

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Four Antarctic years in the South Orkney Islands: an annotated translation of Cuatro años en las Orcadas del Sur*, by Jose Manuel Moneta (2017). Kathleen Skilton & Kenn Back, translators. London: Bernard Quaritch. 440 pp. ISBN 978-0-9955192-0-6.

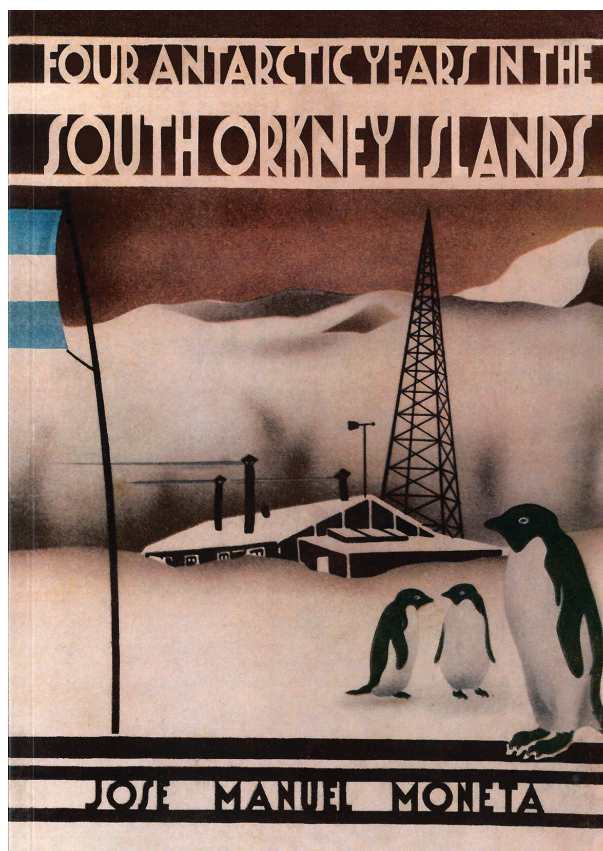
When I was doing research in Buenos Aires in the early 2000s for my doctoral dissertation on the history of the Antarctic Peninsula region, I enjoyed visiting some of the Argentine capital's atmospheric second-hand bookshops and browsing for titles related to the Far South. One of the books I encountered most often was Jose Manuel Moneta's *Cuatro años en las Orcadas del Sur*, an account of the four non-continuous years the author had spent working at Argentina's Orcadas station on Laurie Island in the South Orkneys in 1923, 1925, 1927 and 1929. Between 1939 and 1963, 12 editions of this book were published, and it became something of a classic of Argentine Antarctic literature. Largely as a result of efforts by the former Scott Polar Research Institute archivist Robert Headland, the rare-book publisher Bernard Quaritch has brought out an English translation. This new edition allows us to revisit Moneta's experiences in the South Orkneys, almost a century after he spent his first year there.

First established in 1903 by the Scottish expedition of William Speirs Bruce, responsibility for the meteorological observatory on Laurie Island was transferred to the Argentine government the following year. Since then it has been continually occupied and has produced the longest running continuous meteorological record from south of 60°S. In the early years of Argentine oversight, the station staff were mostly from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Britain and Germany ("A parade of nationalities," as Moneta writes, p. 44). However, from the early 1920s many more Argentines joined the winter-over personnel, and in 1927 Moneta led the first all-Argentine expedition.

Many of the most readily accessible primary sources on Antarctic expeditions come from the so-called heroic era of exploration (roughly 1895–1922), so it is refreshing to read an account from a slightly later period. The 1920s was a transitional decade in Antarctic history, and Moneta was very much part of these changing times. In some ways, Antarctic expeditions remained distinctly old-fashioned, as demonstrated by the several harrowing stories Moneta tells of extreme medical procedures being

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applied by those with little or no training (the amputation of eight frostbitten fingers with no anaesthetic being one particularly gruesome example). However, things were also modernizing rapidly. In 1927, as part of his first expedition as base leader, Moneta established the first radio communication between the South Orkneys and Argentina, which was among the first radio connections from Antarctica to the outside world. As discussed extensively in Moneta's account, there were fears that radio communication could dramatically change the dynamic among those spending the winter on Laurie Island. Contact with the outside world, it was thought, might unsettle expedition members, who would be unable to return from Antarctica in the middle of winter, whatever might be happening back home. There was an awareness that things were changing, even if the direction of change remained somewhat uncertain.

Given that many of the most popular travel narratives from Antarctica were originally written in English, it is also refreshing to have an account available in English that provides a Latin American perspective. Despite the

passionate nationalism that would develop in Argentina concerning Antarctica in the 1940s and 1950s, Moneta's account might best be described as patriotic rather than nationalistic. The preface to the Spanish language editions from 1957 onwards contains a strong statement from Moneta about his views on the correctness of Argentine sovereignty in the Argentine Sector of Antarctica: Argentine governments from 1930 to the present "fostered various initiatives to try to preserve what was ours and which, through our own laziness and naiveté, was being taken from our hands" (pp. 26–27). However, in general, such passionate concern for Argentine sovereignty is notable for its absence in much of Moneta's account. In place of ardent nationalism, *Four Antarctic years* makes frequent patriotic references to such things as the celebration of Argentine national day in Antarctica (marked by the firing of guns into the air alongside the hoisted flag) and Moneta's pride at leading the first all-Argentine winter party in 1927.

Despite the differences that come from an Argentine account of Antarctic expeditions from the 1920s, there is also much in this book that anyone with some experience of Antarctica might relate to. On the positive side, *Four Antarctic years* captures the excitement of arriving in Antarctica for the first time and seeing the ice-covered land as a respite from the stormy seas. More negatively, Moneta recalls the gradual decline in mood and conversation over the course of the long polar winter and the petty arguments that occurred between colleagues over

issues as apparently trivial as scented soap. The fear of being trapped on the continent at the end of the season is especially poignant and will likely resonate with anyone who has spent more than a few weeks living and working on the continent. Even the discussions over the benefits of radio communication to Antarctica in some ways parallel more contemporary debates over the pros and cons of internet availability for researchers working on the continent.

The common features of Antarctic exploration described by Moneta might suggest that there are certain elements of living and working on the continent that transcend particular time periods and particular cultures. Whether or not this is the case, *Four Antarctica years* is a very worthwhile read for anyone interested in the Antarctic past. It broadens our understanding of the history of the continent beyond the traditional emphasis on English language accounts from the heroic era. Given that this translation has given the book a new lease on life for an English-speaking readership, it might have been interesting to say a little more about the "afterlife" of the Spanish language text. Why weren't more editions published after 1963? Is it still fair to refer to this book as a "classic" of Argentine Antarctic literature if it has been out of print for so long? Answers to such questions might tell us something about changing Argentine attitudes towards Antarctica over the past 60 years. However, simply in making this account available to a wider audience, Headland and his team have done a great service to the Antarctic community.