

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The life of José María Sobral: scientist, diarist, and pioneer in Antarctica*, by Mary R. Tahan (2018). Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. 336 pp. ISBN 978-3-319-67267-0.

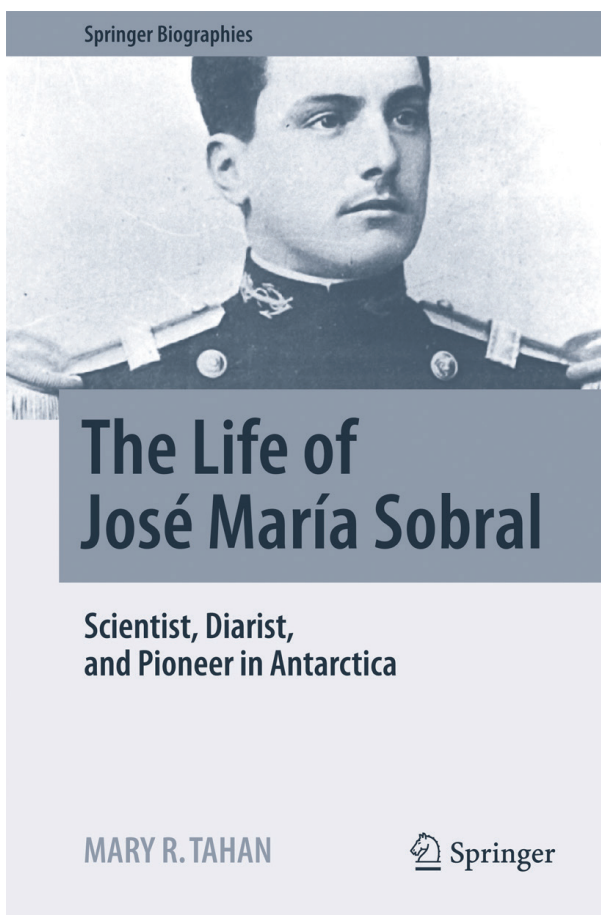
A very young man, the first Argentine to explore and work in Antarctica, a man alone in many ways, a man who kept a diary: José María Sobral (1880–1961) was a member of the Swedish South Polar Expedition (1901–1903) shore party of six men, headed by Professor Otto Nordenskjöld, which worked on Snow Hill Island off the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. His presence among the Scandinavians was a trade-off for the support of the Argentine government, which had supplied food and provisions. Sobral, a 21-year-old under-lieutenant in the Argentine navy, performed expedition work in meteorology, magnetism and geodesy with diligence and dedication. Most of this book consists of his diary during his time in Antarctica. There are two chapters of background material and concluding chapters covering Sobral's life after Antarctica. Author Mary R. Tahan, a Canadian–American writer and researcher, and one of the international artists selected by the Dirección Nacional del Antártico to perform work on-site in Antarctica, has collated the material and provided insightful commentary throughout the diary sections.

Sobral later wrote an account of his experiences (Sobral 1904), but this is the first published work of his expedition diary and daily journal translated into English. An integration of two close translations of the original Castilian Spanish, the diary is a compelling personal account of the expedition activities, findings and discoveries, including Sobral's private thoughts, intimate observations and real-time recounting of events. As Tahan points out in her preface, the diary sheds further light on the importance of this expedition to world knowledge and to Antarctic history as well as on the significance of Sobral's role in the expedition.

Interpersonal problems occurred among the isolated and confined group, resulting from fundamental characteristics of the experience; sustained close personal contact with other individuals in the extreme physical environment of a polar expedition can be cumulatively stressful. Sobral wrote:

### Correspondence

Pat Millar, College of Arts, Law, and Education, University of Tasmania, 130 High Street, Oatlands, Tasmania 7120, Australia. E-mail: patricia.millar@utas.edu.au



The dogs that are supposed to be the authors of [the dog] Qvik's death have been given a huge beating this morning. How barbaric! As if the animals will understand that it was because of what they did yesterday. It was Jonassen's idea, and, naturally, Nordenskjöld approves ... At mealtime, Ekelöf ... serves himself first and then passes to me what's left ... with deep sighs, and this is every day. And many times, after I have served myself, he points out that there is little food... I don't know how he has the courage to lie to me in my face and tell me that he has treated me well. (p. 192)

Sobral was the foreigner in the group, the "stepchild of the expedition" (Duse 1905: 177, cited in Lewander 2007: 181). He communicated with the scientists in English but set himself at once to learn the Swedish language. Nevertheless, Tahan writes that "his isolation haunted him

throughout his life—in the Navy, in Antarctica, in his adopted home of Sweden, and in his homeland of Argentina” (p. xi). He was the kind of isolated human who sought companionship, mostly with little success. His best friend on the expedition, the American landscape painter Frank Wilbert Stokes (1858–1955), later decided to turn back rather than spend a winter in Antarctica. Stokes had been the artist member of three Peary expeditions to the Arctic and Greenland from 1892 to 1894, was an advocate for the need for art to complement science and may have had some mentoring effect on the scientists’ photographic work, including Sobral’s (Millar 2018). With the loss of Stokes, Sobral’s spirit became even more “disheartened by fatigue and by the frightening isolation of those regions”, as he put it (p. 308).

Physical discomforts were many and constant. Sobral wrote:

Every day, Bodman and I, who are the ones with the upper beds, receive a continuous rain from the ceiling. Today, it has been a downpour. We uselessly place blankets and towels against the ceiling, but the water still goes through it, and our beds are real lakes. (p. 167)

By the time of their unplanned second winter in Antarctica, the men were, as Tahan described them,

very short on fresh protein ... their house was becoming an ice-encrusted, sticky soot-filled, mouldy abode; their clothes were disintegrating on their backs (and feet); and the dogs ... were becoming weak with hunger. (p. 185)

But even then, Sobral could still appreciate the beauty around him:

[D]espite the cold, how beautiful is nature in these moments! The sky completely full of stars, and the white of the frozen plain forms a contrast with the black of the basalt cliffs ... you can see the pinkish

tinge of the aurora to the east, and ... on the enormous snowdrift, like a reflection more beautiful than the image itself, you can see the transitions of the delicate tints between red and yellow. (p. 187)

His book *Dos años* (Sobral 1904) is illustrated with photographs that he took and developed. Their poor quality, he wrote, was due to his lack of skill as a photographer, together with physical drawbacks in performing the work and deficiencies in the condition of the photographic equipment. However, author Tahan found “quite lovely” (pers. comm., 2 May 2019) a collection of his photographs, many of which were later hand-painted, in the Naval Archives in Buenos Aires (Estudios Históricos Navales).

The contrast between this extraordinary environmental beauty, dedicated work, hardship and interpersonal struggle make this an absorbing book which would be of great use to readers interested in the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration and to students of the period. Sobral’s diary is an expression of the indomitability of the human spirit. It encapsulates the contemporary idea of Antarctica as a crucible, putting men to the ultimate test.

## References

- Duse S. 1905. *Bland pingviner och sälar. Minnen från svenska sydpolsexpeditionen 1901–1903. (Among penguins and seals. Memories from the Swedish South Polar Expedition.)* Stockholm: Beijers Bokförlagsaktiebolag.
- Lewander L. 2007. To remember and restore the Argentine rescuers of the Nordenskjöld expedition, 1901–1903. In J. Rabassa & M.L. Borla (eds.): *Antarctic Peninsula and Tierra del Fuego: 100 years of Swedish–Argentine scientific cooperation at the end of the world.* Pp. 179–194. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Millar P. 2018. Multiple meanings within visual documentation of the Swedish South Polar Expedition (1901–1903): the tension between emotive/aesthetic and analytic/scientific motifs. *The Polar Journal* 8, 44–67.
- Sobral J.M. 1904. *Dos años entre los hielos 1901–1903. (Two years in the ice.)* Buenos Aires: Tragant.