Noli and Fili Stolen

In Rizal’s time, the Permanent Commission of Censorship recommended the absolute prohibition on the importation, reproduction, and circulation of the Noli. The copies of the Fili, on the other hand, was destroyed by Customs in Manila upon shipment to the Philippines. The rare surviving copies of the novels were secretly purchased and “according to one friend of the family, had to be read in the smallest, most private room in the house the toilet (Ocampo, p. 108).

That was the fate of the first edition of Rizal’s novels. But that is nothing. Compared to what happened to their original manuscripts about 70 years after their publication.

The original manuscripts of the Noli and Fili (along with that of the poem ‘Mi Ultimo Adios’) were stolen from the National Library on the evening of December 8, 1961. After some days, the thieves who outsmarted the building’s. sleepy guards sent a ransom note “made of newspaper cutouts” to the Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission (JRNCC) (Ocampo, p. 148). The robbers demanded 1.4 million pesos for the return of the original texts, else Rizal’s handiworks would be burned.

To summarize the ‘historic robbery’, the then Education Secretary. Alejandro ‘Anding’ Roces personally met with the burglars and, after some various negotiations, had retrieved the documents without paying a single centavo. The manuscripts were returned on installment basis the ‘Ultimo Adios’ during the first meeting, the ‘El Fili’ on the next negotiation, and lastly, the ‘Noli’. There was a time when the demanded ransom was reduced to 100,000 pesos and then to 10,000 pesos (Ocampo, p. 148). But recognizing perhaps that they would get nothing from the government, the robbers ultimately settled on returning the expensive documents, free of charge.

Many still find this ‘charge-free return of the manuscripts’ strange and mind-blowing. But the following additional details about the story could perhaps shed light on the account.

During the negotiations, one of the burglars related to Roces that on the night of the robbery, “the Rizal manuscripts suddenly became heavy as a cavan of rice”. The thief thus exclaimed, “The manuscript must be holy or haunted!” (Ocampo, p. 148). One robber even claimed that he read Rizal’s handwritten novels and described the feeling, “Ang sarap basahin, kinikilabutan ako!” (Ocampo, p. 148). It’s remarkably funny to note however that the thief did not understand Spanish! Nonetheless, these indicate that the stealers were probably bothered by their conscience, hence the consent to just send back the national hero’s works.

Anding promised not to identify the robbers or to be a witness against them in court. Thus, the hilariously controversial thieves were never known.