

A "Must" Reading for Regional and Urban Planners and Railroad Enthusiasts Alike

The Colonial Iron Horse: Railroads and Regional Development in the Philippines, 1875 - 1935. Arturo G. Corpuz. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press (1999). 274 pp.

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A railroad enthusiast's opening

The lore of railroad travel is one form of enjoyment experienced by very few Filipinos of the post-World War II (WWII) generation. In the Philippines, motor vehicles and paved highways have superseded the pre-war suburban and provincial railway systems. The renaissance of the light-rail versions for urban commuting in Metro Manila—the LRTs and MRTs—is a belated development of the last 15 years.

Railroad enthusiasts could easily enumerate the civilized conveniences of rail-based travel: being free to choose and being able while passing the long hours aboard a train to sit, read, converse, sleep, stand, stretch, stroll, eat, socialize, or visit the lavatory, which nowadays are actions mostly permissible only inside airplanes and ships. The relative safety (and survivability in case of crashes and derailments) of conventional trains compared to flying and floating crafts adds to its attraction. A train, with exclusive right-of-way, ordinarily stops only at stations, unlike other land vehicles which have to stop and wait at crossings and intersections. Senior citizens can transfer without much effort from the elevated station platforms to same-level train landings or "estrebos" without the risk of falling and breaking their brittle bones. The ergonomics are unbeatable. The romance of horns, soot, steam, and click-clack locomotion has been the subject of literature and movies.

On the basis alone of providing a smooth ride to masses of people, one can extol the virtues of this invention of the Industrial Age, but as Arturo G. Corpuz has ably demonstrated in his book "The Colonial Iron Horse: Railroads and Regional Development in the Philippines," the railroad is much more than that. It is also an engine of regional growth and development. In the concluding chapter, the author states that "The railroads of Luzon benefitted many of the settlements along its route by significantly improving their regional linkages and thus providing local economies more opportunities to respond to a larger market."

The metaphor "iron horse" suggests the early days of railways, when in early 19th century racing contests the iron-clad steam locomotives started to outrun horse-drawn coaches and wagons. The period 1875-1935 is significant to the Luzon railroad. "In 1875, King Alfonso of Spain ordered the Office of the Inspector of Public Works in the Philippines to submit a railroad plan for the island of Luzon...." In 1935, the Philippine Commonwealth was inaugurated, ushering in the last period of major railway expansion prior to WWII. The period covered by the book is the first half-century of the Philippine railroad.

Chapter by chapter

The book begins with a bold and cutting statement: "The Manila-Dagupan railroad was the single most important infrastructure built in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period that was not initiated by the Church." It proceeds to concentrate the discussion on railroad development (and thereby avoids unnecessary and lengthy discussion of other infrastructure, with the exception of roads in general, which were initiated by the Church such as bridges, water supply, and buildings, and also skips mention of the humbler horse-drawn Manila Tranvia or the vapor-driven Malabon Tranvia). Built and operated by a London-based company, the Manila-Dagupan line started partial operations in 1891 and became fully operational in 1894. It provided "an immense improvement over the harsh experience of land travel." However, its "promise was not realized during the Spanish regime" because of the outbreak of the Philippine Revolution and the Philippine-American War. In addition to the early history of the railroad, Corpuz brings into the picture a key concept for regional or spatial analysis: "the transportation industry serves as the lens from which urban and regional development is viewed." Two different but simultaneous roles of transportation

were given. In its first role, it is engaged in the "production of circulation" (transport of freight and passengers) with "change of location" as output. A second role is "circulation of production" (the movement of other products of industry). The author states the overall objective of the book: "to identify and assess urban and regional factors of the island of Luzon in the Philippines by looking at how railroads were planned, built, and operated."

Chapter One, "Early Settlement and Transportation Patterns" briefly covers geography, pre-hispanic settlements, colonization patterns, early transportation development, 19th century production, appropriation, and transportation, and the primacy of Manila. By the end of the 19th century, there were only three clearly defined land routes across Luzon: northwest (Manila-Central-Luzon-Ilocos), northeast (Manila-Central-Luzon-Cagayan Valley), and south (Manila-Laguna-Batangas-Tayabas-Bicol).

Chapter Two, "The Manila Railroad Company: Initial Impacts, Expansion and Reorganization" is a major chapter with a regional development thesis. As already mentioned above, population growth statistics supported certain conclusions about regional growth. "... although the opening of the Manila-Dagupan railroad had an overall positive impact on the region it served, its effects on specific towns were mixed. Many towns accessed directly through the railroad benefitted and enjoyed exceptional population increases. Tarlac [town], in particular, grew at a much faster pace than any other locality, and it appears that the railroad was the key to opening up this town, along with other parts of landlocked Central Luzon, to the Manila-centered colonial economy. Some railroad station-towns, however, did not appear to have been significantly affected.... For these towns, the opening of the Manila-Dagupan railroad provided an initial access advantage that was not sustained or not translated into increased production relative to other towns." Examples of these minor towns are Polo (present Valenzuela), Guiguinto, and Santa Ana. In 1906 under American rule, the concession was transferred from the London-based Manila Railway Company to a New Jersey-based Manila Railroad Company (MRC). In 1917 the Philippine government acquired ownership of the MRC following operating losses related to economic difficulties caused by WWI. The chapter provides a table which lists the new lines developed during the early American period, namely the Cabanatuan, Stotsenberg, Marikina, Antipolo, Tayug, Magalang, Floridablanca, Arayat, and San Jose lines in the Central Luzon, and Canlubang, Santa Cruz, Batangas, Manila-Aloneros, and Legaspi-Ragay-Aloneros lines in southern Luzon.

Chapter Three, "The Manila Railroad Company: Management and Labor" begins by enumerating the names of the general managers of the railroad company during the American, Commonwealth, and Republican periods. The long illustrious career of Jose N. Paez, the first Filipino general-manager (1923-1941), was narrated in detail. The chapter next discusses the factors that "hindered the development of a strong labor organization in the MRC." One such factor was the fragmented nature of the labor force, having been divided according to location (stations) and function: origin, destination, and carrier work forces. There were at least seven labor unions but "the percentage of union members among MRC employees were [sic] so low." A second factor was the large number of transient workers. Many of the grievances of MRC workers did not directly concern wages. One complaint was against an American locomotive superintendent with "unbecoming conduct, ... despotism and lack of consideration." Another case involved the MRC board of directors' decision that English would be the official language of the railroad company and the consequent "dissatisfaction among older, Spanish-speaking employees who, knowing little English, anticipated difficulties in the performance of their work."

Chapter Four, "Motor Vehicle Competition" traces the decline of the government-owned MRC from its peak in 1930 up to the Philippine Commonwealth in 1935, citing the "lingering effects of the worldwide depression, bad crop yields, the imposition of the sugar export quotas, and the continued auto-bus and truck competition. A general decrease in mass purchasing power and lackluster demand for export crops led to a decline in the long-haul traffic." The chapter also discusses how MRC itself operated auto-bus and trucking services in order to recapture part of the traffic lost to other motor vehicle companies.

Chapter Five, "The Military Iron Horse" relates the well-known military role played by the Manila-Dagupan railroad during the Philippine-American War. Manila was in the hands of the Americans while the retreating Filipinos controlled diminishing portions of the railroad in Central Luzon until the fall of Dagupan to the enemy. An interesting arrangement was the permission granted by both warring parties to the London-based MRC under the English manager Horace Higgins to operate between Manila and Dagupan, crossing battle lines in the interest of maintaining commerce and preserving business. The Filipinos forbade the transportation of foreign troops.

Chapter Six, "Angeles, Olongapo, and Cavite" is a unique chapter about the development of the three American military bases in Luzon and how urban and regional development was influenced by the railroad. Angeles was a case of development with the presence of the railroad, while Olongapo was development without it, and Cavite falls somewhere in between. "In the case of military bases, railroad and highway connections were built ... with little regard for insular economic considerations."

Chapter Seven, "The Benguet Road and the Aringay-Baguió Line" offers the side-story of the difficult construction of the Benguet Road (present Kennon Road) to access the mountain-retreat city of Baguió, and the Aringay-Baguió railroad line, which was later abandoned due to labor and financial troubles, disruptive and destructive rainfall, and WWII.

Chapter Eight, "Hondagua and the Southern Main Line" is the story of how the Southern Mainline, popularly called the Bicol Express, was started in 1907 and finally completed as the Manila-Legapi line in 1938, and how the high expectation for the progress of the eastern port of Hondagua, Tayabas was frustrated by the competition of the port towns of Lucena and Legapi.

Chapter Nine, "Railroad, Agriculture, and Sugar" in its second to the last paragraph states that "the relationship between the sugar industry and the MRC became one of functional and territorial harmony, neatly ordered and juxtaposed hierarchies of production from the hacienda to the centrals to the refineries and distribution from the capital feeders of the central's own railroads to the MRC branches to the northern and southern trunk lines." This was the state-of-affairs until the imposition of sugar quotas, the increased automobile and truck competition and widespread decline of production caused by the depression of the 1930's and the WWII limited sugar and sugar cane traffic handled by the railroad.

Judging content and cover

The organization of the book into chapters which deal with distinct and almost independent topics but without loss of chronology, encourages relaxed reading and unhurried pauses at every major railroad stop. The book's textual-language mix of technology, history, economics, sociology, and urban and regional planning is educational and enriching. Illustrations

are kept to a minimum—a few key maps, figures, and charts—and the only photograph is on the front cover. Old railroad photographs may be rare and dramatic, but too many of them may create an unwanted “coffee-table” look and distract from an otherwise text-based scholarly work. This book is “must” reading for regional and urban planners and railroad enthusiasts alike—a productive cross-disciplinary exercise for anyone.

It will be an extreme oversight to miss the relevance of this book about the “Colonial Iron Horse” to the present dismal situation of the Luzon railroad. The northern Luzon railroad, at least the Manila-Clark connection, is long overdue for reconstruction and modernization, beset presently by lack of funds. The Tarlac portion of the old line was obliterated by Pinatubo lahar, while the Cabanatuan line was abandoned decades ago. The still running southern line or Bicol Express is also in dire need of rehabilitation. Meanwhile the PNR suburban commuter lines do not provide the quantity and quality of service needed by the Metro Manila commuters. Only one modern light-rail line (LRT-1) is operating in Metro Manila, while two more are under construction (LRT-2 and EDSA MRT). Other lines are on the drawing board.

Considering the pre-WWII configuration of the Luzon railway and Manila tranvia systems and the existing and proposed Luzon systems, a major expansion of service area is doubtful. The Ilocos region, the Cordilleras, the Cagayan Valley, and the Pacific Coast of Luzon are likely to remain outside the railroad network. Regional development in recent decades has largely been influenced by the motor vehicle and highway systems. One wonders though whether the country’s planners and decision makers are fully aware of the comparative advantages of highways and railways, between petroleum-based motor vehicles, electric or diesel locomotives and trains, and sea-going ferries, and which mix of technologies offers the best chances of balanced development at the least cost, dislocation, and harm to the environment.

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