

MARIANO PONCE AND THE PHILIPPINE-AMERICAN WAR: A VIEW OF THE MAN AND HIS DEEDS THROUGH HIS LETTERS FROM JAPAN

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Abstract

The article takes a closer look at the character and deeds of Mariano Ponce, a key actor in the Philippine struggle for independence from Spain and, later, the United States. This is done through a detailed examination of several letters he wrote in 1899 while stationed in Japan as representative of the Philippine revolutionary government headed by General Emilio Aguinaldo. The letters allow a deepened understanding and appreciation of Ponce as revolutionary and patriot and enhance our grasp of a pivotal event in the Philippine's past: the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902.

Keywords: *Mariano Ponce; Cartas sobre la Revolución; Philippine-American war; Philippine history*

Introduction

Part of the effort to understand or explain a specific historical era or set of events being investigated is the attempt to situate oneself, as far as one is able, in that era—in a sense, to go back to the past and insert oneself as another actor or spectator into the specific historical period or set of events upon which one wishes to shed light. As much as possible, one must try to get a sense of—to absorb—the context, the dynamics, and the feelings and sentiments of the time period being studied so as to better understand and explain it.

One way of going about this is to try to get inside the mind and heart of one of the protagonists of the historical period under investigation in order to understand that period as he or she did. In doing so, one might hope to gain new insights into the whats and wherefores of important events in the past that, to a considerable extent, have shaped the present.

This paper is a modest attempt at such a project. Concretely, it will take a closer look at the character and deeds of Mariano Ponce, Filipino propagandist

and revolutionary who lived at the turn of the twentieth century, in order to acquire what might be the closest thing to firsthand experience of an important episode in Philippine history: the Philippine-American War (1899–1902). The end result of this effort, it is hoped, would be to give the contemporary Filipino reader a better appreciation of Ponce's role in and contributions to the cause of Philippine independence, as well as a firmer grasp of an important event in the Philippine's past whose outcome—American colonial rule for nearly half a century—has undoubtedly contributed to the forging of the Philippines into what she is today.

It seems a pity that, despite having spent many years of his life at the service of his Motherland, fighting for her right to be respected and to receive the just treatment she deserved, Mariano Ponce seems not to have been given much attention in textbooks on Philippine history. Given the amount of information about him and his deeds one finds in such books, one might be forgiven for forming the opinion that he was not a particularly crucial character in the military effort to establish a Philippine nation independent of foreign powers. Compared to the great figures of Philippine history such as Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Marcelo H. Del Pilar, and Emilio Aguinaldo, the textbooks have precious little to say about him.

Biographical sketch

To be sure, short biographies of Ponce are available (e.g., Zaide, 1970; NHI, 1990). He was born on March 23, 1863 in the town of Baliwag, Bulacan, the eldest child of Mariano Ponce and María Collantes de los Santos. He obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1885 from the College of San Juan de Letran, after which he transferred to the University of Santo Tomas to pursue a medical degree, moved to Europe in 1887, and finished his medical studies at the Central University of Madrid in 1889.

While in Europe, Ponce was an active member of the Propaganda Movement, working shoulder to shoulder with outstanding Filipino patriots like Jose Rizal and Marcelo H. del Pilar. He was, in fact, a close friend of Jose Rizal—close enough to be entrusted with the distribution of the *Noli Me Tangere* (Camagay, 1994). He helped Graciano Lopez Jaena found *La Solidaridad*, the Movement's periodical, serving as its business manager and contributing articles to it, such as biographies of great Filipinos as well as political, historical and cultural essays under the pseudonyms *Naning*, *Kalipulako* and *Tigbalang*. Such was his prominence in the Movement that when the Philippine Revolution against Spain broke out in 1896, he was arrested and imprisoned in Barcelona on suspicion of being somehow involved in the uprising.

After his two-day incarceration, he immediately moved to France to avoid being arrested again. He then sailed to Hong Kong, where he joined other Filipinos (e.g., Jose Ma. Basa, Felipe Agoncillo and Galicano Apacible) who were helping the Revolution from the British colony. This marked the beginning of his career as a revolutionary, fighting for Philippine independence against Spain under the leadership of General Emilio Aguinaldo, whom he served as secretary while the latter was in exile in the crown territory.

Soon after the declaration of Philippine independence on June 12, 1898, Aguinaldo created diplomatic positions in England, France, the United States, Japan and Australia, with a view to persuading these foreign Powers to recognize Philippine independence (Agoncillo, 1990). Through two separate decrees issued in August 1898, the Hong Kong Committee was formally created, and Ponce (together with Faustino Lichauco) was appointed diplomatic agent for Japan with the duties of (a) carrying out propaganda work, (b) conducting diplomatic negotiations with the Japanese government and (c) contracting expeditions (e.g., arms shipments) for the Philippine Republic (Agoncillo, 1997).

Operating from Yokohama, Ponce busied himself carrying out his mission of gaining Japan's support for the cause of Philippine independence and of purchasing arms for the Philippine army. He was in Japan when the Philippine-American War broke out on February 4, 1899. It was also while in Japan that he met and developed a close friendship with Dr. Sun Yat Sen, Father of the Chinese Republic.¹

He was away from the Philippines throughout the War and for several years after its conclusion. He returned to his beloved country, however, in 1907 and immediately occupied himself with the difficult but noble task of nation-building. He was elected representative of the second district of Bulacan to the Philippine Assembly, serving in this capacity from 1910 to 1912. He spent the remaining years of his life researching and writing on various topics in Philippine history and culture.

While in Hong Kong on his way to pay his friend, Dr. Sun Yat Sen, a visit, he fell seriously ill and died in hospital on May 23, 1918. His remains were brought back to the Philippines and were buried with much sorrow in the Cementerio del Norte in Manila.

Ponce's 'Cartas'

This biographical sketch may suffice to provide a general picture of Mariano Ponce and of the (seemingly) modest role he played in Philippine

history. For those, however, who wish to get to know him in more intimate terms, so to speak—the kind of man he was, his thoughts and sentiments, and just how much he contributed to the Philippine revolutionary cause—more sources need to be consulted.

Fortunately, we have those sources in the form of letters he wrote and which were published in 1932 under the title *Cartas sobre la Revolución, 1897–1900*. A perusal of these letters—greatly facilitated by the Filipino translation prepared by Maria Luisa Camagay and Wytan dela Peña (Ponce, 1997)—reveals quite a bit about Ponce’s character, as well as his accomplishments in the cause of Philippine independence in the face of impending American colonial rule. In particular, they show his loyalty to his superiors and to the cause to which he was committed, as well as his faithfulness in fulfilling his duties as representative of the Philippine revolutionary government to a foreign land.

This paper focuses on the letters Ponce wrote from Japan from April 5 to September 24, 1899—a total of 51 letters. The letters cover the period between the flight of the revolutionary government from Malolos, Bulacan² on March 31, 1899—a crucial turning point for the worse in the military campaign against the Americans—and Ponce’s temporary departure from Japan to join his compatriots in Hong Kong. Although much about the man can be gathered from them, what will be highlighted in particular is Ponce’s unwavering loyalty to the revolutionary cause, demonstrated in three ways: (1) the herculean effort he exerted to secure arms and ammunition for the revolutionaries fighting against the Americans, (2) his seemingly steadfast faith in the eventual success of the armed struggle for independence despite the fact that the revolutionary army was doing very badly on the battlefield, and (3) his intense annoyance at—bordering on abhorrence for—Filipinos whom he believed were working against the revolutionary cause for their own private gain.

The arms shipment

As diplomatic agent of the revolutionary Philippine government to Japan, one of Ponce’s tasks was to procure arms and ammunition to smuggle to the Philippines (Agoncillo, 1997). This he did with great prudence and care, knowing fully well how important but, at the same time, delicate and risky his assignment was. How he fared in its fulfillment and what became of his efforts can be gathered from his correspondence with members of the Hong Kong Junta—a group of Filipino revolutionaries in exile that supported the revolution through propaganda, diplomacy, and the procurement of weapons and munitions for the armed struggle against the Spaniards and, later, the Americans. Members of the Junta included Galicano Apacible, Isidoro de Santos (whom he sometimes

referred to by their respective nicknames, Kanoy and Orong) and Faustino Lichauco. Reference to the arms procurement process in a number of Ponce's letters from 1899 are summarized below:

Letters to G. Apacible dated April 5: In the first letter, Ponce informs Apacible of a rich Japanese contact who promised to provide them with guns and ammunition. He says he is told that the bullets for the old Mausers used by the Philippine army would only cost three dollars per 100 pieces, but that those for the newer automatic Mausers would cost more.

In the second letter, Ponce asks that he be given answers to the following questions: How much is available for the purchase of the needed arms and ammunition? What sort of equipment is required exactly? What does the Junta think about the suggestion to acquire a ship to be used to transport the equipment purchased?

Letter to Orong dated April 7: Ponce informs Orong of 10,000 old Mausers and bullets ready for delivery. He says it would not be difficult to find transport for the shipment. He asks if it would be necessary to send someone disguised as a merchant to take care of the disembarkation.

Letter to Kanoy dated April 16: Ponce asks Kanoy to reply to his letter dated April 5 regarding the purchase of arms and a transport ship.

Letter to Kanoy dated April 25: Ponce speaks of a Japanese fellow who says he would help him procure arms and ammunition from the Japanese government for free or look for arms dealers willing to do business with the Filipinos.

Letter to G. Apacible and I. Santos dated May 24: Ponce acknowledges receipt of 50,000 yen to buy "*dubat*" (a code word for bullets) at three dollars per 100 pieces. He explains that he asked for the money because he had received permission to buy the bullets straight from the factory itself at that price. He mentions that, for a short while, he feared that the purchase would not push through owing to the death of a certain General Kawakami, the head of the Estado Mayor. Fortunately, Kawakami's successor, a General Oyama, did not hinder the transaction. Ponce says the cost of four million *dubat* plus the rent of the transport ship would total \$130,000 (\$120,000 for the former and \$10,000 for the latter).

In this letter, Ponce complains of weakness and chest pains due, according to a doctor he had consulted, to intellectual and moral tiredness.

Letter to G. Apacible dated June 6: Ponce expects the ship bearing arms and ammunition for the revolution to leave in a week's time. He says he had to get a bigger ship (at least 500 tons). The total cost of the shipment was 180,000 pesos—150,000 pesos for the bullets and the transport fee; 30,000 pesos for the "*sumpit*" (code word for guns) and other expenses. He says he needs 50,000 dollars more and will ask for it at the appropriate time. The ship was being readied with the aid of 'the advocates of bribery' (*los partidarios de los subol*)³.

Letter to G. Apacible and Dr. I. de Santos dated June 20: Ponce asks for 17,000 to 18,000 pesos more. He says that since the arms procurement process must be kept secret, he has no choice but to trust the people with whom he is dealing. If the process fails, he says he will take full responsibility for the failure.

Letter to G. Apacible and Orong de Santos dated June 20 (4pm): Ponce writes a second letter in which he revises his original estimate and asks for 20,000 yen or pesos so that the ship carrying the arms and ammunition can leave. He says the men appointed to accompany the shipment, Manuel and Sol, are already on board the ship. (Note that the ship did not get to leave as early as Ponce expected it to—see letter to G. Apacible dated June 6).

Letter to G. Apacible dated July 4: Ponce informs Apacible that the shipment has not left yet due to new problems. They have to wait for the next ship.

Letter to G. Apacible dated July 18: Ponce informs Apacible that the shipment was delayed yet again. He informs him that a certain Fernandez is on the way to Hong Kong and will explain the reasons for the delay despite it being almost a month since Sol and Manuel left to see to the matter.

Letter to G. Apacible and I. de Santos dated July 25: This is the fateful letter in which Ponce informs the Hong Kong Junta that the *Nunobiki Maru*, the ship carrying the arms and ammunition for the revolutionary army, which left port on July 19, met disaster and sank. Ponce says he is extremely saddened by the unfortunate event and wants to resign his post. He asks that someone with better luck be appointed to take his place. Nevertheless, he also wants to know if he should try to put together another arms shipment. He laments the fact that he cannot get help without first paying for it.

Letter to G. Apacible and I. Santos dated July 26: Ponce acknowledges the need to "avoid losing our money" (*evitar la pérdida de nuestro*

dinero), but argues that what happened (i.e., the sinking of the *Nunobiki Maru* and its valuable cargo) could not have been foreseen, and that the Japanese cannot claim any compensation from the Filipinos for the loss of their ship. He assures Apacible that the Japanese did not cheat them.

Letter to G. Apacible and I. de Santos dated August 7: Ponce informs Apacible and de Santos that 17 people died when the *Nunobiki Maru* sank, including the beloved Sol. Manuel, on the other hand, survived and was able to reach Shanghai, where he joined a certain Castro⁴. He says that the Japanese are willing to sell more weapons and ammunition at the cheapest price possible, considering what happened to the original load. He says he is convinced that the Japanese did not cheat them. He informs them of his plan to be in Hong Kong by the 12th of August.

Letter to G. Apacible dated August 11: Ponce says he decided to stay in Japan to wait for the money and instructions to be brought by Orong. He says that since the ill-fated shipment has remained a secret, they could try for another shipment. He says there is a rich Japanese businessman, a supplier of the Japanese government, who might be persuaded to finance a new shipment in exchange for business concessions once the war in the Philippines is won.

Letter to G. Apacible dated August 16: Ponce gainsays the rumor that a ship bringing weapons for the revolutionary government is on its way to the Philippines from Japan, as reported in some Japanese newspapers.

Letter to G. Apacible dated August 29: Ponce thanks his comrades for recognizing his services to the revolutionary cause. He says he is sending them an accounting of all his expenses and his own report on the sinking of the *Nunobiki Maru*. He wishes to keep all documents of the arms transaction in case an investigation is conducted. He says they have started trying to find out if the sinking of the ship was planned, and that they are now making ready for a new attempt to purchase arms. He will try to get weapons on loan and will be frugal since he realizes that money is running out.

Letter to Lichauco dated August 30: Ponce asks Lichauco to tell Kanoy to be careful about what he writes to the Philippines, since no one should find out where the weapons he is procuring are coming from. He says he promised the Japanese that the Americans would not know about their involvement in the business.

Based on these letters, one can see that the whole arms procurement business was not an aboveboard transaction between the Filipino revolutionary

and Japanese governments. During this time, American intentions to colonize the Philippine islands were already clear, given that the Treaty of Paris was ratified by the US Senate on February 6, 1899, and that the US armed forces were in the middle of waging an all-out war against the Philippine revolutionary army for control over the archipelago. The Japanese leaders were not willing to oppose these intentions because of “Japan’s desire to court the favor of the United States” (Alip, 1959, p. 47). Ponce himself puts it more clearly when he writes to Apolinario Mabini in September 1898 that the Japanese government was willing enough to support the Philippine revolution, but that it was prevented from doing so by the fear of clashing with the US, which Japan considered a friend (Ponce, 1932)⁵. He reiterates this Japanese position in a letter to Galicano Apacible in January 1899, stating that, despite their sympathy with the Philippine cause, in light of news that the Americans were becoming more wary of and watchful over the situation, the Japanese government was having trouble deciding on whether or not to support the Philippine revolution because of their fear of American retribution (Ponce, 1932)⁶.

In short, the Japanese were not keen on antagonizing the Americans by formally and officially supporting the Filipino revolutionaries. Ponce, however, in the September 1898 letter to Mabini cited above, notes that the Japanese were not averse to allowing the Philippines to purchase arms and ammunition in Japan.⁷ This he did, therefore, under cover of secrecy (see letters to G. Apacible and Dr. I. de Santos dated June 20 and to G. Apacible dated August 11) through private Japanese businessmen/arms dealers operating with the tacit consent of the Japanese government. That the Japanese government was aware of the arms procurement process is clear from Ponce’s letter to G. Apacible and I. Santos dated May 24 summarized above, in which he mentions buying bullets from a Japanese munitions factory with the permission of some Japanese generals.

Knowing well how dangerous his mission was, Ponce nevertheless carried it out with diligence and patience. He was very much aware of the risk of being found out by elements unfriendly to the Philippine cause and the possible unsavory consequences of such an eventuality. But this did not stop him from getting the job done. Nor did having to deal with shady characters among the Japanese—“*los partidarios de los subol*,” as he describes them (see letter to G. Apacible dated June 6)—keep him from fulfilling his duty. He was trusted by the Aguinaldo government to procure arms for its military campaign, and procure them he did, despite having to work in secret and to risk dealing with people whose honesty and discretion he had to take on faith (see letter to G. Apacible and Dr. I. de Santos dated June 20).

That the shipment would eventually be lost at sea (see letter to G. Apacible and I. de Santos dated July 25) was completely unforeseen. Ponce was clearly devastated by this—so much so that he tendered his resignation as representative of the Philippine government to Japan. He nevertheless overcame his disappointment and immediately inquired about and worked on putting together another arms shipment. Clearly, he was not about to give up on his duty to provide arms and ammunition for the fight against the Americans. This demonstrates Ponce's tenacity and commitment to the cause of independence—an unmistakable sign of his patriotism and his faithfulness to the people and to the government he served.

On a speculative note, one might ask how the war would have progressed had the arms shipment made it to the Philippines. This seems like a rather moot question, though one cannot help but wonder how much altered history would have been had the shipment reached its destination.

Ponce's attitude vis-à-vis the war effort

Another manifestation of Ponce's loyalty to the revolutionary cause was his unflagging affirmation of the eventual success of the war effort, despite reports that the Philippine army was relentlessly being pushed back by American forces. The message he gave to everyone—the Japanese he was in contact with, his compatriots in other parts of the world, and his foreigner friends—was consistent throughout the period covered: the fighting will continue until final victory is achieved. This apparent confidence in the eventual triumph of the revolutionary cause is expressed in many letters he sent out, as the following summary of a number of them reveals.

Letter to Orong dated April 5: Ponce asks Orong if the rumors that the revolutionary government had transferred to San Isidro (Nueva Ecija) are true. This is the first letter to make reference to the fall of Malolos.

Letter to Y. Yamagata⁸ dated April 5: Ponce tells Yamagata that he does not believe that Malolos will fall to the Americans so early in the campaign, and that he has not received any official confirmation regarding the matter. He opines that this can only happen if his government wishes it to, as a way of gaining a better position. In any case, he is certain that capturing Malolos will not be a great victory for the Americans. He says his compatriots have not lost hope, and that their desire to defend their freedom is stronger than ever.

Letter to Orong dated April 7: Ponce informs Orong of rumors that the Americans are already halfway to Malolos, and that the revolutionary

government has moved to San Isidro. He calls the rumors rubbish because they are based on mere hearsay. He says there is a lot of news from the French press, however, about the sufferings of thousands of American soldiers.

Letter to Ferdinand Blumentritt dated April 10: He sends Blumentritt a copy of a letter written from Malolos by Apolinario Mabini, dated March 18, in which Mabini affirms the nation's great hope of victory in their just cause; that they will not lay down their arms until freedom is attained in the archipelago. He says the war will be a long one, but that this does not matter. The greater the sufferings, the more love for the nation there will be.

Ponce says that, in light of the new strategy of guerrilla warfare being waged by the revolutionary army, it is not surprising that the revolutionary government chose to leave Malolos. He says losses among the revolutionaries are minimal, since they only enter battle when assured of victory.

Letter to Y. Yamagata dated April 11: Ponce says he received news of the capture of Malolos, but is not sure of its veracity. He informs Yamagata of the uprisings against the Americans in Negros and Iloilo and says that the revolutionary leaders are confident of an early victory.

Letter to Blumentritt dated May 1: Ponce says that, although the successes of the Americans are being telegraphed to newspapers, theirs are not major victories. The guerrilla warfare being waged by the Filipinos and the harsh Philippine weather will surely make things very difficult for the American forces.

Letter to Vergel⁹ dated May 1: Ponce makes little of the fall of Malolos to the Americans, stating that it was really part of the revolutionary government's war strategy. He says that the French Consul reports that the Americans are having a hard time, and that the Filipinos do not fear the arrival of an additional 14,000 American troops.

Letter to Blumentritt dated May 12: Ponce tells Blumentritt that the revolutionary government is willing to accept the status of a protectorate under America, but under very specific conditions. He says that unless these conditions are met, the revolutionary army will not surrender and lay down their arms.

Letter to Vergel dated June 15: Ponce says that he has not heard from the revolutionary government in the Philippines, but that the newspapers report that the revolutionary army was able to capture bullets and guns from the Americans in some of their skirmishes. He says that the revolutionary army will lay down their arms once the nation has attained its freedom.

Letter to L.G.M. Castro dated June 23: He tells Castro that the revolutionary army will not lay down their arms until they achieve victory. He is confident that the Americans will not venture to pursue the revolutionary army into the mountains.

Letter to Takataro Kimura¹⁰ dated June 30: Ponce assures Kimura that reports about the surrender of the Filipino armed forces are not true. He says that, although some people living in Manila have accepted American rule, those people are not part of the revolution and never were. The fighting continues. Surrender has never been and will never be an option.

Letter to Castro dated July 28: Ponce says that the revolutionary government is far from Manila and hence, he has not been able to receive news from it. He nevertheless affirms that they will endure and that whoever endures triumphs. He emphasizes that the revolutionary army is much more capable than the American to continue the fight since it is turning out to be too costly for the latter. He says that the Filipinos have the moral energy to continue fighting since their cause is just.

Letter to Castro dated August 11: Ponce tells Castro that the country will continue fighting for its freedom and affirms that its victory is certain.

Letter to Vergel dated August 14: Ponce tells Vergel not to believe that the revolutionary army has surrendered. He says that the Americans are in fact losing hope of ever winning the war.

Letter to Oshikawa¹¹ dated September 11: Ponce tells Oshikawa that the Philippine revolution is in a critical situation and that he depends on the latter's help to raise funds for the revolutionary cause. He begs Oshikawa not to abandon the Filipino revolutionaries in this present situation.

It is significant to note, based on these letters, how consistently Ponce affirmed that the Philippine revolutionary army would never surrender until final victory was achieved.

Ponce's pronouncements regarding the fortunes and prospects of the revolutionary army at that time seem overly optimistic given that, since the start of the Philippine-American war in early February 1899, the revolutionary army suffered defeat after defeat in the hands of the Americans until it was finally disbanded into guerrilla groups in October of the same year (Molina, 1960). Despite these defeats, Ponce made much of the news he received about how badly the Americans were suffering from the weather and of the damage

being inflicted on them by Filipino guerrilla groups (see letter to Orong dated April 7 and to Blumentritt dated May 1), broadcasting such news as major steps towards victory. He also played down any unpleasant news he received, such as the fall of Malolos, which he said was not a setback but actually part of the military strategy pursued by the revolutionaries (see letter to Y. Yamagata dated April 5, to Blumentritt dated April 10, and to Vergel dated May 1).

This projected optimism is easy to understand if one considers his role in the Philippine struggle for independence. He was the officially appointed diplomatic agent to Japan in charge of propaganda work. It was, therefore, his duty to project a brave face to all with whom he was in touch, despite the defeats suffered by the Philippine revolutionary forces and the increasing strength of the enemy. For the Filipinos who were fighting for the same cause (e.g., Vergel de Dios in Paris, Castro in Shanghai), it was a way of boosting their morale, of maintaining their hope, and, perhaps most importantly, of making sure that the work and support they lent to the cause would not falter. For the rest—especially for the Japanese—it was a crucial means of getting other countries’ support for the revolutionary cause and diplomatic recognition for the Philippine revolutionary government. Through his unwavering insistence that the fighting would end in victory for the Filipinos, Ponce endeavored to convince everyone that the revolution was viable, led by men and women capable of standing up to foreign aggressors, and that the staunch resistance to American aggression proved that the Filipinos deeply desired and, more importantly, were ready for self-government. It was his obligation, as representative of the Philippine revolutionary government, to act as he did. His official position in the government structure created to pursue Philippine independence would not have allowed him to do otherwise. What he personally thought about the eventual outcome of the war at that particular period of time came second to what he had to do for his country.

Given this, one might still ask: Did Ponce give any signs of wavering in his apparent certainty of the Philippine army’s eventual victory? Only the last letter in the list presented in the summary above (i.e., letter to Oshikawa dated September 11) gives us some idea about this. Its tone is not optimistic, to say the least. One in fact gets a sense of Ponce’s dread and desperation as he appeals for help from all who would be kind and sympathetic enough to give it. He was aware that more and more American troops were reaching the Philippines to join the fighting. According to one account, “three troop transports sailed for Manila in May, three in June, nine in July, and thirty-eight more over the remainder of 1899, bringing the army in the islands to fifty-five thousand men by the end of the year” (Golay, 1997, p. 52). Furthermore, the letter was

written just a month before Aguinaldo's flight to the mountains in the face of an American offensive which began on October 12, 1899 (Agoncillo, 1990). The Philippine revolutionary army was in dire straits indeed, and Ponce knew this. Hence, the tinge of hopelessness one senses in his letter.

The 'Americanistas'

A third manifestation of Ponce's complete loyalty to the revolutionary cause was his disdain for and denunciation of the people he calls "*americanistas*"—Filipinos who were willing to accept American rule in exchange for a certain degree of autonomy rather than fight for independence, which was what the revolution was all about and for which so many Filipinos had died and were dying.

Ponce's sentiments about the *americanistas* can be gleaned from a handful of his letters, summarized below.

Letter to Kanoy dated April 16: Referring to a manifesto issued by the Americans, Ponce says that the Filipino revolutionaries should not pay any attention to what the Americans offer.

Letter to Vergel dated June 15: Ponce says that the founding of an autonomous party willing to accept American rule will not be helpful to the revolutionary cause. He refers to the autonomists and pro-American partisans as 'those who were lukewarm (toward the struggle for independence) from the beginning and who never played a role in the revolutionary ranks' ("*los tibios de antes y jamás tuvieron peso en las filas revolucionarias*"). He says they will not triumph.

Letter to Castro dated June 23: After saying that the revolutionary army will never lay down their arms, Ponce speaks of those in Manila who have accepted American rule as never having formed part of the revolutionary camp. He accuses them of joining the revolutionary cause in the beginning only because it had gained the upper hand in the fight against the Spaniards. For this reason, he writes: "They are not, therefore, the leading voice of the revolution" ("*No son pues la voz cantante de la Revolución*").

Letter to Apacible dated August 16: Ponce asks if Apacible knows anything about the trip made by Pedro Paterno and Felipe Buencamino to Manila (presumably to confer with the Americans). He makes known his apprehensions about the trip and conference, fearing that the two men will try to work out an arrangement with the Americans like that made in Biak-na-Bato with the Spaniards¹².

In the first letter summarized above, Ponce makes reference to a manifesto issued by the Schurman Commission (named after its head, Jacob G. Schurman) that was sent to the Philippines by the American president, William McKinley, and “entrusted with the mission of reporting to the American government the real conditions in the Philippines” (Molina, 1960, p. 221).

One of the first things that this Commission did upon arrival in Manila early in March 1899 was to meet with “those *ilustrados* who had deserted the Revolutionary Congress” (Golay, 1997, p. 49). Soon after, on April 4, it “issued a proclamation... which set forth what Worcester (a member of the Commission) called the ‘kindly purposes of the American government.’” (Gleek, 1998, p. 33). The proclamation assured the Filipinos that

[T]he United States did not intend their exploitation but their “advancement to a position among the most civilized peoples of the world.” Of greater importance was the Commission’s announcement “that the United States is... anxious to establish in the Philippine Islands an enlightened system of government under which the Philippine people may enjoy the largest measure of home rule and the amplest liberty.” (Golay, 1997, p. 49)

The proclamation was welcomed by the members of the conservative (i.e., educated and economically well-off) class—the *ilustrado* class—who not only abandoned the Revolutionary Congress but, shortly after doing so, “made common cause with the American government” (Gleek, 1998, p. 33). Hence, the term *americanistas* used by Ponce when referring to them in his letters. He names some of them in his letter to Vergel dated June 15: “Salvador V. del Rosario, (Jose) Albert, and Florentino Torres and others” (Ponce, 1932, p. 358). Among the others whom he does not mention were the likes of Trinidad Pardo de Tavera, Cayetano Arellano, Gregorio Araneta, and Benito Legarda (Corpuz, 1989; Agoncillo, 1997)—men who, as Ponce notes in his letter to Castro dated June 23, joined the revolutionary cause in the beginning but who soon abandoned it in favor of American rule. Their defection to the American side, in fact, happened even before the shooting war between the Filipino and American forces began in February 1899 (Agoncillo, 1997).

Ponce’s animosity towards them was considerable; he could not acknowledge them as ever having formed part of the revolution, considering their actuations opportunistic as they chose to join whichever side in the struggle happened to have the upper hand at any given time (see letter to Castro dated June 23). He rightly considered them a hindrance to the cause to which he was committed, especially since their defection was being exploited by the Americans, who used their prestige and influence to convince the Filipinos on the battlefield

to lay down their weapons and submit to American rule (Corpuz, 1989; Agoncillo, 1997). He flatly rejected the offer of autonomy made by the Americans (see letter to Kanoy dated April 16). He must have felt it traitorous for a Filipino to accept anything short of independence. This was the position of the Philippine revolutionary government led by Aguinaldo, and he would have no other as long as the fighting continued. In this he showed his loyalty to the people and to the cause he served.

What Ponce probably did not know was that Aguinaldo himself may have been inclined to accept an autonomy proposal made by the Americans early in May 1899 “whereby the government to be established in the Philippines would consist of an American governor-general appointed by the President of the United States, a cabinet appointed by the governor-general, an advisory council elected by the Filipinos, and a strong and independent judiciary” (Agoncillo, 1997, p. 424). We are told that Pedro Paterno and Felipe Buencamino, who headed the newly-formed Cabinet that replaced the one led by Mabini, were in favor of the proposal, but that “Aguinaldo, however, was at the time torn between accepting and turning down the American proposal” (p. 425). So, Aguinaldo called a meeting of members of Congress and field generals in mid-May to discuss the matter. It became evident in the meeting that most of those present were in favor of accepting the American offer of autonomy (Agoncillo, 1997).

But acceptance of the offer was not to take place on account of General Antonio Luna, who was the staunchest member of the faction within the revolutionary camp that was pushing for unconditional, absolute independence and the recognition of the Philippines as a sovereign nation. Luna, who considered accepting the proposal a traitorous act, immediately had Paterno and most of the members of the Cabinet arrested. Given this strong reaction from the military arm of the government, the autonomy proposal came to naught. And despite Luna’s assassination on June 5, 1899¹³, the fight for independence continued.¹⁴

In the midst of this “power struggle” within the revolutionary government, it is clear that based on the letters cited above, Ponce was one with those who favored independence over autonomy. In the letter to Apacible dated August 16, for example, he expresses concern over the actions of Paterno and Buencamino who, despite their patriotic statements (Corpuz, 1989), he knew to have a history of dealing with the enemies of the revolution (i.e., the brokering of the truce of Biak-na-Bato to which he refers in the letter) in a manner that, to put it mildly, was not in keeping with the goal of independence for which so many Filipinos were fighting and dying. Ponce evidently was not

comfortable with the idea of allowing such men to handle negotiations with the Americans. Although these men occupied high Cabinet positions in the revolutionary government, Ponce did not hesitate to express his reservations about them taking charge of dealings with the Americans, fearing a compromise that would jeopardize the cause of independence. Once again, we see in Ponce's attitude his dedication and commitment to that cause.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to try to get a closer look at Mariano Ponce—his thoughts, ideas, and sentiments, as well as his deeds during one of the most stirring periods in Philippine history. By going over his letters with a little more depth than has been customary, one realizes just how loyal and committed he was to the cause of Philippine independence and to the government he served, despite the sacrifices, sufferings and heartaches such loyalty and commitment entailed.

At the same time, by using Ponce's vantage point as a protagonist, one gets a clearer sense of what came to pass during the Philippine-American War—of the formidable obstacles the Filipinos had to overcome, the heroic stand they took against an evidently superior foe, and the tragedies that befell them as a result of natural calamities and human failings. The events of the past somehow come alive when one reads them in letters written while they were happening and from the hand of a character who was deeply implicated in them.

If one likens the Philippine-American War to a play or a film, one could say that Mariano Ponce's was not the main actor's part. However, it must be acknowledged that he played one of the best supporting roles in the drama that unfolded—a role for which he deserves more than just a little recognition and respect.

Notes

¹For details regarding his friendship and dealings with Dr. Sun Yat Sen, see Camagay, 1994.

²Malolos, Bulacan was the seat of the First Philippine Republic which was inaugurated on January 23, 1899.

³Ponce uses the Filipino word *subol*, which means bribe. He was probably referring to people whom he bribed or who suggested the use of bribery to get things done.

⁴L.G.M. Castro was a patriotic Filipino based in Shanghai. He helped the Filipino cause of independence by assisting in the arms procurement effort and in propaganda work, such as translating articles sent to him by Ponce and having them published in newspapers in Shanghai.

⁵In the letter, Ponce writes: ‘...I must inform you that this Japanese government is very much inclined to favor our cause; the only thing holding it back is the fear of some possible conflict with a country it deems a friend, like the United States.’ [‘...*be de participarle que este Gobierno japonés está muy inclinado á favorecer nuestra causa, conteniéndole sólo el temor de algún posible conflicto con una nación amiga como es la yankee.*’] (Ponce, 1932, p. 178).

⁶Ponce writes: ‘And since, as it is known among official circles, the Americans are redoubling their vigilance, the Japanese, despite their good wishes, are unable to decide (to support us) for fear of complications with the Yankees.’ [‘*Y como según se sabe en los círculos oficiales, los americanos redoblan su vigilancia, los japoneses á pesar de sus buenos deseos no pueden decidirse por temor á complicaciones con los yankees.*’] (Ponce, 1932, p. 257).

⁷After noting that the Japanese were reluctant to give their formal backing to the Philippine cause, Ponce writes: ‘This (i.e., Japanese reluctance), however, is not a hindrance to their agreeing to our purchasing arms from their factories for use in our Revolution.’ [‘*Esto no quita, sin embargo, para que consientan el que nosotros compremos armas de sus fábricas con destino á nuestra Revolución.*’] (Ponce, 1932, p. 178).

⁸Y. Yamagata was editor of the Japanese newspaper, *The Yorozu Chobo*.

⁹Vergel de Dios was a member of the Paris Committee which was founded by prominent Filipinos in Paris with the aim of obtaining from foreign powers the recognition of Philippine independence. (Ponce, 1997, p.178, footnote; Agoncillo, 1990).

¹⁰Kimura was one of Ponce’s writer-friends from the *Keikwa Nippo*, a Japanese newspaper that published some of Ponce’s essays on the Philippine revolution. In a letter written him by Ponce dated 25 May 1899, Kimura is referred to as ‘one of the personalities in the *Japanese Societ des Gens de Lettres* (Japanese Society of Men of Letters)’ (Ponce, 1932, p. 348). In another letter dated June 30, 1899, Ponce requested him to write the introduction to the Japanese translation of his *La Cuestión Filipina*.

¹¹The identity of this Japanese correspondent of Ponce’s is difficult to ascertain. He may be Harunami Oshikawa (alias Shunro, 1876-1914), a writer of patriotic fiction who authored several novels which dealt with the Philippine Revolution (see Hayase, 1999).

¹²Ponce was referring to the truce brokered by Pedro Paterno between General Emilio Aguinaldo and the Spanish authorities at Biak-na-Bato (San Miguel, Bulacan), in which Aguinaldo agreed to cease hostilities against the Spaniards and go into voluntary exile in exchange for the sum of 800,000 pesos to be paid to the rebels and 900,000 pesos to be paid to innocent civilians who suffered during the armed hostilities (Agoncillo, 1990). He writes: 'I fear that they (Paterno and Buencamino) might do something similar to what they did in Biak-na-Bato and throw it all away (bring all our efforts to naught)?' [*"Temo que éstos hagan algo parecido á lo de Biak-na-Bato y nos lo echen todo á perder."*] (Ponce, 1932, p.396).

¹³For a recounting of this sad episode in the Philippine-American War, see Agoncillo, 1997, chapter 13: Tragedy at Kabanatuan.

¹⁴An indication of the dropping of the American autonomy proposal and the continuance of the struggle for independence after Luna's death is that, throughout August and September 1899, Felipe Buencamino, Secretary of Foreign Affairs in the Paterno Cabinet, who was one of those in favor of accepting autonomy under American sovereignty, was still desperately begging Galicano Apacible in Hong Kong to send home a shipment of arms and ammunition for the war effort (Corpuz, 1989).

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