

# Conrado Benitez: Philippines Trade Envoy to America

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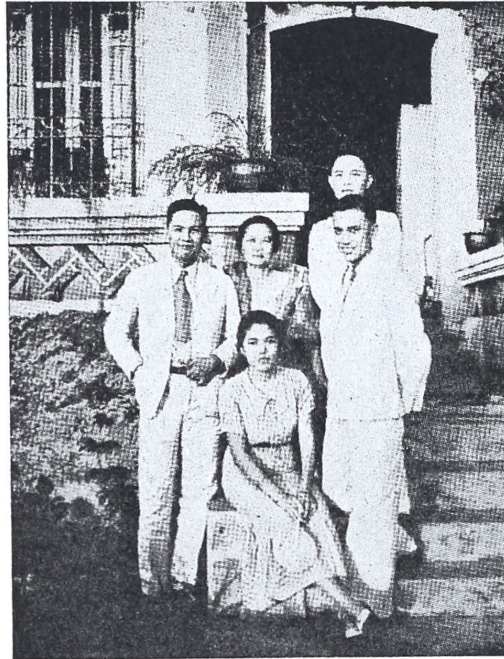
In the spring of 1909 a young man came into my dean's cubby-hole in Ellis Hall, inquiring for Dean Boynton, who seemed to be temporarily mislaid. The young man was brunette, with a strong face and the pleasantest smile I had ever seen, except Walter Steffen's perhaps, and his teeth whiter even than Steffen's. I had been away the previous year, on a sort of earned leave, and had never seen this young man before. He told me his name was Conrado Benitez; that he had been sent to Chicago two or three years before when he was sixteen, as a "special student"; that he had graduated from the University High School, was now ending his sophomore year at Chicago, and was particularly interested in economics, "education," debating, and swimming.

"We Filipinos, sir," he said, favoring me with the aforesaid smile, "can all swim and argue." I made the change he wanted in his course, signed P.H.B. on the card, left a duplicate on Dean Boynton's desk, and thought how true the aphorism was that "the brighter they are the farther they come." Conrado Benitez was obviously bright; he had come a very long way, from Manila. I wondered how far he would go.

He became captain of the water-polo team, treasurer of the Senior Class of Ec-o-lev-en, took a debating scholarship and honorable mentions for scholarship in both the Junior and Senior Colleges (never mind what they were; that was a quarter of a century before the New Plan). In August, 1911, three months after he received his Ph.B., he was awarded the Master's degree also, in education. A week later, we said good-bye (we had become friends by that time, and Conrado was always polite as well as affectionate with his friends) and he went back to Manila, where he had been appointed to the faculty of the Government Normal School. His appointment interested the islands, mildly; for he was the first Filipino to be judged worthy of thus sharing the "white man's burden" of teaching young ideas how to shoot.

His progress at first was slow. In fact, it took him four long years to become dean of the College of Liberal Arts in the University of Manila. He might have reached that plane sooner, but for the fact that he had also become interested in a movement to establish a newspaper in English, owned and edited by Filipinos. So at 25, when he became dean, he also became editor-in-chief and chief editorial writer of the *Manila Herald*. Already, by the way, he had been dubbed "the Americanist," because he could not forget how much he had delighted in the University of Chicago, in American ideas of education, and in his conviction that America stood for freedom of thought and action.

After the War, in 1919, he re-visited the States for the first time, as a member of the first official Filipino "mission." He came frankly to lobby for the eventual independence of the Islands; was



THE BENITEZ FAMILY

Poses at their Laguna home. Conrado, Mrs. Benitez, their daughter Helen, and two sons, Frederic and Thomas

put in charge of the "contact bureau" in Washington, and stayed in the United States half a year. I renewed my own old contact with him that year, for when he came to the University to look us over he flew like a homing pigeon to the deans' cubby-holes. I knew that even then he was a distinguished person, but I was not afraid of him.

"Benny," said I, "do you still swim and argue?"

"Not much swimming nowadays," he said, with the same old fascinating grin, though his eyes were sadder, "but my job in this country is to argue!"

In fact, while remaining an educational administrator and a newspaper editor, he had also found time to study law, and had been admitted to the bar. He found the three professions, however, too strenuous to practice simultaneously, so in 1921 he gave up his newspaper work, (the *Herald* had become a daily) and in conjunction with a partner who had also been educated in the United States, and who has since been appointed to the Supreme Court of the Philippines, he practiced steadily, valiantly in defense of the constitutional interests of the Philippines. By the time he was thirty, Benitez was generally regarded as about the most "promising" fellow in the Islands.

But he kept out of politics. He had been made Dean of the new College of Business Administration of the University of the Philippines; he was writing school textbooks in Philippine history and in economics, he was bringing up his wife (who is now Dean of Philippine Women's

University) and his three children, and he was as one might say generally "extending his sphere of influence." In 1934 however the bell rang. He was practically forced to become a delegate to the new, epochmaking Philippine Constitutional convention. He was promptly placed on the Committee of seven to draft the document—the only "Americanist" of the lot. The constitution was drafted. Three of the seven, headed by Benitez, "struck." He wanted ampler provisions to insure academic freedom, non-sectarian control of the public schools, more Government participation in the furtherance of higher education; in short, he wanted more education, and more freedom, constitutionally guaranteed, in the Islands. After a hot debate in the Committee, a smaller "Committee on Style" was formed—a way of whipping the devil around the stump. Benitez controlled that "Committee on Style." It revised the Constitution, putting in what the "younger generation" demanded. Benitez had swum through, to distinction, and argued through to a sort of Jeffersonian serviceability to his country.

This year, after having been incidentally, as one might say, elected Grand Master of the Masonic Order in the Philippines, he was made a member of the Philippine delegation to the Institute of Pacific Relations, meeting in California in August. After that was over he hurried on to Chicago. He was on his way round the world, for to admire and for to see, but particularly to study governments. His old class, the Chicago class of 1911 (please do not confuse with the Harvard class of 1911, recently made so famous for *faineance*) grabbed him, and he stuck around for ten days, eating and drinking and gabbing. But I was interested in the tone, in what I may call the elevation and hard common-sense, of his "afterdinner speeches," of which I heard a couple. He asked no favors, gave no quarter to ignorance, talked like a statesman—which is what he has become. The same old smile, the same old deference ("I think of you as Teddy, sir, but I have not the irreverence to use the name") but the maturity of a man who thinks in terms of national interests, and international understanding. Somehow he made me feel a little as Jane Addams used to—that I was likable, but, well—*young*. I think the millionaires and the publicists and the practical hardheads of 1911 felt a bit the same way. But how they delighted in him, and how he delighted in them! "I have felt," he said once, "always that the University of Chicago was solidly, splendidly educational. But I have felt always too that it was a house of friendship. I don't know whether I give more sincere thanks for the education or the friendliness of it. But yes—more for the friendliness."

Conrado Benitez has gone far. There are those who think he will go farther, that indeed he cannot escape going much farther still.—from *University of Chicago Magazine*, December, 1936.