

DR. JOSE RIZAL AND MINDANAO

Rolando S. dela Goza, C.M.

Dr. Jose Rizal wrote more about Mindanao than all the Filipino national heroes put together. This showed his great interest in the second largest island of the Philippines and his scholarly and scientific curiosity. He wrote about the land, the people, the plants, economic development, and the beauty of Mindanao. His writings on Mindanao are actually some of the most scholarly and scientific output of his short but illustrious life. However, many of our authors on Rizal study his novels more than his scientific output. This short article will concentrate on Jose Rizal's writings while he was exiled in Dapitan on the island of Mindanao.

Rizal in Exile

For four years (1882-1886), Dr. Jose Rizal suffered the fate of many nationalists in the 19th Century, exile from their native lands. Although he was sad at first, he came to love the land of his exile. He had time to reflect, study and write during this period of his life and his works showed a mature person with a scientific bent. He corresponded with several European scientists, worked as a doctor, a social worker and agriculturist.

A random survey of his writings shows a busy man really eager to help his fellowmen. He wanted to become an agriculturist (Rizal to R. Carnicero, October 15, 1892); invited the people of Kalamba, Tanawan and Lipa to go to Mindanao (Rizal to Manuel Hidalgo, January 9, 1893); asked for a fishnet (pukutan to give food for 6,000 people (Jan. 19, 1893); reported that his land was called Talisay but had no, talisay tree growing

on it (Rizal to M. Hidalgo, Feb. 8, 1893); tried to build a road (Rizal to Blumentritt, Feb. 15, 1893); had a beautiful house constructed (Rizal to Hidalgo (March 7, 1893); reported that some of his trees were bearing fruit (Rizal to Hidalgo, April 5, 1893); offered to send birds and reptiles to Dr. Meyer (June 8, 1893); practiced medicine with great success (Rizal to M. Hidalgo, August 1, 1893); advised his sister Saturnina to engage in selling clothes, abaca and jewelry (Rizal to Saturnina Oct. 25, 1893); wrote to the Governor General (February 1894); sent some reptiles and dried insects to Germany (Rizal to Meyer, April 10, 1894); worked hard on studies of the Subanon, the Muslims, Tagalog grammar, comparative dictionary of various dialects (Rizal to Meyers, July 31, 1894); recounted many medical cures with means at hand (Rizal to J.M. Basa, Dec. 18, 1894); noted the poverty of the people in Dapitan (Rizal to Dr. Lorenzo Marquez, March 15, 1895); proposed the cultivation of Punot where four or five thousand cattle and 40,000 coconuts could be planted (Rizal to Blumentritt, April 10, 1895); wrote about the origins of Mindanao, took care of the sick, and learned Malayo (Rizal to Blumentritt, April 10, 1895); sent \$50 to his mother for her to buy things she liked and wrote her about Josephine Bracken (Rizal to his mother, July 4, 1895); asked his mother to help trace their genealogy (Rizal to his mother, Sept. 25, 1895); composed "Mi Retiro" and hymn to "Tali---" (Rizal to his mother, Oct. 22, 1896); offered to volunteer for Cuba as a doctor (Rizal to Governor General, Dec. 17, 1895); desired to have his parents and relatives in Dapitan (Rizal to Trinidad, Jan. 15, 1896); planted 6,000 abaca plants, and served his country (Rizal to his mother, Jan. 15, 1896).

On July 31, 1896, Rizal boarded the steamer *Espana* bound for Manila. Thus ended his four year exile in the island of Mindanao.

The beauty of Dapitan, Mindanao

Many Filipinos can recite the "Ultimo Adios" in Spanish, English or Tagalog but they hardly have heard of "My Retreat" which is superior in many ways to his other poems. This paper

will only concentrate on Rizal's description of his "Retreat" in order to show not so much the brilliance of Rizal but the beauty of Dapitan and Mindanao in general.

For Rizal the beauty of Mindanao rested on its wide beaches, soft and fine sands, the green mountain, the high seas the brooks, the stones, the serene sky, the song of the birds, the resplendent sky, the wild winds, the silver moon, the beautiful flowers and the sweet singing birds.

According to Rizal's estimate, there were around 5,000 people in Dapitan during his time who had lived there for many more years than he. Yet it was during his short stay that the beauty of Dapitan was described to the full. After Rizal, hundreds of thousands of people must have lived in North Mindanao, yet no one was ever able to surpass the description he made of the beaches, the mountains, the flowers and the sky.

For Jose Rizal, the whole place was living and full of active mysteries just waiting for a poet like himself to discover. The floods sang: "By the song and murmur of the high sea's flood." The fountain and the brooks were alive: "and in the day's heat a crystal fountain leaps." Even the ordinary sky playfully flowed: "When the sky is serene how gently it flows, and its zither unseen ceaselessly plays." The sea with his sweeping expanse smiles: "Its smile in the morn to my soul is a call." The trees of the mountains groan and shiver: "Then from their heights the mountains groan, and the trees shiver tremulous from great unto least...."

But how did these beautiful surroundings: the trees, the birds, the brooks, the seas, the flowers and the butterflies affect Rizal? Were they just the object of a poet's imagination and put in a beautiful poem? For Rizal they were all poetry and much more. They were pleasant home, peace and calmness divine, rest for a weary brain and silence to his keen sorrow, appeasement to his gloom, ease from his wild flights, hope of undying reward, reminders of the home of his fathers and of his love, a place where the winds of his native lands may pass the place where his

faith was strengthened and a place to reflect on the past glories he once enjoyed.

But the natural beauty of Dapitan did not prevent Rizal from working hard in order to have the conveniences of a civilized life in the town. In addition to putting up his own house he helped in draining the marshes to get rid of malaria; he set up a lighting system of coconut oil lamps and remodelled the town plaza. He made a huge relief map of Mindanao out of stone, grass and earth which can still be seen in the Dapitan plaza.

Dapitan: The land and its People

For four years, Rizal studied the land and the people of Dapitan and the surrounding areas. He would walk, go by boat, talk his way together with his guards into the hills, converse with the people and take care of their needs. He noted what happened and wrote about his observations to his family and his friends, some of whom were foreigners. He invariably used his training as a scientist and a medical man to analyze the ills of the people and try to cure their illnesses.

In his letter to Blumentritt (Feb. 15, 1893). Rizal gave a glimpse of his skills in geography:

Dapitan's climate suits me better than that of my home town and is very much better than that of Manila. This climate is most temperate. I live with the Governor. However, I spend the greater part of the day on my land where I have ordered built a little house amidst fruit trees (artocarpeas, theobromas, sansonias, etc.). I am engaged in clearing my land in order to plant coffee and cacao which thrive well, despite the fact that the lands are hilly and stony. I probably have some 16 hectares bought from different owners who had abandoned them. They are situated along the seashore, inside the bay of Dapitan, so that you can mark on the map the part

between the town and a little more toward the south of the cove of Taguilong or Talaguilong. C'est la ou sont mes possessions! (It's there where my properties are!). I am becoming a farmer, because here hardly, very hardly, do I practice medicine. I have already cleared a part of the forest. Although it is stony, it has however good views, beautifully steep rocks. I am opening roads to make a civilized forest with well traced paths, with steps, benches, etc. (Rizal to Blumentritt, February 15, 1893).

Even the name "Mindanao" did not escape his interest. On April 10, 1895 he wrote to Ferdinand Blumentritt.

I can tell you little about the word Mindanao that I would prefer to write Mindanaw. The people here now call the whole island Mindanaw. It is true that Pigafetta mentioned Butuan, Chipit, et cetera, but not Mindanaw, if my memory does not fail me; I do not have here my notes. However, *danaw* in Bisaya, as in Malay, means lake (*dao pan*). I do not know what is lake in Moro Maguindanaw. However, inasmuch as there is a great lake Lanaw, that in my opinion means lake -- for in *danaw*, *ranaw*, *lanaw*, there are only natural phonetical changes -- I can allow myself a bold conjecture which I admit can be another *lucis a non locendo* (light that does not shine). Maguindanao can mean great lake; *magi* would be a contraction of *malaki* (large), for reeds and canes. I do the funniest cures with the means available. I cannot order anything for the patients cannot pay. At times I even give medicine gratis. (Rizal to J. Ma. Basa, December 18, 1894).

He reported to his friend Ferdinand Blumentritt that he operated on three or five patients a week (Rizal to Blumentritt, July 31, 1894). He organized the poor Mindanao folk to unite for

trading so that they could become independent and free themselves:

I have taught the poor Mindanao folk to unite for trading so that they may become independent and free themselves from the Chinese and thus be less exploited. But I have to talk a great deal with the local governor, who, despite being a good man, is a supporter of the Chinese and prefers the Mongols to the Mindanao people. Fortunately, the company is prospering; we make a little profit; and the poor Dapitan folk are becoming active and satisfied. (Rizal to Blumentritt, August 29, 1894).

Within a few years, he "was overwhelmed with patients and cannot finish many works"; Moreover he wrote:

I have 14 boys whom I teach language, mathematics, and how to work, and as we have now work I have decided to construct a dike of stone, brick and mortar so that they may learn. (Rizal to Blumentritt, January 15, 1895).

He also observed that the Subanons are so wild that when "they saw me they ran away to the mountain." (Rizal to Blumentritt, April 10, 1895). A few months later he seemed to correct himself:

These Subanos are the ideal people that ought to inhabit these mountains. They work, they do not steal, they are very peaceful. On the other hand, they are rather filthy, but the rich are already clean and neat. (Rizal to Blumentritt, November 20, 1895).

The association referred to by Rizal in his letter to Blumentritt was the "Association of Dapitan Farmers" for whom he wrote by-laws which could be the envy of many even in our

days. It had purposes, membership, management, duties of management and members and provision for losses. (*Political and Historical Writings of Jose Rizal*, p. 334). It showed the great care and interest of Dr. Jose Rizal to help the people. The purposes of the Association were:

Purposes

Art. 1. The purposes of the Association of Dapitan farmers are the following: Improve farm products, obtain better outlet for them, collect funds for their purchase, and help the producers and workers by establishing a store wherein they can buy prime commodities at moderate prices.

Art. 2. The Association will use the trade mark A. D. on their merchandise.

Members

Art. 3. To carry out these purposes the Association of Dapitan farmers will admit industrial partners and shareholders.

a) The industrial partners will devote themselves to the purchase, sale, loading, unloading, storing and the like of the goods that the Association may own or acquire.

b) The shareholders will deposit with the Association an amount not less than fifty pesos. (J. Rizal, *Political and Historical Writings*, p. 334).

It is clearly evident that Rizal got to love the land and people of Dapitan. He worked hard to improve the lot of those who came in contact with him, not only by curing the sick but also by providing economic and social benefits to the people. But as this paper deals with Rizal as a writer on Dapitan, Mindanao it is good to end with his beautiful but little known literary description of Dapitan:

As everybody knows, Dapitan is the capital of politico-military province composed of various towns and barrios, all equally worthy of eternal fame and universal renown, called by the sonorous names of Dipolog, Ilaya, Libay, Libungan, Lindangan, etc.

It is located on a beautiful bay which looks toward the West, of a kind especially made for it as if to isolate it from the vulgar world, and along it runs a beautiful river which, to accommodate it, has gladly consented to divide itself into two, its two silvery arms encircling it and bringing it toward the sea as an offering, for being the most beautiful thing that it could find to its tortuous and undulating pilgrimage through mountains and valleys, through woodland and plains. The casco of the town, as they call it prosaically, is formed by the church, a big church, but big-- from whose two sides stretch two small heaps of little houses to opposite directions, and viewed from the mountain which shelters it behind, seems like the slender elytrons of a huge insect devouring the green plain beside the seashore. These two elytrons or wings, are called, one Banono and the other Banting, and as the body of which they form part of the Church, the insect and all the rest deserve special treatment. But we are going to lay them aside now and we will merely say that Banting is on the right and Banono on the left, and as in legislative chambers and parliaments both represent individuals and groups distinct and even opposed and antagonistic in opinions, ideas, sentiments, and aspirations. In front of this insect, its grass trimmed, spreads the square on whose sides rise three buildings, which deserve to be called palaces-- the *Casa Real* (Government House), that of the school and that of the captain of the guards, famous in more than one sense, as

will be seen later--and the broad plain that reaches out until it merges with the sand of the seashore.

Dapitan is famous in various ways. Its red cotton blankets with strips of bright colors are on demand everywhere, but cannot be found even at the weavers who now weave only trifling things and can be seen dying of sleep and huddled up quietly under their houses. These blankets are almost their only industry--because one of the distinctions of the town is not to have any industry at all --except the fame it enjoys. They are sturdy, durable, and well-woven and are usually handed down from father to son, and only foreigners can obtain them as a special gift or in exchange for enormous sacrifices. Dapitan is renowned for its "affectionate" nipa houses, with fringed roofs through whose grooves can be enjoyed the caresses of the climate, the blue of the sky, the rays of the sun, the rain, and the night dew as if one is on the open field, barring the odor of fish which is reminiscent of the seashore. And we say "affectionate" houses because far from having the rigidity of other houses, now they are inclined towards the street, graciously greeting the solitary passerby, now they are thrown backward, as if saying "Hello! You Here!", now they are leaning towards the neighboring house as if telling some secrets or exchanging confidences to the cooing of the coconut palms. Those streets covered with green carpet through which meanders between little forest of *amor-seco* a narrow lane for the use of its emaciated inhabitants, walking one behind the other, would be enough to make Dapitan an immortal town, if its famous Church and even more famous cockpit, built under the shade of coconut groves, had not carried away the fame of the town to the limits of

the known world. This cockpit almost ruined the celebrated Newtonian theory and the whole system of gravitation. The readers can imagine what would have happened if, instead of an apple falling on the head of the great English mathematician, it had been a whole coconut-- as it happened to a gambler in the famous cockpit who immediately went to the next life to play cockfight with St. Peter, if our religious beliefs do not deceive us as they cannot -- what would have become of Newton's theory? (*Rizal's Prose*, J. Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1962, pp. 163-165).

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

- Alip, Eufronio. *I Traced Rizal's Footsteps in Foreign Lands*. Manila: Alip & Sons, 1981.
- Bantug, Jose P. *Rizal Scholar and Scientist*. Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1948. Reprinted in the *Historical Bulletin*, Manila, Vol. XI, No. 2, June, 1967, Publication of the Philippine Historical Association.
- Blumentritt, Ferdinand. *Biography of Dr. Jose Rizal*. Singapore: Kelly and Walsh, 1898, English translation by Howard W. Bray.
- Cavanna, Fr. Jesus Ma., C.M. *Rizal's Unfading Glory*. Manila: No name of publisher, (1957).
- Commision Nacional del Centenario de Jose Rizal, *Cartes Entre Rizal Y El profesor F. Blumentritt*. 3 Partes. Manila: Comision Nacional del Centenario de Jose Rizal, 1961.

Costa, Fr. Horacio de la, S. J. (edition and translator) *The Trial of Rizal*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1961.

Dela Goza, Fr. Rolando S., CM. *The Greatest Filipino*. Manila: Adamson U Press, 1976.

Documentos Rizalinos: Regalados Por el Pueblo Espanol y Pueblo Filipino. Manila: Imprenta Publica, 1953.

Epistolario Rizalino. Manila: Bureau of Printing 1930-1938. Rpt. by the National Library.

Guerrero, Leon Ma. *The First Filipino. A Biography of Jose Rizal*. Manila: 1963.

Hernandez, Jose Ma., Zosimo C. Ella, and Esteban A. de Ocampo. *Rizal, Educator and Economist*. Manila: 1949.

International Congress On Rizal, December 4-8 1961. Manila: National Printing Co., Inc., 1961.

J.R.N.C.C. *International Congress on Rizal*, 4-8 December 1961. Manila: Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1961.

Palma, Rafael. *Biografia de Rizal*. Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1949.

Retana, Wenceslao E. *Vida Y Escritos del Dr. Rizal*. Madrid: Libreria General de Victoriano Suarez, 1907.

Zaide, Gregorio F. *Rizal As Historian*. Manila: R. P. Garcia Publishing Co., 1953.