19. Carl Skottsberg’s «modest expedition» –
A look at the scientific discovery of Patagonia

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We owe the scientific discovery of Patagonia to the unflinching efforts of European, American, Argentine and Chilean explorers who undertook adventurous explorations on their own behalf or who participated in different schemes of scientific expeditions. Several of these enterprises deserve to be taxed as heroic pioneer deeds, almost unconceivable in our days. Among these, the remarkable “Swedish Magellanic Expedition” (1907–1909) led by Skottsberg stands aloft. It provides an extraordinary insight into the energy, courage, and perseverance involved in an enterprise of such a magnitude. However, the fact that we concentrate ourselves in retracing Skottsberg’s voyage does in no way imply that we either intend to diminish the efforts of so many other explorers or to relegate the results they obtained to a second level.

With respect to the botanical side of the scientific discovery of Patagonia, we gratefully point to the following publications:


When, in 1904, Carl Johan Fredrik Skottsberg (1880–1963), Swedish botanist, phytogeographer and explorer, had returned from taking part in the Swedish Antarctic Expedition led by Otto Nordenskjold (1869–1928) from 1901 to 1903, and had begun to work out his notes and collections, it happened to him, “that every now and then questions cropped up which, for want of material, had to be left unanswered. Gradually also quite new problems presented themselves, and the thought of returning once more to some of the countries I had visited soon arose” (Skottsberg, p. vii). He therefore “considered the possibility of planning a modest expedition, principally for geological and botanical purposes” (p. vii). Thus was born the enterprise, afterwards called “Swedish Magellanic Expedition”, composed of Skottsberg (leader) and his colleagues Percy D. Quensel (1881–1966) and Thore G. Halle (1884–1964), which left Gothenburg on September 10, 1907.

In the first stage of their voyage, Skottsberg and Halle travelled around the Falkland Islands, while Quensel was heading for the Paine and Lake Argentino, aiming to accomplish geological and glaciological observations in areas poorly known in those days, but which in our time are one of the main tourist destinations.

In the course of the southern spring of 1907, Skottsberg went round the islands, collecting material, looking at the vegetation, photographing *Hebe elliptica* (G. Forst.) Pennell (= *Veronica elliptica* G. Forst.) – “the largest land plant of all Falkland” (p. 13), discovering the remnants of old forests – buried under successive slidings of soil –, and noticing the impact of sheep-grazing on certain grasses (e.g. *Poa flabellata* (Lam.) Hook. f.).

After having explored the archipelago for more than three months, the expeditionaries embarked on February 12, heading for Punta Arenas. As they were approaching this settlement in the night of February 14, “the sky shone bright red ...; the forest south of the town was on fire; it made a mighty lighthouse that showed us the way to the roads...” (p. 31).

The history of the conquest and colonisation related to the strait that separates the island of Tierra del Fuego from the American continent goes back to Magellan’s (ca. 1480–1521) discovery of this passage in 1520. Soon afterwards, new voyagers repeatedly attempted to take possession of the new lands. In 1584, Spanish colonists and soldiers disembarked on the northern coast and founded a colony that was to subsist with great difficulty for a few years. Lack of food and the attacks by the indigenous people brought this attempt to an end – the place thereafter being called “Puerto Hambre” [Port Famine].

In 1616, the discovery of the alternative route along Cape Horn soon set back the importance of the Strait. The entire region received a new impulse towards mid 18th Century, with new European settlers, the introduction of sheep from the Falklands, and the upcoming of steam-ships.

Punta Arenas was founded in 1843. For several decades, it was merely a colony of deported politicians and military men. Among the first naturalists that penetrated into these areas was Bernardo Philippi, who was sent as plant collector for the Museum of Natural History of Berlin, and eventu-
Itinerario simplificado de la expedición de Skottsberg (Febrero 1908 - Febrero 1909)