

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 3

“Touch Me Not”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Recent anthropological evidence shows that human beings have lived in the Philippine islands since something like 65,000 BC. Over the millennia, small principalities (city-states, if you like) emerged in the islands, many under the cultural influence of India. Sea trade developed with neighboring nations such as: Japan, China, Vietnam, the East Indies. The Philippines would fall under Spanish colonial control in the sixteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, Filipinos would lose one colonial master, and gain another. The experience of the Filipinos during the colonial period would come to be described as, “three hundred years in a convent, and fifty years in Hollywood.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 3. Touch Me Not.

Before we get started on today’s episode, I’d like to take a step back, just to take the broad view and see where we are and where we’re going. I mentioned back in episode 1 that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States was involved in an ugly colonial war in the Philippines. I’d like to tell that story, but before we go *there* I need to say a few things about the Spanish-American War.

The Spanish-American War properly belongs in *The History of the Nineteenth Century* podcast, and, uh, I promise I’ll get right on that as soon as I finish the twentieth century, so I’m not going to go into the full thing here, but I do have to tell a good bit of that story in order to set the table for the situation in the Philippines. And the thing is, in order to talk about *that* we need to talk about Spain. We need to consider Spain’s relationship with the Philippines, and in order to talk about *that* we have to talk about Ferdinand Magellan.

Now, Ferdinand Magellan’s voyage around the world properly belongs in *The History of the Sixteenth Century* podcast, and I promise I’ll get right on that just as soon as I finish the nineteenth century, watch for it in the Fall of 2032, but I will summarize it as quickly as I can.

We'll talk about that, we'll talk about the Spanish-American War, and then we'll ease our way into the Philippine War. I figure this'll take about three episodes. So, let's get going.

As you probably know, the story begins with the European urge to buy silk and spices from the far east. The short version is, European food is bland, European clothing itches, and the rest of world history fifteenth century forward flows from these two simple facts. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks, particularly, when the Ottomans have a monopoly on land trade from Asia, and the Italians have a monopoly on trade with the Turks, this stuff is getting pretty expensive.

The Portuguese got the idea of trying to break this monopoly by exploring the possibility of sailing around Africa. By the sixteenth century they figured this out, and they are enjoying a valuable new source of income. If you look at a map, you can see that Portugal is well-positioned to explore the African coast, and if you look at a map of Portugal's colonial possessions, even in 1901, you can still trace their 400-year-old trade route. The Portuguese control enclaves along the way: in Guinea, Angola, Mozambique, in Africa; Goa, in India; East Timor in the East Indies; and Macau, in China.

And if you're the king and queen of Spain, you're probably kicking yourself right about now, because you're thinking, "hey, Spain is every bit as well-positioned as Portugal to take advantage of this new trade route, so how come we didn't think of it first?" Enter Christopher Columbus, the Italian sailor, who properly belongs in *The History of the Fifteenth Century* podcast, but, never mind. Columbus proposes sailing west across the open ocean to get to the far east.

Now I'm sure everyone who listens to this podcast is well-versed in history, and understands that that whole story about Christopher Columbus trying to prove the world was round when everyone in Europe thought it was flat is a crock. It was concocted by Washington Irving in the nineteenth century for the purpose of confusing schoolchildren, because, frankly, Washington Irving is a jerk.

The truth is this, and it's a lot less flattering to Christopher Columbus: Columbus believed that Japan lay only about 3,000 miles west of Spain. This was a controversial view because everyone else in Europe figured it was more like 9,000 miles, and that was far beyond the range of the sailing ships of the time. But Ferdinand and Isabella, the king and queen of Spain, figured, "what the heck, this is worth a try, it's not like this Columbus guy expects us to go along with him, so it's worth a few ships and sailors to see if there's anything to this."

Now, by all rights, Columbus should sail off to the sunset and never be heard from again, but luckily for him, there were new lands previously unknown to Europeans between Spain and China, where his crew could stop and get something to eat and drink before they starved to death. The rest, as they say, is history.

Fast forward 25 years. Now we have Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan approaching the Spanish to discuss finishing the project Columbus meant to start, that is, finding a westward route to the far east. Now, Magellan, unlike Columbus, he'd actually been to the East Indies on a Portuguese expedition, so he had some idea of what he was talking about, and the Spanish took him seriously. They gave him a fleet of five ships and sent him on his way. He left Spain August 10, 1519.

Magellan sailed southwest, studiously avoiding Brazil, which was Portuguese territory. The Portuguese, by the way, were not at all happy with one of their own advising the Spanish on ways to get around this nifty new trade route that they had just set up; they had tried to kill Magellan before he left. Anyway, Magellan and his fleet got to the coast of what we call Argentina, checking every inlet along the way. The way you do this is you sail your ship anything that looks like it might be a passage to Japan, and taste the water as you go. If the water turns fresh, you know you've got a dead end, so you turn around and head further south and try again.

The expedition wintered over in Patagonia and continued the following Spring. Remember that we're in the southern hemisphere now, so the Winter is in the middle of 1520. On October 21, the expedition discovered the passage that we call the Strait of Magellan, and passed through it to what Magellan dubbed the "Pacific Ocean", because it seemed so peaceful... at first.

Magellan lost one of his ships to a storm back in Argentina, and a second ship got scared when they hit the Strait of Magellan and turned around and ran back to Spain, but the other three ships continued on. The Pacific passage was arduous, but Magellan and his crew pressed on and discovered Guam on March 6, 1521. Magellan's chronicler reports that the natives entered the ships and stole whatever they could lay their hands on. Magellan claimed Guam on behalf of Spain, and Guam became Spain's first possession in the Pacific.

On March 17, Magellan reached the Philippines and claimed them on behalf of Spain. Magellan befriended a local king named Humabon, who converted to Catholicism, and agreed to ally with Magellan, but Humabon had a problem. The problem was named Lapu-Lapu; he was a king nearby who refused to convert or cooperate with Humabon or Magellan and the Spanish. So, when Humabon said to Magellan, in effect, "hey, I have an idea: let's you and him have a war," and Magellan agreed to this. The Spanish set off to teach Lapu-Lapu a lesson. Instead, it was Magellan and his men who got schooled. It seemed that Lapu-Lapu had an army that numbered well-above a thousand soldiers, and Magellan and his crew were not equipped to handle a force that big. They pulled back, and Magellan was killed while covering their retreat.

Humabon, meanwhile, was getting a pretty clear picture of which way the wind was blowing. He invited the surviving senior Spanish officers to a banquet, got them drunk, and had them killed. Spanish who survived this massacre boarded their ships and fled the Philippines. There were too

few of them at this point to manage three ships, so they burned one of them. The Portuguese seized another, but the very last ship made it back to Spain with 18 survivors.

And by the way, on a side note, Magellan is often credited as the first man who sailed around the world. Other people then want to come along and say, “hey, wait a minute, Magellan got killed in the Philippines, so he didn’t actually make it around the world. The first people to sail all the way around the world were those 18 survivors who made it back to Spain.” Now, that’s true enough, but if you want to get picky about this, you also need to bare in mind, Magellan’s already been to the East Indies, having sailed east from Europe on a previous voyage. Now he’s been to the Philippines having sailed west from Europe, so that sorta counts as travelling all the way around the world. You can parse it out any way you want to.

The Spanish named the islands after their monarch Philip II, he who was briefly married to Queen Mary of England, and was, for a while, therefore, sort of, kind of, the King of England, and who later sent the Spanish Armada after Queen Elizabeth, but it took until 1565 before the Spanish were ready to settle there and start ruling the place. Part of the reason for the delay was the Spanish had to negotiate recognition of their claim from the Portuguese, who are still holding a grudge over the whole “Magellan turning traitor and helping the rivals along” thing. To their disappointment, the Spanish discovered the Philippines don’t have much to offer in the way of spices, nor was there an abundance of gold and silver waiting around to be mined, as there was in the New World. What the Philippines did having going for them was that the Chinese were well-acustomed to coming to the Philippines to trade with the natives, so control of the islands gave the Spanish an opportunity to buy up some silk and porcelain from the Chinese, so it wasn’t a complete loss.

Luckily for the Filipinos, the absence of lots of gold and silver lying around waiting to be mined means the Spanish didn’t have any incentive to impose slavery and forced labor on them the way they had in Latin America. Some Spanish families were given large estates in the Philippines, and the power and obligation to rule over the natives on their land. Some Catholic religious orders were given large tracts of land also.

As in other Spanish colonial holdings, there was a strict hierarchy; peninsular Spaniards were at the top, creoles (which is to say, full-blooded Spaniards born in the Philippines) below them, then mestizos (people of mixed Spanish and Philippine, and quite often, Chinese, ancestry), and at the bottom, the rural native Filipinos.

This relative neglect meant that a lot of Spanish authority was exercised in the Philippines through the Catholic Church, which sent Spanish priests and Spanish monks to the Philippines to mingle with the natives and convert them to Catholicism. The good side of this is that these priests and monks, as they fanned out into the rural villages, tended to learn the native languages and customs, which had two effects. One was that it facilitated their conversion efforts; as a

result, the Philippines were, and are, the only Catholic country in Asia. The second effect, that the natives were not pressed to learn Spanish the way that the natives in Latin America were, and that is the reason that that language never really took hold in the Philippines.

Some of these Catholic clergy, as they became close to the native Filipinos, began to advocate for them, which helped moderate some of the worst features of Spanish rule. On the downside, the clergy, who were Spanish-born, were jealous of their privileges, and opposed any effort to ordain natives to the priesthood, even creoles, which rankled the increasingly devout Filipinos.

It was only in the nineteenth century that life in the rural Philippines began to change over from traditional subsistence agriculture to the farming of cash crops, such as tobacco and sugar. During this time the islands went from self-sufficiency in food production to food importation, which, of course, hit the poorest Filipinos the hardest, since they now had to come up with money to buy things which they used to be able to grow on their own.

On the other hand, the combination of intermarriage and more hard currency coming into the islands led to the rise of a Filipino middle class, some of whom went so far as to send their sons to Spain to be educated. They came home with nineteenth century ideas about rule of law, and equal rights, and democracy, ideas the Spanish government and the ruling elite saw as dangerous.

By the late nineteenth century, following the revolutions in Latin America, the Spanish Empire is down to a couple of African holdings, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Oh yeah, and Guam. Spanish pride demanded tight grip on what remained of their empire, and Spain's persistent refusal to come into the modern era meant she was increasingly viewed by her European neighbors, not to mention Americans, as a brutal and unworthy colonial mistress.

The attention of people in the United States was largely focused on the situation in Cuba. There's a couple reasons for this. Obviously its proximity to the United States, and also the large number of Cuban expatriates who were living in the United States by the end of the nineteenth century, many of them in New York City. Cuba had seen multiple revolts against the Spanish in the nineteenth century; less well-known in the United States was rising discontent in the Philippines.

As is often the case with revolutions, it began with Filipinos originally asking only for greater rights within the Spanish colonial system. But as their very reasonable requests were brutally rebuffed, and their leaders dealt with harshly, Filipinos became increasingly radicalized, and the call became less and less about making the existing colonial system more equitable, and more and more about independence.

In 1872, there was a mutiny at the Spanish arsenal in Cavite. Cavite is a region on the southern shore of Manila Bay. Manila Bay is a large body of water that opens to the ocean on the west, the city of Manila lies in the east shore of the bay, and Cavite, as I say, lies on the south shore.

The mutiny appears to have mostly been about a pay dispute, rather than about revolution, but the Spanish figured a little political disorder was the perfect opportunity to blame three priests: Mariano Gómez, José Burgos and Jacinto Zamora, two creoles and a mestizo, who had been agitating for equal rights. The Spanish authorities blamed the whole mess on them, even though they probably had nothing to do with it, and the priests were executed by a slow, painful, public strangulation, which should tell you everything you need to know about the tender mercies of Spanish colonial administration. Even the Archbishop of Manila refused to defrock the three priests prior to their executions, as was the normal procedure, indicating his disapproval of the whole thing. These three priests, who are usually known today by a portmanteau of their names, Gomburza, are recognized and honored by Filipinos to this day as martyrs.

At the time of their executions, José Rizal was already 11-years-old. He was the son of a middle-class mestizo family in the Philippines. He had an older brother who had connections to Gomburza, and nine sisters (poor kid). He was an incredibly bright and precocious child, who had learned to read by the age of five, and over the course of his life showed an astonishing facility in a wide variety of fields, including languages. His teachers were impressed with his flawless command of Spanish, and it didn't take him very long to blow away every school and university in the islands.

He was interested in studying law, but when his mother came down with an eye disease that threatened her with blindness, he went to Spain to study ophthalmology, and got a medical degree from the Central University in Madrid. He also spent time studying at the University of Paris, and the University of Heidelberg.

Once exposed to the more liberal atmosphere in Europe, Rizal naturally began asking the obvious question: why do Filipinos not get the same kind of freedoms and rights that Europeans get? And so, he became an advocate for more liberal rule in the Philippines. He firmly rejected independence, but he proposed legal and social reforms, including Filipino representation in the Cortes, the Spanish parliament, and the Philippines being designated as a province of Spain in the same way that Cuba had.

Somehow, while he was studying he also found to dabble in anthropology, sociology, history, architecture, fencing, freemasonry, creative writing, pistol shooting, painting, sculpting, and just about everything else you can think of, including writing a novel: *Noli Me Tángere* (“*Touch Me Not*”). The title is Latin; it's taken from the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John. Rizal wrote it after reading Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and deciding that the Spanish rule in the Philippines needed and expose in a similar vein.

The book is a romantic story of a young Filipino man who studies in Europe, clearly based on Rizal himself, and returns home to experience the brutality of Spanish colonial rule, and the corruption in the Catholic Church. *Touch Me Not* probably stands as the first ever novel written

by an Asian author, apart from China or Japan. When it was published in Europe the Catholic hierarchy leaned on the colonial government to ban it, thus turning it into a best-seller there.

By the time Rizal returned to the islands of course, he was regarded with deep suspicion by the authorities there. He founded a reform movement called “The Philippine League” and shortly after that was banished to internal exile on the island of Mindanao by the governor-general. Now, one of the early members of The Philippine League was Andrés Bonifacio, the self-educated son of a poor mestizo family. News of Rizal’s exile radicalized Bonifacio, and he founded his own movement: the Exalted and Most Honorable Society of the Sons of the People, known by its Tagalog initials as the KKK. Unlike Rizal’s Philippine League, which was merely advocating for reform, the KKK was pushing for nothing short of complete independence.

In 1895 yet another revolt broke out in Cuban against Spanish rule there, and that revolt was already stretching Spain’s limited military resources, so Bonifacio decided to take advantage of this situation to begin revolt against Spanish rule in the Philippines, in 1896.

Now, when the Cuban revolt broke out in 1895, Rizal was languishing in exile in Mindanao, with nothing better to do than found a school and a medical clinic, paint, sculpt, and study native Philippine plants and animals. There are three animal species native to the Philippines that are named after him, by the way: a frog, a lizard, and a beetle.

But anyway, when he heard about the Cuban revolt, Rizal volunteered to serve in Cuba as a doctor. Governor-General of the Philippines accepted this offer, and Rizal on a boat for Cuba. But Bonifacio’s revolt broke out when Rizal was en route, and when he arrived in Cuba he was arrested and returned to the Philippines. As had been the case with Gomburza over twenty years ago, the Spanish authorities took advantage of Bonifacio’s revolt to charge Rizal with treason. Rizal was not a member of the KKK, he did not support the KKK, and he was willing to publicly swear allegiance and condemn armed revolt. Nevertheless, he was convicted of treason and executed by firing squad on December 30, 1896. He was 35-years-old.

[music: *Suite for José Rizal*]

And once again, the Spanish policy of ruthless retaliation against even the moderate and reasonable dissent proved to be colossally stupid, as all it accomplished was to outrage Filipinos, and drive them wholesale into the arms of the KKK.

Enter Emilio Aguinaldo, a young man still in his twenties, Aguinaldo was another son of a middle-class mestizo family, this one in Cavite. After a meeting with Bonifacio, Aguinaldo used his family connections to recruit a number of prominent Filipinos in the Cavite area into the KKK. And when Bonifacio declared open revolt, Aguinaldo’s organization in Cavite seized control of several towns, and then ambushed a unit of 500 Spanish soldiers sent out from Manilla to retake the province. Aguinaldo and his men routed the Spanish, capturing modern weapons

and a sword that had belonged to the Spanish commander. It was made in Toledo, the center of Spanish swordcraft, and it was dated 1869, the year of Aguinaldo's birth. Aguinaldo took the sword as a good-luck token, and always wore it afterward. He also beat back a second Spanish attempt to retake Cavite, this time with 2,000 soldiers.

Bonifacio himself, meanwhile, was not enjoying comparable victories, and began to see Aguinaldo as a rival. Totally justifying Bonifacio's paranoia, Aguinaldo began calling himself "generalissimo" and by March 1897 had declared himself the president of a Philippine republic. When Bonifacio refused to accept this Aguinaldo's new republic had him tried and executed.

As the year 1897 wore on, the Spanish forced Aguinaldo and his followers out of Cavite and into a standoff in the rugged province of Bulacan, which is north of Manila. The rebels were trapped, but the Spanish lacked the force they would need to route the rebels out of the region, so it was time to negotiate.

By the end of the year, they had reached an agreement. In exchange for a cash payment and amnesty, the rebels would lay down their arms and their leaders, including Aguinaldo, would repudiate the revolution and leave the country. Both sides thought that they had won a victory. The Spanish had quashed the revolt bloodlessly, without making any concessions, and afterward they set about painting Aguinaldo and his followers as traitors who had sold out Philippine independence for thirty pieces of silver.

But if you think this story is over, you don't know Emilio Aguinaldo. He and his followers relocated to Hong Kong, and arriving there, Aguinaldo immediately repudiated his repudiation, they banked the Spanish payment, and made plans to use it to purchase modern weapons and return to the Philippines for Revolt 2: Electric Boogaloo.

In Hong Kong, Aguinaldo and his group made contact with the American consul, Rounseville Wildman. By this time, war fever was rising in the United States; a war with Spain for foreseeable, and Wildman began to wonder if Aguinaldo might not be a potentially valuable ally.

Another important American in Hong Kong at the time was Commodore George Dewey, Commander of the United States Navy's Asiatic Squadron, which had recently relocated to Hong Kong. Now, the story of what the Asiatic Squadron is doing in Hong Kong I'm going to have to save for next week's episode, but Dewey assigned a couple of his officers to reach out to the Filipino revolutionaries for intelligence on Manila's defenses. During these talks, Aguinaldo and his band asked the Americans to support their bid for Philippine independence. The Americans were non-committal, but they did offer to transport Filipinos back to Manila if they would help fight the Spanish. The Filipinos figured this was more-or-less an alliance.

But the Spanish weren't done with Aguinaldo yet; they sent an agent to Hong Kong to file a lawsuit against Aguinaldo, accusing him of stealing and misappropriating the Spanish money.

The Spanish had hoped to tie up the money in a protracted lawsuit in Hong Kong, and at the same time cast doubt on Aguinaldo's bonafideness as a revolutionary. Aguinaldo figured discretion was the better part of valor, so he left Hong Kong for Singapore for a while to duck the lawsuit.

In Singapore, he met with the American consul there, a man named Spencer Pratt. Pratt was evasive on the question of American support for Philippine independence, but he urged Aguinaldo to cooperate with Dewey and the U.S. Navy. Aguinaldo's price for cooperation was a written request for his assistance from Commodore Dewey, along with a written pledge to support independence. Pratt cabled Dewey, telling the commodore that Aguinaldo was prepared to assist in the event of war, but did not mention Aguinaldo's conditions. Dewey sent a return cable saying, in effect, "that's great, send the guy to Hong Kong A.S.A.P." but Aguinaldo was disturbed the lack of any mention of support of independence in the cable from Dewey. Pratt told Aguinaldo that Dewey had indeed made a pledge in a separate, private cable to Pratt, although Dewey had, in fact, done no such thing. By the way, Spencer Pratt got fired from his job as consul in Singapore once the State Department in Washington found out about these unauthorized negotiations with Aguinaldo.

So, where we're left is with a group of Filipino revolutionaries who believe, pretty firmly at this point, that America supports their bid for Philippine independence, and an American State Department and United States Navy who are happy to accept Filipino help in fighting the Spanish and... we'll see about the rest of it.

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we move the spotlight to the United States, and examine the runup to the Spanish-American War in the United States, and take a further look at these rather tortured and misunderstood negotiations between American officials and Emilio Aguinaldo that may be an alliance, or it may be an... understanding to maybe... talk about things... someday. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

If you like *The History of the Twentieth Century* and you're on Facebook, why not like *The History of the Twentieth Century* Facebook page at [facebook.com/historyofthetwentiethcentury](https://www.facebook.com/historyofthetwentiethcentury). And if you have Facebook friends who like history, share the page with them and invite them to like it too (see what I did there?).

Oh, and one more thing. In examining Filipino nationalism in the late nineteenth century, it's important to understand there never was a Filipino state, or a Filipino national identity prior to Spanish control. The Philippines are, after all, a large archipelago of thousands of islands, which is a geography that does not exactly lend itself to feelings of national unity, as the conflict between the kings Humabon and Lapu-Lapu may suggest. But the shocking execution of José Rizal, a non-violent advocate for peaceful reforms, pretty much marks the moment that

Philippine nationalism was born. Today, at the place of José Rizal's execution, stands a monument and a park dedicated to him. A Philippine province is named after him, and *Noli Me Tángere* is required reading in Philippine high schools, and José Rizal himself has been dubbed “the first Filipino”.

[music: Closing Theme]