

# MANUEL AND AURORA

MANUEL L. QUEZON III

**F**erocious storms, treacherous undertows, bounty and tragedy—these are the characteristics of the sea that walls in Baler on one side. On the other side are near-impenetrable lushness, seemingly inexhaustible resources, and the stretch of the Sierra Madre and its living wall of rocks, which intensify that sense of remoteness. In essence, Baler is an island both paradise and purgatory.

## BALER PERSONIFIED

Both Manuel Luis Quezon and Aurora Antonia Aragon saw themselves and were seen by others as akin to the characteristics of Baler. In Manuel were the storms: of his temper it was known to be sudden and ferocious yet fated to pass; there too the restlessness of the waves and the deep undercurrents of emotion and ambition. In Aurora was the light, indeed, the dawn that banishes darkness, to be replaced by life-giving light. He was the builder, she was the nurturer; he was the leader, she was his conscience. He would often be viewed as a gambler, often reckless, a man of nerve (and nerves) as the American John Gunther once put it in a 1938 article. She was, in a sense, one too: when she was asked to define love she told the interviewer, “love is always a gamble.”

The same journalist who described Manuel L. Quezon as a man of nerves, wrote that he gloried in his origins. “Here I first saw the light of day,” was the caption for an aerial photograph of Baler that Quezon proudly showed visitors. Claro M. Recto, both a rival and an ally, called him “The Star of Baler.” The city named after Baler’s most famous son is now envisioned as the new capital for a new nation.

Destiny would take Manuel Quezon away from Baler but he would return, albeit infrequently,

and his affections for his hometown never waned, his thoughts never far from his place of origin. In Aurora’s pre-war Baguio home, on display was a photograph of Baler, circa 1916, and she would point out to visitors the Plaza, and her home with much pride. For both Manuel and Aurora, Baler always occupied a place of lofty position.

## THEIR EARLY YEARS: FERVOR AND FATALITIES

Manuel and Aurora’s mothers—Maria Dolores and Zeneida Molina—were sisters; their fathers, Lucio Quezon from Paco and Pedro Aragon from Laguna, were Tagalogs. Manuel’s father was a fervent loyalist of Spain; Aurora’s father, suspected of treason against the Spanish Crown. The lives of the two were, from early on, confronted by the complexities of colonial life. Manuel’s parents were both school teachers, with the linguistic distinction of being the only residents of Baler able to converse in Spanish with the representatives of Spain’s sovereignty: the parish priest and the local commander of the Spanish forces. The young Manuel would begin a life of perpetual rebellion against the status quo, in particular the clergy and officials at whose insufferable feelings of superiority he bristled. One of his earliest claims to fame would be an



act intended to vindicate family honor, but which took on a political color.

His cousin, Fidela, then a lovely young woman, attracted the attention of a Spanish officer. Manuel thought that the Spaniard did not have honorable intentions toward her. One evening he ambushed and struck down the soldier. He went into hiding from the authorities until the soldier recovered. Time would embroider an already gallant tale: there are versions in which, after assaulting the officer (this time, over the officer's demonstration of affections for a lady Manuel was himself courting), Manuel paraded about town with the officer's handkerchief in his pocket. There is an addition to the tale. Worried for the safety of his son, Lucio Quezon extracted from his son an oath of loyalty to Spain, which Manuel upheld even after his father's death.

Indeed, death is an integral part of the intertwined stories of Manuel and Aurora: deaths at sea, at home,

and in the mountains. A brother of their mothers died following a shipwreck on his return to Baler from Casiguran. Legend says that the brother was able to swim ashore but the Dumagat, thinking he was a Spaniard, executed him. During Manuel's youth, at the age of eight, he accompanied three Franciscans to go swimming at the beach. As they swam away from the shore, an undertow pulled them out to sea, resulting in the drowning of the priests. Manuel, however, was caught by an accompanying sacristan by the hair and saved his life; he remained grateful to him, his savior for the rest of his life. Home would be where Manuel, by then a student back for vacation from his studies in Manila, would hold his mother in his arms, as she died of the same illness he would die of decades later: tuberculosis.

As for Aurora, as a five-year-old, she was taken by the Spanish troops to the church of Baler together with 15-year-old sister Amparo and their mother Zeneida. There they sought refuge from the Filipino revolutionaries and witnessed the horrors of war, while remaining ignorant of the fate of Pedro Aragon, who had been taken to Fort Santiago in Manila as a rebel suspect. This was the Baler of the twilight of Spain's imperium in the Philippines: clans divided between loyalists and rebels, family turned against family—the birth of a nation accompanied in torrents of fraternal blood. Baler was a microcosm of the revolution: Manuel and Aurora's experiences were examples of the toll it took on families and individuals: Aurora and her mother were protected by the Spanish even as her father was imprisoned by them; Manuel and his father chose to remain loyal to Spain while Manuel's half brother Teodorico symbolically broke off with the family by renouncing his father's name, using for the rest of his life only his mother's maiden name, Molina.

With Teodorico Molina in the forces of the Katipunan, and his cousin Fidela married to Teodorico Novicio, commander of the Filipino troops in the area, bitterness became the inevitable legacy of the revolution. The fiercely loyal Lucio Quezon and his son Pedro were on their way to

secure supplies for the Spanish garrison when they were ambushed and beheaded in the Sierra Madre, their bodies never to be found. Years later, on one of his visits to Baler, Manuel would confess that although he had received many honors and plaudits from his countrymen, one regret remained: that he could not trace the remains of his murdered father and brother, Heting (Pedro).

The revolution, in a sense, was exemplified by Teodorico who stayed his entire life in Baler, whereas the tensions and tragedies of that revolution, particularly its inevitable toll in fratricidal strife, were exemplified by the lives of Manuel and Aurora. Manuel would always be haunted by the death of his father and brother; family relations forever susceptible to tensions. The *insurrectos*, as the terminology was then, would remain in Baler; as for Manuel, a strange kind of racial and national vindication (as put by writers



Doña Aurora (LEFT)

from Carlos P. Romulo to Nick Joaquin) was in store for him: the possession of Malacañang Palace by a Filipino, a creole.

### THE STARS BEGIN TO SHINE

Manuel left Baler early in life; Aurora remained there longer. His ambitions would be satisfied only by finding an ever-expanding role on the national stage; her attitudes remained fundamentally devoted to home and hometown. In the early years of the American era, while Quezon pursued law after having joined the army of the First Republic to fight an enemy, America, he then experienced the distinction of becoming an aide de camp to President Aguinaldo, and then a major under the command of General Mascardo in Bataan.

In those early decades of America's new imperium in the Philippines, Aurora set about contributing good to her community. Like her aunt, Aurora became a teacher and converted their family home across the church into a school for boys and girls. She described her experience in an interview on 26 April 1939:

“When I taught in our house the boys and girls of our hometown of Baler, I organized a reading circle, and we organized a library for the use of the teachers as well as the students. I was elected the librarian of the circle. I listed all the books that we had, and I required every borrower to sign his name on a notebook, and to write therein the title of the book to be borrowed. I also required him to pay a fine of five centavos a day if he failed to return the book on time.

“There was a humorous incident that happened when I was the librarian of that reading circle. The library was open from ten to twelve in the morning and three to four in the afternoon. We had a meeting and one of the subjects discussed was the improvement of the library service. A reader stood up and said, ‘Mr. Chairman, I move that the librarian be opened from three to six in the afternoon everyday instead of from three to four.’ A burst of laughter resounded in the room. When everything was calm I stood up and said, ‘What you meant is to open the library from three to six in the afternoon and not the librarian.’”

As Manuel gained fame and quite a bit of controversy as he embarked on a public career, he involved himself in Baler affairs only to satisfy filial piety, personally filing a case for murder against Novicio and securing a conviction that was, however, overturned by the Supreme Court, which maintained that the murders were acts of war, and covered by an amnesty proclamation.

We do not hear much of involvement in the public affairs of Baler on the part of either Manuel or Aurora, except for isolated stories of Manuel taking the long journey by horseback the singer Atang de la Rama (a petite figure who apparently could be comfortably carried in a basket, along with other provisions on the horse) so that she could sing for his cousin, whom Manuel was surreptitiously courting at that time. Aurora's mother, Zeneida, vehemently objected to any marriage, so that the two had to wait until Aurora's mother died before they could marry in 1918.

### **SMALL TOWN, NO SMALL MINDS**

We finally know of something concrete taking place in 1916, when Manuel was already Senate President. According to Aurora's own account,

"I was in Baler in 1916. We erected its school by public contribution. The town people furnished the materials, like boards, lumber, etc., the people freely contributing their time and labor.

"I found the officials of Nueva Vizcaya province in Baler who had already succeeded in securing the consent of the inhabitants of Baler to the cession of their town to Nueva Vizcaya. In the public meeting I stood up and said, 'What can you officials of Nueva Vizcaya give to Baler which the province of Tayabas cannot give? In the first place Tayabas is a first class province with plenty of resources and Baler can get anything it needs from her. (That was the time of the coconut boom.) Whereas Nueva Vizcaya is merely a special province. It cannot even elect its governor and municipal presidents. If the Baler people want to convert their town into township, like the towns in Nueva Vizcaya where their officials are not elected but only appointed, it is up to the Baler people. But let me say that I see no benefit in this change. It is trading local independence or autonomy with autocracy.

"Then the people of Baler began to ask: 'Ano ba ang kahulugan ng township? Tao at saka 'sheep,' ano ang ibig sabihin niyan?' 'Pues iyan nga, kayong nga taga Baler ay gagawing 'sheep'—tupa, taong walang isip—ng mga taga Nueva Vizcaya. Mawawalan kayo ng libertad na gaya ng tinatamo ninyo ngayon."

The observant reader will note several things about Aurora's recollection: it is a perfect example of the "Baler way" of politics. An open, frank, uninhibited debate, one that not only tolerated, but took for granted, the participation of everyone, male or female, privileged or simple; democratic, open, and contentious. This was the political heritage of Baler, where status was not an obstacle to participatory democracy: surely the young Manuel, later marveled at for his adeptness at thinking on his feet, and his skills on the debating floor, learned the give-and-take, the necessary mixture of fiery phrases and the cajoling appeal, that ensured his dominance in national politics for close to two generations. The personal touch, the openness to all, the absence of mental or social inhibitions to open discourse, were exemplified by both Manuel and Aurora. Small-town politics, unlike the common misconception, does not necessarily breed small minds.

### **THE LOVE AFFAIR**

When Manuel and Aurora finally married in 1918, it was in Hong Kong.

"Then came the time for me to get married and I did get married. To avoid public demonstrations, and the pomp of a marriage of the first and only president of the Philippine Senate, which the customs of our people would have demanded, I went to Hong Kong and there got married, without anyone being present at my wedding except half a dozen men who were traveling with me. Even these did not know I was getting married that day until, to their surprise, the marriage ceremony began. I was dressed in a business suit and my bride had an ordinary dress, no flowers, no celebration, nothing but the absolutely essential."

Of their marriage, the best analysis, perhaps, may be Manuel's own, in a letter he wrote to Aurora at a time he thought he was going to die.

It was addressed to Aurora—his “sweetheart.” They addressed each other as such from the moment of their marriage because Aurora felt that anything else would seem strange, after having grown up addressing her elder cousin as Ka Manuel. This was what he wrote:

October 23, 1934

My sweetheart:

I have just arrived here at the hospital. I have to be operated on because the stone is big and they say it cannot pass thru the ureter. It is indeed very fortunate that I did not return to the Philippines from Java, for had I returned, I surely would have died for no one there could have performed the operation.

My operation will take place the day after tomorrow. It is well that you are not here so that you will be saved from worry and trouble and you will only know when I am already well, by the help of God.

I am not worried about what would happen to me, because they say that the operation will not be difficult and Dr. Young is the best of all in this kind of operation. And above all I have faith in God who is most powerful. Nevertheless, should anything ever happen to me, I leave to you the care of our children. Have courage because if you will fall sick, no one will look after our children.

I regret that I have not dedicated my life wholly to you and yet it was you who gave me strength to continue my services for our Motherland.

My love for you has never changed. My heart and life are for you alone. No wife could have equaled you in kindness and in everything. All the happiness I received came from you. Now at this hour believe what I say, because it comes from the deepest part of my soul.

Pray for me and, our children, pray for me. I am kissing, embracing you all, and praying to God for all of us. If this be the end, then I will be waiting for you in the peace of heaven, and I will never forget to watch over you through the Almighty to deliver you from all evil.

Farewell—my life

Manuel

Much about their marriage has been lost to legend and gossip, but in that single letter is an excellent testament to what they meant to each other.

## THE STAR POINTS THE WAY HOME

During his presidency, Manuel would return from time to time to Baler; he had a vacation house constructed, but neither were inclined to reconstruct Manuel’s boyhood home or enlarge or even improve Aurora’s home facing the church. The remoteness of their hometown eventually resulted in Aurora establishing a model farm in Arayat, Pampanga, and settling there. During the years of her husband’s administration, she was happiest there but Baler remained a tangible presence. The farm was known as Kaleidan.

The final, personal glimpse into their married life comes from Manuel’s autobiography, where he describes the decision to go into exile.

“[After having been told by General MacArthur to prepare to evacuate to Corregidor]. When I got home, I called my wife aside and repeated to her everything that General MacArthur had told me. I wanted her advice. She felt that it would be very painful to leave and be away from our people. ‘But this is war,’ she said. ‘Total war—and the Military Commander should know better what should be done to win it.’”

“‘The winning of the war,’ Mrs. Quezon added, ‘is the only question before us. Nothing else matters.’”

“I agreed. She had put her finger on the right spot.”

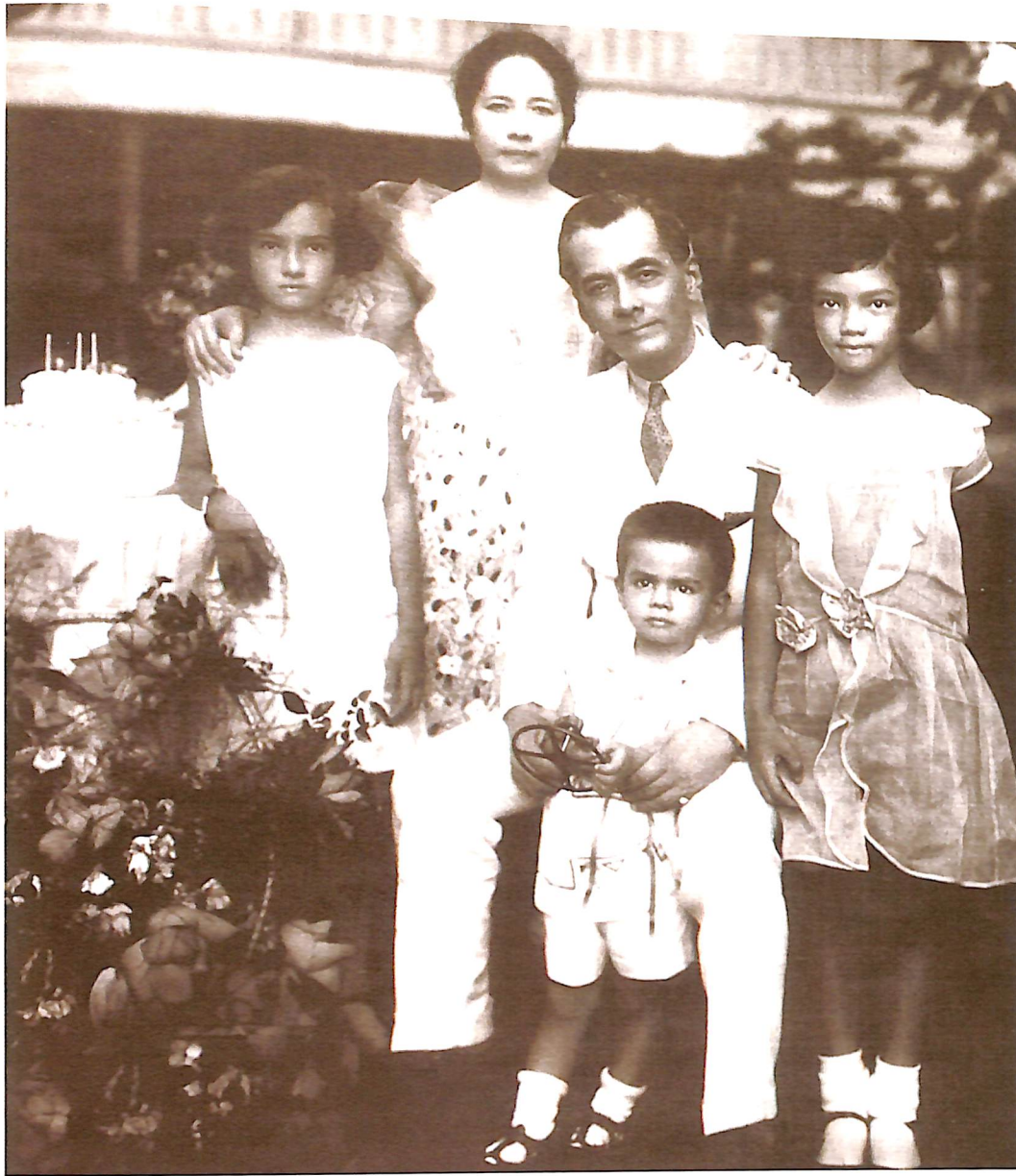
“‘How about you and the children—will you come with me?’ I inquired. Instead of answering my question, she asked me another: ‘What do you want us to do?’”

“‘I want you to remain here. The Japanese will respect you and treat you with every consideration. I have always dealt with their nationals in the Philippines with courtesy and justice. And you have done the same.’”

“Mrs. Quezon answered: ‘I shall do as you wish, but my preference is to be with you. Remember the sacred words, ‘For better or for worse, in sickness or in health, till death do us part.’”

“‘However,’ she counseled, ‘let us think the matter over to-night and to-morrow we should hear what our children have to say. They are grown up enough to be heard.’”

“On the following day and before the meeting of the Council of State which I had called for eleven o’clock, the family council took place. Every member of the family was willing to do as I wished; but, like their mother, who



had said nothing to them of our conversation the night before, they preferred to go with me wherever I went.”

In exile, ailing and embittered, offering up his sufferings for his country, Manuel took to recounting his past either to his collaborator in his autobiography, his close American friend Francis Burton Harrison, or in more confidential but informal chats with his Executive Secretary, Arturo Rotor. He was aware, as best as he could be, of events at home, including the destruction of the telegraph station in Baler. On 1 August 1944, Manuel’s life came to an end, in the same manner as his mother’s life had ended, almost fifty years before—marked with blood.

Widowhood was the life of Aurora thereafter and she dedicated her life to her husband’s memory. It was from her pen that the ultimate meaning of both their lives was best expressed. Having been offered a pension by the Congress of the Philippines, she declined it with these words:

“I feel that on account of countless war widows and orphans I should waive collection of a pension. I cannot, in good conscience, receive government assistance when so many of my less fortunate sisters and their children are not yet taken care of.”

“I know [if I accepted] I would not be keeping faith with the memory of my beloved husband.”

And it was to honor the memory of her

husband that on 28 April 1949, she set out to visit Baler. Instead of traveling by sea, as her husband had preferred to do, she traveled by road. It was on the Baler-Bongabon road whose construction she had supported and the completion of which she had celebrated with her townsfolk that her life was ended: the stillness of the surrounding forest, along the road in Sierra Madre, broken by the sound of gunfire, a final claim for blood. As her husband, so with her: Manuel and Aurora in their final moments denied what, perhaps, they most yearned for. A final sight of their hometown, that island in the midst of the walls of sea and trees. ▲

(TOP) Manuel and Aurora with Ma. Aurora, Ma. Zenaida, and son, Manuel Jr.