Dean Conant Worcester (1866–1924): Colonizing and Collecting the Philippines

Mark Rice
St. John Fisher College, mrice@sjfc.edu

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Publication Information
Please note that the Publication Information provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/amst_facpub/8 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Dean Conant Worcester (1866–1924): Colonizing and Collecting the Philippines

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here is the chapter's first paragraph:

Although his fame has faded over the years, there was a time when Dean Conant Worcester (1866-1924) was a very influential—and equally controversial—individual (fig. 57). A physically imposing man with an abundance of energy and self-confidence, Worcester’s career path went from scientist to colonial administrator to successful businessman. He was one of the many players who helped usher the United States into its position of global dominance in the twentieth century. His representations of the Philippines in writing and images were instrumental in the debates within the United States about the future of its most far-flung colony. Indeed, as one biographer has written, Worcester “was the foremost creator and popularizer of American notions about the Philippines” in the first two decades of the twentieth century.¹

Disciplines
American Studies

Comments

Find this book in your library.
Buy this book from the publisher.
Buy this book on Amazon.
Although his fame has faded over the years, there was a time when Dean Conant Worcester (1866–1924) was a very influential—and equally controversial—individual (fig. 57). A physically imposing man with an abundance of energy and self-confidence, Worcester's career path went from scientist to colonial administrator to successful businessman. He was one of the many players who helped usher the United States into its position of global dominance in the twentieth century. His representations of the Philippines in writing and images were instrumental in the debates within the United States about the future of its most far-flung colony. Indeed, as one biographer has written, Worcester "was the foremost creator and popularizer of American notions about the Philippines" in the first two decades of the twentieth century.¹

Worcester was an avid photographer and a prolific writer, and his records serve as a rich source of historical details about the early years of US control of the Philippines. There are multiple archives of Worcester materials at the University of Michigan. The Dean C. Worcester photographic collection at the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology contains nearly five thousand original glass plate negatives as well as hundreds of lantern slides made from Worcester's photographs. This collection may be the most extensive collection of original negatives from the US colonial era in the Philippines. It has proven to be an invaluable resource for scholars interested in the history of American anthropology, the history of ethnological photography, and American colonial history in the Philippines.²

Other important collections of Worcester materials at the university include zoological specimens (now in the Museum of Zoology) and ethnographic and archaeological objects (now part of the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology's Philippine Expedition Collection) that he collected. The Dean C. Worcester Papers in the Special Collections Library include twenty-one volumes of letters, reports, manuscripts, and other written materials that focus primarily on the fourteen years (1899–1913) that Worcester was involved in the US colonial regime in the Philippines. In addition, the library has nearly nine hundred photographs (taken between 1890 and 1907 and donated by Worcester in 1914) that show various "people, places, and activities in the Philippines."³ These photographs have been digitized and are available through the library's Philip-
pine Photographs Digital Archive. At the Bentley Historical Library, the Dean C. Worcester Papers, 1887-1925 (donated in 1957 by Worcester's daughter, Alice Worcester Day), include photographs, correspondence, lecture notes, newspaper clippings, and other documents related primarily to Worcester's time as a colonial administrator.

Dean Worcester was born on October 1, 1866, in the small town of Thetford, Vermont, the seventh of eight children of Ezra and Ellen Conant Worcester. Ezra was a country doctor whose medical practice was not very lucrative. With eight children to feed, the family did not have a lot of extra money to spend on education. Consequently, Dean turned to his much older brother, William, a successful physician who specialized in mental illness, to help him pay for his college expenses. With William's support, Worcester headed west in 1884 to attend the University of Michigan, where he majored in zoology. Shortly before he received his degree in 1889, "he was appointed to the university' staff as an assistant in botany, although he had no undergraduate preparation in that field, an appointment that reflected the indistinct boundaries separating many subdisciplines of science at that time."

Worcester's first exposure to the Philippines came while he was an undergraduate. In 1887, he accompanied his professor, J. B. Steere, on a zoological expedition to the Philippines, returning to Ann Arbor in 1888. After his graduation, Worcester desired both additional adventure and additional opportunity for scientific exploration, and he believed that much zoological work was left to be done in the Philippines. Consequently, he returned to the archipelago in September 1890, together with his classmate and friend Frank Swift Bourns (who had also taken part in the Steere Expedition), as part of the Menage Expedition (fig 58). While Minneapolis-based real estate tycoon Louis F. Menage was the main sponsor, the expedition was also supported by the Minnesota Academy of Natural Sciences. For two and a half years, Worcester and Bourns traveled through much of the central and southern Philippines. They acquired thousands of zoological specimens and cultural artifacts from some of the ethnolinguistic groups they encountered there—in particular the Mangyans of Mindoro and Tagbanuas of Palawan—and they took an unknown number of photographs. The Museum of Anthropological Archeology has more than one hundred glass plate negatives from the Menage Expedition in its collection and the Museum of Zoology houses some of the biological specimens.

In late 1892, Worcester and Bourns separated in order to maximize the territory they could cover in the late stages of the Menage Expedition. Bourns traveled to Borneo to hunt orangutan, while Worcester continued working in the Philippines. Although he had planned to travel to various sites for several more months, Worcester had to cut short his time in the Philippines due to a severe case of typhoid fever. After convalescing in Manila for a few weeks, Worcester left the Philippines in February 1893 and arrived back in the United States in April.

Within days of his arrival back in the United States, Worcester traveled to Los Angeles to marry Nanon Fay Leas, a fellow alumnus of the University of Michigan. The small ceremony took place in the Leas home on April 27. The couple settled in Ann Arbor where Worcester was hired as curator of zoological and anthropological collections and custodian of all collections in the University Museum, and to teach zoology courses at the university. Their daughter, Alice, was born in 1896, and their son, Frederick, in 1898.

From 1893 to 1898, Worcester focused his energies primarily on his family life and on his work as a scientist and instructor. He also spent some time in Minneapolis cataloging the specimens collected during the Menage Expedition. However, much of that collection was broken up due to unexpected financial straits that the economic depression placed on the Minnesota Academy of Natural Sciences. In 1894, however, Worcester gave a lecture about the Menage Expedition before the Minnesota Academy, a lecture that he illustrated with his own photographs. This may have been the moment when he began to understand the potential power of his illustrated lectures. Accord-
To the Minneapolis Tribune, his lecture "proved as interesting as anything which has been heard in Minneapolis for many days." The next year, in 1895, Worcester, along with millions of other Americans, took careful note of the Cuban War of Independence. Although he remained focused primarily on zoology, it appears that that war began to shift his thinking about what he had learned while in the Philippines. That shift continued in 1896 with the start of the Philippine Revolution. By the end of that year, Worcester coauthored (with Bourne) an article about societal conditions in the Philippines. That article, "Spanish Rule in the Philippines," appeared in the October 1897 issue of Cosmopolitan magazine and was an attack against "Spanish misrule" that drew parallels between the conditions in the Philippines and Cuba: "For months the deadly struggle in unhappy Cuba has held the attention of the American people. On the other side of the globe another struggle is in progress, no less tragic, though infinitely more hopeless, so far as the human eye can see, than that at our own door." Also in 1897, Worcester presented two papers at the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, held in August in Detroit. Those papers, described in one report as "elaborate," were "illustrated by photographs" and dealt with two ethnolinguistic minority groups in the Philippines, the Tagbanua and the Mangyan. Worcester was invited to give those same talks later that month in Toronto at the British Association for the Advancement of Science, signaling his emerging interest in describing and categorizing various minority groups in the Philippines. On October 18 of the same year, he gave an illustrated
lecture about Spanish rule and conditions leading up to the Philippine Revolution to the Unity Club of Ann Arbor.

The culmination of Worcester's shifting interest in the Philippines and the event that opened the door for his long colonial career was his 1898 book, *The Philippine Islands and Their People*. The book recounted his two expeditions to the Philippines and blended his personal observations and experiences with broader historical and geographical information about the Philippines that he gleaned from other sources, particularly John Foreman's 1890 book, *The Philippine Islands*. Worcester argued that the Philippines was not fit for self-government but that with the right guidance its rich natural resources could be developed more effectively than they had been under Spanish rule. Worcester's book, illustrated with photographs taken during the Menage Expedition, quickly became a bestseller, received generally positive reviews, and was republished multiple times in just a few months, American interest in the Philippines having been whetted by the Spanish-American War.

Based in large measure on the success of his book, Worcester was invited to meet with President McKinley in January 1899 to talk about his experiences in the Philippines. Shortly after their meeting, McKinley appointed him as the sole civilian member of the Schurman Commission, which was charged with investigating conditions in the Philippines and making recommendations for what the United States ought to do next there. Worcester arrived back in the Philippines on March 4, one month after the start of the Philippine-American War. He reestablished contact with some of the friends he had made during the Menage Expedition, most of whom were Spanish landowners, and he passed along information provided to him by these friends to US military authorities, in order to assist in the American fight against Philippine independence.

The Schurman Commission completed its work later that same year and returned to the United States to file its report. The next year, Worcester was back in the Philippines as part of the Taft Commission, the only member of the Schurman Commission to be appointed to the new commission. With the establishment of a civil government in the Philippines in 1901, Worcester was appointed to the position of secretary of the interior, a post he held until 1913. His wife and children relocated to the Philippines to be with him. The family lived mostly in Manila but also built a summer house in the mountain town of Baguio, which served as the summer capital for the new colonial government.

Two dimensions to Worcester's political career in the Philippines merit highlighting. The first is that Worcester served longer than any other commissioner in the Philippines. Not only was he the only person to serve on both the first and the second Philippine commissions, but his thirteen-year career as secretary of the interior was unmatched by any other colonial administrator. The second dimension is the scope of his responsibilities. As historian Rodney Sullivan writes: "The major areas for which Worcester bore responsibility for most of his long tenure as secretary of the interior were agriculture, health, science, lands, tribal peoples, and forestry." Of these, Worcester devoted most of his energy to the tribal peoples.

Every year that he was secretary of the interior, Worcester made one or more "inspection tours" through northern Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao, where he oversaw American efforts to "civilize" the non-Christian populations. These efforts included building schools, establishing peaceful relations between previously hostile groups, and introducing Western-style clothing. Worcester brought his camera with him on these tours and photographed a wide range of ethnolinguistic minority groups. He suggested that these groups comprised a larger percentage of the islands' population than they actually did. He also presented them as more "authentic" representations of the islands than were the Hispanicized and Catholic majority of the country, thereby bolstering his argument that the United States needed to retain control of the Philippines for a long time in order to guarantee that American-style civilization would grow deep roots in the colony. Between
his own photographs and the photographs made by government photographers whose work he oversaw, Worcester built up an archive of more than fifteen thousand photographs (fig. 59). These photographs were routinely included in his books, articles, and government reports, as well as in the articles and books of other people reporting on the activities of the US colonial regime in the Philippines.

One important and influential venue for Worcester to publicize his ideas about the benevolence of US control of the Philippines was *National Geographic Magazine*. His first article in that magazine, published in the June 1898 issue, was titled "Notes on Some Primitive Philippine Tribes"; following articles were "Field Sports Among the Wild Men of Northern Luzon" (March 1911), "Taal Volcano and Its Recent Destructive Eruption" (April 1912), "Head-Hunters of Northern Luzon" (September 1912), and "The Non-Christian Peoples of the Philippine Islands: With an Account of What Has Been Done for Them Under American Rule" (November 1913). The last two articles encompassed entire issues of the magazine, which was rarely done. They were heavily illustrated with Worcester's photographs, some of which were hand-colored to heighten the apparent exoticism and primitivism of the Filipinos. The last of the articles appeared after Worcester was back in the United States preparing for an intensive campaign against Philippine independence.

Worcester's reliance on photographs to promote US activities in the Philippines was not without its critics. In the 1912 book, *The American
Occupation of the Philippines, the anti-imperialist James Blount called Worcester "the direst calamity that has befallen the Filipinos since the American occupation, neither war, pestilence, famine, re­ concentration, nor tariff-wrought poverty excepted." Discussing Worcester's representations of Filipinos, Blount referred to Worcester as the "P.T. Barnum of the 'non-Christian tribe' industry," and he criticized Worcester for "humbugging the American people into the belief that the Islands must be retained until the three hundred thousand or so Negritos, Igorrotes, and other primitive wild peoples sprinkled throughout the archipelago are 'reconstructed.'" He also criticized "the click of the Worcester kodak" seen in the Bureau of Insular Affairs photographs lent out for publication in popular American magazines, resulting in what he called a "libelous panorama" of images of the Philippines.

Partly in response to Blount's book, partly in response to the anti-imperial platform of the newly elected President Woodrow Wilson, and partly to secure his place in history, Worcester published his two-volume opus, *The Philippines Past and Present*, in 1914. The book was a comprehensive overview of the effects of US control of the Philippines since 1898, painted in a thoroughly positive light. For much of the twentieth century it served as the standard text on the history of US-Philippine relations.

Also in 1914, Worcester embarked on a lecture series in dozens of cities, mostly in the Eastern and Midwestern states. His lectures were illustrated with lantern slides and he sometimes showed films that he had made of Philippine minority groups. These lectures, intended to promote indefinite US retention of the Philippines, received a great deal of attention in newspapers, which would frequently include lengthy excerpts from the lectures, thereby expanding their reach beyond the audiences that routinely packed the ballrooms and lecture halls where Worcester spoke. In December 1914, in what was essentially the finale of his political career, Worcester gave one of his lectures before a US Senate committee debating the Jones Bill, which some congressional Democrats hoped would grant autonomy to the Philippines. An amended, the Jones Bill was signed into law in August 1916. While it granted increased legislative authority to elected Filipinos, executive power remained firmly in the hands of Americans, and no timetable was set for Philippine independence.

In 1915, Worcester and his family returned to the Philippines, Worcester having been appointed vice president of the Philippine-American Company in late 1913. For the next nine years, Worcester oversaw a number of business interests in the islands, including cattle ranching on the island of Mindanao and the production of coconut oil in Cebu, where he lived with his family. He proved to be a capable manager who oversaw a successful business that paid and treated its employees well, including "wages at least 20% higher than elsewhere." Nevertheless, he remained a polarizing figure in the Philippines until his death from heart disease on May 2, 1924.

While Worcester's time as a student and employee of the University of Michigan was short-lived, his impact on its museum and archival collections, and to enduring university ties to the Philippines, was profound. It is in no small part due to his efforts that U-M houses some of the United States' most extensive and important assemblages of biological, archaeological, photographic, and archival collections from the Philippines.

Notes


8. Anita Newcomb, McGee, "Anthropology at the American Association for the Advancement of Science," *Science* (October 1, 1897), 512.


11. Ibid., 578.

12. Ibid., 579.