

**Not only a poet**

## ***Balagtas: Propagandist***

**By Ben Revilla**

**O**NE OF THE greatest poets produced by our country is Francisco Baltazar, better known by his pen name, Balagtas. He was, however, more than just a poet; he was also a reformist and propagandist. Through his poetry, Balagtas was able to crystallize the grievances and suffering of our people. Rizal carried with him to Europe a copy of Balagtas' allegorical masterpiece, *Plorante at Laura*.

Balagtas lived in an era of oppression and deep patriotism. His poetry sought to awaken the people to the cruelties of the colonizers. He was therefore as important a propagandist as Rizal, Mabini and del Pilar. And since he wrote in the language of the people, he probably reached more people than his more illustrious counterparts.



Balagtas was born in Panginay, Bigaa, Bulacan on April 2, 1788, the fourth child of Juan Baltazar and Juana de la Cruz. His father was a blacksmith. Like the other boys of the town, he was educated at the parochial convent school, where he mastered the cartilla and the caton. He was introduced very early to the unhappy events in the country by listening to the older folk who gathered every afternoon in his father's shop. When he was eleven, he left for Manila where he found employment as a houseboy. His employer, seeing promise in the boy, sent him to school.

He enrolled at the Colegio de San Jose where he took up humanities, theology, philosophy and canon law. Later, Balagtas transferred to the Colegio de San Juan de Letran. Here he discovered his literary talent. He was proficient in three languages—Spanish, Latin, and Tagalog.

His less literate friends asked him to write love letters for them which Balagtas did gladly. He became a student of Jose de la Cruz who is better known as Huseng Sisiw because he charged his clients a white chick for every literary piece he produced for them. Under his guidance, Balagtas developed into a popular poet. His fame spread. Most of his plays were staged at the Teatro de Tondo.

**A**ROUND this time Balagtas fell in love with a girl named Bianang but a ruthless rival was able to convince the authorities to jail the young poet. Balagtas brooded in jail for some time. Here he wrote "Pagsisi," a poem that is considered the best of his early works. After he was released from jail, Balagtas fell in love again with a girl named either Maria Asuncion Rivera or Magdalena. Nothing came out of this because in 1840 Balagtas was appointed auxiliary justice to Judge Victor Figueroa.

His work took him to many towns and in Orion he met Juana Tiambeng. They fell in love and on June 22, 1842 they got married. Balagtas resigned his post and returned to the job he liked best—writing and staging plays. However, his income was not enough so he was forced to return to government service this time as *teniente de primero* and *juez de cementera*. During the course of his official work he was accused of having shaved the head of a rich man's maidservant. This unique crime resulted in a conviction. For four years, Balagtas languished in jail.

While in jail Balagtas wrote a great deal. He was released in 1860. He continued to write poetry. This period was probably the most prolific in his entire career.



Nobody as yet has determined the exact date of the completion of the book **Plorante at Laura** but the first known edition came out in 1838. It was printed by the Colegio de Santo Tomas press. Two other editions followed the first printing—in 1853 by the Imprenta de los Amigos Pais and in 1861 by the Imprenta de Ramirez y Giraudier.

**A SUMMARY** of the book was made by the historian Teodoro Agoncilló: "The story opens in a gloomy wilderness. We see the young Plorante, struggling to free himself where he is tied to a tree, lamenting his fate and invoking heaven to right the wrongs done to him by his enemy, Count Adolfo. He remembers the days when Laura was his beloved.

He falls into a swoon. At almost the same time a Moorish Prince, Aladin, enters the forest and finding Plorante about to be devoured by hungry lions, kills the beasts and sets the young man free. Plorante, grateful, tells his saviour the story of his life. He was the son of Duke Briseo, the adviser of King Linceo of Albania. At an early age, his father had sent him to Athens to study. Here he had become the idol of all his classmates except Count Adolfo, who harbored ill-feelings against him. Once staging Aschylus' Seven Against Thebes, Count Adolfo had actually slashed at Plorante with a sword. His friend Menandro saved Plorante from death. Upon his return to his country, Plorante was commissioned by King Linceo to lead the Alba-

nian forces against the Persians, besieging the kingdom of Crotona. While plotting his strategy with the King and his father, Plorante met Princess Laura, the king's daughter, with whom he fell in love. Plorante was victorious over the Persian invaders. Learning of another Persian horde that was attacking, Plorante returned to his country and routed the Persians. Now he took the offensive against the infidels and seventeen kingdoms fell into his hands. In the midst of the campaign against Etolia, he received a letter from King Linceo asking him to return to Albania posthaste. Leaving his army to Menandro, Plorante returned to Albania only to find his father and the king murdered in cold blood by Count Adolfo, who had usurped the throne. Adolfo had him arrested and tied to a tree in the wilderness. The usurper also announced that Laura had accepted his love. Upon the conclusion of Plorante's story, Aladin introduced himself as the very Persian prince Plorante had spoken of. Returning to Persia after the Albanian campaigns, he found himself condemned to death by his father, Sultan Ali Adab, apparently because of his defeat in Albania. The death sentence was changed to life imprisonment upon the promise of Florida, Aladins' betrothed, to accept the sultan's love. Fle-

rida, however, had escaped and wandered in the forests. Learning of Florida's escape, Aladin, too, escaped from Persia and journeyed far and wide in search of his loved one. It was during his search for Florida that he chanced upon Plorante. The two had just concluded their stories when they hear voices drifting their way. The voices are those of Laura and Florida. Laura tells of how Florida had saved her from Count Adolfo, who had fled to the forest after Menandro arrived with his forces from Etolia. Adolfo tried to dishonor Laura, but Florida, who had lost herself in the forest after her escape from the sultan, had killed Adolfo with an arrow. At this moment, Menandro and his army arrived. The two couples are brought to Albania. Plorante is proclaimed king, and Florida and Aladin are baptized. Not long after Sultan Ali Adab dies and Aladin ascends the throne of Persia."



**A**MONG the foreign scholars who became interested in the poem are Blumentritt, Rost, Kern, Meyer, Minguella, Glanco and Retana. The first four went as far as to study Tagalog in order that they may read *Plorante* in the original. The Spanish scholars praised the work lavishly.

Balatgas' other known works include *La India Elegante y el Negrito Amate*, *Mahomet at Constanza*, *Almanzor at Rosalinda*, *Orosman at Safira*, *Don Nuño at Zelinda*, *Clara Balmori*, *Nuno Gordoneo*, *Rodolfo at Rosemondo*, *Auredata at Astrone*, *El Amante de la Corona*, *Abdol at Miserana*, *Bayaceto at Dorlisca*, and others. Most of his works were burned in the fire in Orion in 1892.

At his death-bed on February 20, 1862, Balagtas told his wife: "Don't permit that anyone of our children should ever embrace the writing of poetry as a calling." Two of his sons, Ceferino and Victor, became poets. Ceferino wrote *Pagpupuri sa Virgen Maria* and other poems while the literary works of Victor were included in an anthology compiled by the late Her-menigildo Cruz.

The achievement of Balagtas is summed up by Director E.B. Rodriguez in this manner: "He fashions a world where justice reigns supreme, where everyone finds enjoyment in his relation with nature and men . . . such is the world he envisioned — a world of perfection, love and romance."

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### The Tulingan

**A**LTHOUGH the Islands sit on one of the world's richest tuna spawning areas, tuna fishing on a scale known in Japan, the United States and the Mediterranean countries does not exist in the Philippines. Depletion of tuna stocks in Japanese and Formosan home grounds has induced their fishermen to stalk Philippine waters for tuna, reaching out as deep as the Macassar Strait.

Local fishermen's acquaintance with tuna is limited to its midge varieties known in Batangas, Zambales and Pangasinan and other coastal areas bordering the China Sea as "tuliñgan."

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