Spanish version of the anthem. She called her translation "The Philippine National Hymn."

**The Seven Wise Men**Jose S. Reyes (1899-1973) wrote in 1922 "The Legislative History of America's Economic Policy Toward the Philippines." The Columbia University Press published it. Reyes was a pensionado sent to the Columbia University, where he eventually earned his doctorate in Philosophy in 1922. When Dr. Reyes returned to the Philippines in 1923 he authored jointly with Jose Melencio a book on Philippine Civics. It became a textbook in the

Written by Bobby Reyes

Friday, 25 May 2007 00:35 - Last Updated Tuesday, 07 December 2010 11:24

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Philippine intermediate schools. Reyes represented the Province of Sorsogon in the 1934-1935 Constitutional Convention. He was a member of the committee of seven delegates who wrote in English the first draft of the 1935 Philippine Constitution. The other members of the committee were Claro M. Recto, Jose P. Laurel and Eusebio Orense of Batangas, Miguel Cuaderno of Bataan, Jose M. Aruego of Pangasinan and Camilo Osias of La Union. The Manila press called them the Seven Wise Men of the constitutional convention. Dr. Reyes eventually became secretary of education under Presidents Manuel L. Quezon and Sergio Osmeña. Later President Osmeña named him executive secretary.

The Philippine Library Association was founded in 1924. The first poetry anthology in English was called "*Filipino Poetry*" and it was published also in 1924. Rodolfo Dato of the Bicol Region edited it.

Juan C. Laya, of San Manuel, Pangasinan, was a prolific writer. He wrote prize-winning short stories, plays, poems, essays and radio-and-movie scripts. His novel, "*His Native Soil*," won the 1940 Commonwealth Literary Award.

(To be continued . . .)

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