

Medicine in Stamps

José Protacio Rizal (1861–1896): Physician and Philippine national hero

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One hundred and fifty years ago, José Protasio Rizal Mercado y Alonzo Realonda was born on June 19, 1861 to Francisco Engracio Rizal Mercado y Alejandro and Teodora Morales Alonzo Realonda y Quintos in Calamba, Laguna, the Philippines.⁽¹⁾ A national hero of the Philippines, he is arguably the most revered Filipino of all time. Numerous streets, various institutions and a whole province are named after him, and memorials in his honour can be found around the world. He is even deified by a religious movement, the Rizalistas.⁽²⁾ His multiple accomplishments marked him as a true renaissance individual. He was a linguist, poet, painter, sculptor, sportsman, scientist and patriot, whose writings led to his execution and sparked the Philippine Revolution of 1898.^(1,3) He was also a physician and an ophthalmologist who insightfully dissected the ills of his patients and society.

PRELUDE The seventh of eleven children, Rizal's heritage exemplifies that of many Filipinos. According to Craig, *"He was a typical Filipino, for few persons in this land of mixed blood could boast a greater mixture than his. All his ancestors ... had been immigrants to the Philippines, early Malays, and later Sumatrans, Chinese of prehistoric times and the refugees from the Tartar dominion, and Spaniards of old Castile and Valencia—representatives of all the various peoples who have blended to make the strength of the Philippine race."*⁽¹⁾

He learned his *abakada* (abc's) from his mother at the age of three, and quickly mastered his older sister's reader. Three doting uncles contributed to his well-rounded early education in academics, sport and trade, after which he studied with a private tutor in the nearby town of Biñan, Laguna.^(1,3) As a young lad, he displayed exceptional skills in sketching, modelling clay and wax, woodcarving and writing poetry. He went on to study at the Jesuit-run Ateneo Municipal de Manila in 1872 and excelled

in all his subjects, earning the degree *Bachiller en Artes* (Bachelor of Arts) *Sobrasaliente* (with highest honours) in 1877, three months shy of his sixteenth birthday.^(1,3,4) That year, he also won the *Liceo Literario-Artística* (Lyceum of Art and Literature) prize for the best poem by a native for his verses *"Al Juventud Filipino"* (To the Philippine Youth).^(1,3)

Rizal studied Agriculture at the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila while simultaneously enrolling in Philosophy, then Medicine at the Royal and Pontifical Universidad de Santo Tomas in Manila^(13,4) (founded by the Dominicans in

1611, it celebrated its quadricentennial this year as the oldest university in Asia). He obtained the degree of "Land Surveyor and Agricultural Expert" from the Ateneo, but owing to unpleasant experiences of prejudice at Santo Tomas, continued his studies in both Medicine and Philosophy and Literature at the Universidad Central de Madrid in Spain, where he completed his Licentiate in Medicine in 1884 and Licentiate in Philosophy and Literature in 1885.^(1,4) His clinical and surgical notes *"Apuntes de Clinica"* and *"Apuntes de Clinicas Quirurgica"*, made as a senior medical

student at the Hospital of San Carlos and the Hospital de la Princesa in Madrid, are a testament to his insight and industry.⁽⁴⁾ The art and science of medicine and surgery are intertwined in his case histories, physical examination findings and diagnosis, accounts of medical (including prescriptions and diet) and surgical (including diagrams of surgical technique) intervention, observations on follow-up and final disposition (including autopsy findings of two mortalities), annotated with lectures he had attended and opinions made by professors, as well as his own observations.⁽⁴⁾

During his years in San Carlos, he also devoted himself to the study of languages (he ultimately spoke 22 languages and dialects), sculpture (exhibiting a bust at the Salon de Paris in 1889), drawing and art while writing



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poetry and his first novel.^(1,3) Although he completed the academic requirements for a Doctorate in Medicine, he could not afford to travel back to the Universidad Central de Madrid from Berlin where he had begun training in Ophthalmology.⁽¹⁾ His letter from Berlin dated April 27, 1887 intimates “*as to the Doctorate, since it is necessary for me to go to Madrid to get it, I shall see if I will have money left to make the round trip ... At any rate, I shall pay for the title and I shall send my thesis with the object of finding out if they want to admit me in this manner without the necessity of presenting myself personally.*”^(4,5)

PREPARATION AND PROFESSION His desire to restore his mother’s failing sight fueled his training in Ophthalmology. In Paris, he worked as an apprentice to the leading French ophthalmologist, Louis de Wecker (1832–1906). According to de Ocampo, “*in Rizal’s time ... doctors from all over the world who come to train at the (de Wecker) clinic became famous in their own countries, (while) patients, many of them belonging to royalty, came from all over Europe for treatment.*”⁽⁴⁾ In this setting, Rizal was a “*refined, friendly and industrious man who was held in high esteem by Dr. de Wecker and his colleagues in the clinic.*”⁽⁴⁾ In a letter to his parents dated January 1, 1886, Rizal reports that “*from 50 to 100 patients go daily to the clinic... There are days when they perform as many as ten major operations*” and shares that “*I know already how to perform all kinds of operations.*”⁽⁵⁾ He also expresses the need “*to be trained in the study of what is going on at the bottom of the eye that requires much practice,*” leading him to Germany where “*I have been told, this is taught very well.*”⁽⁵⁾

A letter to his parents on February 9, 1886 recounts his first night in Heidelberg: “*on the night of my arrival, wishing to obtain information about a good professor of ophthalmology, I inquired about the beer-hall where students gather, and I was directed to the Gulden Bierbrauerei ... I introduced myself and in my semi-German, I asked them. Instantly they stirred, asked one another and gave me all the necessary information. They invited me to sit with them and drink beer.*”⁽⁵⁾ Thus was he led to train at the *augenlinik* (eye clinic) of the renowned Professor Doctor Otto Becker (1828–1890), whose lectures at the University of Heidelberg he was given special permission to attend.⁽⁴⁾ On March 11, 1886, he wrote: “*I continue assisting at the hospital and studying ... Ophthalmology and German... In the hospital I practice and examine patients who come every day. The professor corrects our mistakes in diagnosis; I help in the treatment ...*”⁽⁵⁾

While in Germany, Rizal was sponsored as a

member of the Berlin Anthropological Society by its head, the scientist–statesman and “Father of Pathology” Professor Doctor Rudolph Virchow (1821–1902).^(1,3) It was also in Berlin that he finally completed the first of two novels that would inspire the Philippine revolution, “*Noli me Tangere*” (literally, “Touch me Not”, also entitled “The Social Cancer”).^(1,3) The dedication of the novel embodies his profession:⁽³⁾ “*Recorded in the history of human sufferings is a cancer of so malignant a character that the least touch irritates it and awakens in it the sharpest pains. Thus ... hath thy dear image presented itself showing a social cancer like to that other! Desiring thy welfare ... and seeking the best treatment ... I will strive to reproduce thy condition faithfully, without discriminations; I will raise a part of the veil that covers the evil, sacrificing to truth everything, even vanity itself, since, as thy son, I am conscious that I also suffer from thy defects and weaknesses*”.

PRACTICE AND POLITICS Rizal practiced Ophthalmology mainly in three places – Calamba (August 1887–February 1888), Hong Kong (November 1891–June 1892), and while in exile, in Dapitan (July 1892–July 1896).^(4,6) His sojourns in these places reflected his political journey as well. In fact, his return to Calamba from Europe amidst concerns for his safety over the controversy and censure generated by the publication of his first novel echo Guererro’s claim that “*as a physician he had really only two patients at heart: his country and his mother.*”⁽⁷⁾

In Calamba, where he was known as “doctor Uliman” (“*Aleman*” being the Tagalog term for “a German”), he quickly became famous as an eye specialist, gaining patients from as far as Manila and earning “sufficient income to finance his second trip to Europe.”^(3,4) It was most probably in Calamba that Rizal first operated on his mother, either performing an “iridectomy, preliminary to cataract extraction,” or “for some other conditions ... like pterygium or glaucoma.”⁽⁴⁾ While he was in Calamba, the *Noli* was banned from the Philippine Islands, penalising anyone in possession of a copy with deportation and confiscation of property in favour of the betrayer.⁽³⁾ It did not help his cause that Rizal encouraged the people of the community to accurately document injustice with “reliable statistics” and “actual conditions,” himself preparing “an excellent presentation of the grievances of the people of his town.”⁽¹⁾ The Governor-General advised Rizal “for his own good ... to leave the country at once.”⁽³⁾ Armed with “death threats from his enemies,” he finally “yielded to pressure from family and friends” to leave his hometown of Calamba for the last time in

1888,” travelling “through Hong Kong, Japan, America and Europe” while “focusing his work on scholarly research and political writing.”⁽⁶⁾ It was during this period that he wrote articles and poetry for the Filipino-Madrid reformist review *La Solidaridad* (“solidarity”), became the leader of the European Filipino activists who made up the Propaganda Movement and finished his second novel *El Filibusterismo* (“The Filibuster”, “Freebooter” or “The Revolutionist”, also translated as “The Reign of Greed”, published 1891).^(1,3) His novels fanned the flames of resistance, and as increasing notoriety abroad heightened reprisals against his family back home, plans were made to rendezvous in Hong Kong with the free members of his family.⁽¹⁾

In Hong Kong, where he was known as the “Spanish Doctor”, Rizal’s “fame as a surgeon spread” and he was soon able to “live freely (*vivir libre*).”⁽⁴⁾ According to de Ocampo, it was here that he successfully operated on his mother’s left cataract in 1892, for Rizal’s letter to Blumentritt from Hong Kong on December 30, 1891 mentions: “my old blind mother is also here fleeing from tyranny,” and a subsequent letter written on May 4, 1892 says that “my mother can read and write and my father again enjoys the warm climate.”⁽⁴⁾ While his practice flourished, he continued to work toward achieving reform and “equality under the law,” founding the *La Liga Filipina* on June 3, 1892. Against the objections of his family and friends, he decided to make the perilous journey back to the Philippines, “not unmindful of how little regard Spain had had in his country for her plighted honor.”⁽¹⁾ In letters to be opened after his death, Rizal wrote:^(1,3)

“Gladly do I go to expose myself to peril, not as any expiation of misdeeds (for in this matter I believe myself guiltless of any), but to complete my work and myself offer the example of which I have always preached.”

“A man ought to die for duty and his principles. I hold fast to every idea which I have advanced as to the condition and future of our country, and shall willingly die for it, and even more willingly to procure for you justice and peace.”

“Besides I wish to show those who deny us patriotism that we know how to die for duty and principles. What matters death, if one dies for what one loves, for native land and beings held dear?”

Following his return to Manila, Rizal was quickly arrested and deported to Dapitan, Mindanao in the southern Philippines.^(1,3) It was here that Rizal practiced the longest, not only as an ophthalmologist but as a general physician. It was also here that Rizal operated on his mother’s right cataract. A letter to Blumentritt on

July 31, 1894 reports: “I (got) operated my dear mother of cataract. Thank God she is perfectly well now and can write and read with ease.”⁽⁸⁾ The recovery was short-lived, as Rizal recounts: “she did not like to follow my instructions and ... removed and put back the eyepad ... until her eyes became so inflamed ... and I do not know if I can improve her condition ... the operative wound gaped, the iris prolapsed and now there is a violent inflammation. Nothing can quiet her and she reads and goes to bright lights and rubs her eyes. It is unbelievable what has happened.”⁽⁴⁾

Rizal’s exile in Dapitan was spent fruitfully as he enjoyed relative freedom to pursue his talents and interests. He resisted the temptation to escape (which would have been tantamount to “an admission of guilt”), refusing offers from friends for a vessel from Singapore to rescue him on one of his many trips around the islands.⁽¹⁾ In a letter to Blumentritt dated December 19, 1893, Rizal says:⁽⁸⁾

“I am going to tell you how we live here. I have a square house, another hexagonal, and another octagonal – all made of bamboo, wood and nipa. In the square one my mother, my sister Trinidad, a nephew, and I live. In the octagonal my boys live – some boys whom I teach arithmetic, Spanish, and English – and now and then a patient who has been operated on. In the hexagonal are my chickens. From my house I hear the murmur of a crystalline rivulet that comes from the high rocks. I see the beach, the sea where I have two small crafts – two canoes or barotos, as they call them here. I have many fruit trees – mangoes, lanzones, guayabanos, baluno, nanka, etc. I have rabbits, dogs, cats, etc. I get up early – at 5:00. I visit my fields, I feed the chickens, I wake up my folks, and start them moving. At 7:30 we take breakfast – tea pastry, cheese, sweets, etc. Afterwards I treat my poor patients who come to my land. I dress and go to the town in my baroto, I treat the people there and I return at 12:00 and take lunch. Afterwards I teach the boys until 4:00 and I spend the afternoon farming. I spend the evening reading and studying.”

He later built a hospital (and treated townspeople for free and charged foreign patients accordingly), established a school and taught classes (in arithmetic, English, Spanish and natural science), planted and farmed while contributing to the development of the town (building the lighting and waterworks system, importing aquatic resources and agricultural machinery and facilitating export of local produce) and continued his studies and scientific pursuits (including submitting ethnographic material to European museums, documenting flora and fauna and discovering three new species).^(1,3,4,6)

In another letter dated January 15, 1895, Rizal shares: “*I am overwhelmed with patients and I cannot finish many works I have begun. I am enlarging my Studies on the Tagalog Language and I cannot finish it. I lack reference books, for here I have no library. My patients are so numerous that I have to turn away some for not being able to attend to them.*”⁽⁸⁾

Despite having his hands full at home, he did not hesitate to volunteer his services as a physician for the duration of the Spanish campaign in Cuba, where many soldiers were dying of yellow fever without medical assistance due to a lack of physicians.^(1,3) It was on the voyage to Spain to serve in Cuba that he was arrested in his cabin for complicity in the Philippine insurrection (*Katipunan*) that had just been betrayed.^(1,3) Quickly repatriated, the “dangerous revolutionary” was held in solitary confinement in a dungeon in Real Fuerza de Santiago (Fort Santiago) in Intramuros, Manila.⁽¹⁾ He was sentenced to death “for the crime of having founded illicit associations and for having incited and promoted rebellion”⁽³⁾ and summarily executed in public by firing squad on December 30, 1896 at Bagumbayan (new homeland) field, now Rizal Park.^(1,3) The first stanza of “*Mi Ultimo Adiós*” (My Last Farewell), written on the eve of his death summarises his sentiments:^(1,3)

*Adiós, Patria adorada, región del sol querida,
Perla del Mar de Oriente, nuestro perdido edén,
A darte voy, alegre, la triste, mustia vida;
Y fuera más brillante, más fresca, más florida,
También por ti la diera, la diera por tí bien.*

*Farewell, dear Fatherland, clime of the sun caress'd
Pearl of the Orient seas, our Eden lost!
Gladly now I go to give thee this faded life's best,
And were it brighter, fresher, or more blest,
Still would I give it thee, nor count the cost.*

POSTSCRIPT Rather than quell it, Rizal’s martyrdom ignited the Philippine Revolution (1896–1898), and continues to inspire similar sentiments in the rest of Asia and around the world. His prior arrest and deportation to Dapitan precipitated the birth of the separatist revolutionary *Kataastaasang Kagalangalan Katipunan ng manga Anak ng Bayan* (“Highest Honourable Association of the Children of the Nation”, “KKK” or simply, “*Katipunan*”) and the subsequent death of his

reformist *La Liga Filipina*.⁽³⁾ His subsequent arrest, incarceration and execution ensured the spread of the revolution. Echoing his dedication to the *Noli*: “*In the history of human suffering is a cancer so malignant that the least touch awakens such agonizing pains*”, his diagnosis of the social cancer that plagued the Philippines under Spain was indeed subversive, as it set the stage for radical extirpation as the only hope of cure. His stance that healing begins with honest diagnosis could well apply to any other space and time context where truth and justice are wanting. Indeed, “to his patients he gave sight and to his country he gave vision”.⁽⁶⁾

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