

MARCELA M. AGONCILLO

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(1860-1946) Maker of the Filipino National Flag Enshrined in Philippine history as the maker of the Filipino flag, Marcela Mariño Agoncillo was born in Taal, Batangas on 24 June 1859 to Francisco Mariño and Eugenia Coronel. Marcela was reputed to be the prettiest in Batangas so she was fondly called “Roselang Bubog” and like any daughter of a rich couple, a maid or an elderly relative always accompanied her. She was sent to study at the Sta. Catalina College run by the Dominican nuns in Intramuros, Manila. It was in this school that she was trained well. She learned Spanish, music, crafts, and social graces expected from a Filipina of social stature. A noted singer and one who occasionally appeared in zarzuelas in Batangas, Marcela attracted many suitors but it was the rich young lawyer, Don Felipe Agoncillo, who won her heart. The two got married and had six daughters: Lorenza, Gregoria, Eugenia, Marcela, Adela (who died at the age of 3), and Maria. Their daughters were trained to be respectable women, always reminding them to live honestly and well and to work hard without depending on the family wealth. One with a heart for her nation, she stood by her husband in defending their poor town mates against the corrupt Spanish authorities. Felipe was branded filibustero but this did not deter her loyalty to him. Instead, she calmly accepted her husband’s decision to go into self-exile in Hong Kong. She and her children later followed in Hongkong. The Agoncillo family resided on Morrison Hill Road in Wanchai District in Hong Kong. Their home had practically become an asylum for Filipinos in the British colony. In December 1897, they crossed path with General Aguinaldo and his party who arrived in the country as exiles under the conditions of the Pact of Biyak-na-Bato. Months after, Aguinaldo decided to return to the Philippines to resume the fight against Spain, it was then that a flag that would symbolize the Filipino aspirations was decided to be made and Doña Marcela was tasked to do the work. Doña Marcela acceded to the request and sew the flag with the help of her daughter, Lorenza, and Delfina Herbosa Natividad, Rizal’s niece who was married to one of Aguinaldo’s generals. Five days after, the flag beautifully embroidered in gold, with the stripes of blue and red, and a white triangle with the sun and three stars was made. Years later on account of the flag, Doña Marcela would say: “In the house at No. 535, Morrison Hill, where I lived with my family, exiled from our country on account of the national cause, I had the good fortune to make the first Philippine flag under the direction of an illustrious leader General Emilio Aguinaldo y Famy. It took me five days to make the national flag, and when completed, I myself delivered it to General Aguinaldo before boarding the transport McCulloch... General Aguinaldo is the best witness who can give the information whether or not that flag was the first to be displayed in Cavite at the beginning of the revolutionary government against the government of Spain in these islands” General Aguinaldo would later say about the flag: “The first Filipino national flag was made by the hands of the Agoncillos in Hong Kong. It was the flag I took with me in Cavite when I returned from my exile and was slowly unfurled at the balcony of the Aguinaldo residence at Kawit, Cavite on June 12, 1898.”

In 1907, few years after the fall of the Philippine Republic and the American regime in the country was established, Doña Marcela and her children returned to the Philippines poor. Their family funds had run out because of the heavy expenses incurred by Don Felipe’s diplomatic activities in Europe and in the United States. But with fortitude, her family recovered from poverty incurred during the revolution. Don Felipe was in the government service. On September 29, 1941, her husband passed away and she was left to rear her children through another year of devastating war, this time with the Japanese. They suffered like other Filipinos caught in the war with scarce commodities and food supplies. Doña Marcela, however, had not changed. Like she used to do during the revolution against Spain, she taught her daughters to always share, saying: “if it is hard to give, it is harder to ask.” When their house in Manila was burned down, she took her children back to Taal and lived in their ancestral house. On Ascension Day, 30 May 1946, a year after the Philippines was finally freed from the Japanese, Doña Marcela died at the age of 86. To fulfill her last wish, her body was brought back in Manila and interred alongside her husband at the cemetery of La Loma.

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