

FLAVIO ZARAGOSA Y CANO
(1892-1965)

Outstanding Poet in Ilongo and Spanish

One of the greatest poets in the Ilongo and Spanish languages, Flavio Zaragosa y Cano, was born in barrio Janipaan, Cabanatuan, Iloilo on June 27, 1892 to Sinforoso Casten Zaragosa and Agapita Montero Cano.

After taking his primary education at a school managed by Felipe Perez, he entered the Centro Escolar de Molo. He was 14 years old and still studying at the Instituto when he wrote his first poem, "Alma Joven" which was published in the *Nuevo Herald*. Encouraged by this initial success, he formed and headed a literary group in his school called the *Sociedad Recreativa Literancia*. After obtaining his degree of *bachiller en artes* and *bachiller en ciencia*, he embarked on a teaching career at the Escuela Parochial in Molo. It was during this time when he wrote "Binunga sang Bisaya," which were presented in Bulalacao, New Lucena in Iloilo. He also founded two organizations, Pagbangon and Apostolado de le Mujer, which showed his nationalist sentiments and support of the active participation of women in Philippine society.

In 1910, driven by his desire to study Law, the Ilongo writer went to Manila and initially he attended the Escuela de Derecho, run by Felipe Buencamino.

While still a student, he worked as a bookkeeper at Binondo's Farmacia Filipina and as a teacher at the Colegio de Mercantil, handling such subjects as literature, physics, botany and zoology. Despite his heavy workload, he allotted some time for his writing, and consequently produced numerous poems that appeared in periodicals like *la vanguardia*; and *el renacimiento*. The latter awarded him the first prize in a poetry contest for his poem, "Fort Mckinly." The other periodicals that published his works were: *El ideal*, *The Philippine Free Press*, *El Tiempo*, *Makinaugalingon*, *el adalid*, *la semana*; Cavite's *La Solidaridad*; Legaspi's *Heraldo Bicolandia*; Mindanao's *The Union*; Cebu's *La Revolucion*. Some of his works were also published abroad like the *Philippine Republic*, published in Hong Kong and *Baello-Baelliere* of Barcelona, Spain.

Zaragoza married his fiancée Josefa Francisco, a Manileña, and opted to settle his family in Albay. There, he undertook one endeavor after another. He published the newspaper, *Heraldo Bicolandia*; established two schools, the Colegio Provincial de Albay and the escuela popular de Iriga, and an organization called Cultura Social. He likewise supervised the Imprenta Monserat and a bazaar, both based in Legaspi in 1916.

A prolific writer, Zaragoza had a wide range of experiences in the field. He served as editor of the *Bicol Review Bayang Pilipino*, and *Libertas*. He served as director of *Buntot Pague* and *Opinion Popular*. Most of his poems in Ilonggo were published in the vernacular magazine, *Yuhum*. He endeavored to translate Spanish classics, such as *Rizal's Noli Me Tangere*, into Ilongo.

In 1919, he returned to Iloilo and concentrated on his poetry and newspaper work. He participated in the province' cultural affairs like oratorical contests and poetry jousts often winning the top prize, such as when he was awarded the P500 plum in an elocution contests held at the Casino Espanol in 1919. In 1920, he won anew in a different competition.

Zaragosa joined local politics in Albay and won a seat in the municipal council in 1916. A year later, he organized a labor union that benefited the laborers of the steamship *Vapor Poizat*. He held various positions in government service. He was municipal secretary of Cabanatuan, in 1922, of Dumangas from 1923 to 1927 and as secretary of the provincial board of Iloilo in 1926. He also worked as personal secretary of Senator Jose Ma. Arroyo. Upon passing the civil service test, he served as interpreter at the court of the first instance of Iloilo from 1934 to 1935. Although he did not finish his law studies, the government had granted him license to practice as notary public from 1923 to 1931.

Zaragosa received his earliest public recognition in 1926, when he was given the title “el rey de Balagtas en Poesia en dialecta Bisaya”. In 1938, he won his second title, “poet laureate” and was awarded a silver medal in a soiree held in Bacolod. Among those who acknowledged his magnificent poems include Claro M. Recto. He was likewise a very active member of the Iloilo Press and Radio Club and of the Royal Spanish Academy of Letters.

He was considered unrivalled in the field of Spanish epic poetry in the Philippines because of his works as follows: *Cantos a Espana*, *Rizal y La Verdad*, *Cantos Epicos*, *Poesias Varias*, *La Perjura*, *Otros Poemas*, *Cantos de Hogar*, and *Cantos a la Belleza*. His work, *De Mactan a Tirad*, the epic story in verse of the Filipino nation's struggle for freedom and sovereignty transported him from relative obscurity to nationwide celebrity status in 1940.

Zaragoza knew when to stand his ground. During the Philippine Commonwealth Literary Contest, he lost to Jesus “Batikuling” Balmori. Believing that he should have won, as most literary critics had anticipated, he tore the check before President Manuel L. Quezon, and the audience during the awarding ceremony, and with head held high, left the silenced auditorium. Because of what he did, President Quezon ordered the Civil Service Commissioner Jose Gil, to take appropriate action against him on the grounds that he was a government worker. The commissioner, however, who admired his poetry, desisted.

He died in 1965. Married two times, Zaragosa had five children by his first wife Josefa Francisco, namely Flavio Jr., Zacarias, Gloria, Florentino, and Betty. His second wife was Socorro Araneta, a native of Talisay, Negros Occidental.

Reference:

CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art Volume 9. Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994

Quirino, Carlos. Who's Who in Philippine History. Manila: Tahanan Books, 1995