Chapter 2
Born to Sail, with a Spirit for Science

Abstract An account of José María Sobral's life prior to his being selected to participate in the Swedish-Argentine Antarctic Expedition of 1901–1903, including his experiences in the Naval Academy and the Argentine Navy.

He was born on April 14, 1880, in the province of Entre Rios, in the northeastern part of Argentina, just south of Santa Fe where Roald Amundsen would later write his book about reaching the coveted South Pole.

A fitting birthplace, this physical convergence of Antarctic history, as Jose Maria Sobral would himself aspire to, and achieve, Antarctic exploits of historic proportion.

His birth home was on Calle San Martín 633, in the city of Gualeguaychú, a city named after the river that bordered it, which in turn originated from the waters of the Uruguay River.

Sobral was born near the water that he would later aspire to sail.

The son of a notary public and a homemaker, Sobral was one of eight children. His father Enrique Sobral and mother Maria Luisa Iturrioz were loving parents whom Sobral adored and of whom he would write and think incessantly during his lonely years in Antarctica (Sobral 1898–1961).

Sobral was the oldest of the children. From the sense of responsibility that he would later exhibit in his working years, it would only seem logical to think that he took responsibility for his seven siblings.

Moving to Buenos Aires during his primary schooling, Sobral graduated from high school at Colegio Nacional Norte (Northern National College) (Fundación 2017; Marenssi 2007).

At the age of 14, Sobral enrolled in the Escuela Naval Militar (Naval Academy). The date was October 26, 1894, when the young Sobral sat for his admission examination. By December, he was officially in the Navy.

The day he entered the Navy, his father Enrique Sobral wrote to him a lengthy and emotional letter in which he urged his son to uphold the national honor in times of war, to be a guardian for peace, and to seek science among its followers, so that "your name is repeated by your contemporaries and proudly, fondly remembered by future generations" (Sobral 2016). Sobral would take his father's advice to heart.

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The following year, on September 7, 1895, the Naval Academy discharged the young Sobral, citing reasons of health. He adamantly re-enrolled a few months later, on December 5 (Rabassa 2003). He was now at the threshold of taking the path to become a Navy officer.

At the naval school, he met and befriended Jorge Yalour, who he would again encounter in Antarctica as a lieutenant on the Argentine ship sent to rescue him.

He completed his studies at the Naval Academy and was graduated as part of Class Number 24, with a ranking of 19—at the bottom of the class. He had successfully fast-tracked his education, however, completing the required courses in only 3 years. And so, on August 8, 1898, he was graduated as Midshipman.

Shortly thereafter, Sobral found himself sailing around the world.

He was assigned to the training frigate ARA *Presidente Sarmiento* on its first voyage, which lasted from 1899 to 1900, visiting tropical ports-of-call and exotic locations. It was an ideal assignment for an ambitious novice. Sobral was able to see the world, sailing to Japan, China, Hawaii, San Francisco, New York, and other locales (Sobral 1899–1900). On that extensive voyage, Sobral met Julián Irízar, who he would later meet in Antarctica as the commander of the ship sent to rescue him.

On the *Sarmiento,* Sobral was under the command of Onofre Betbeder, who, a year later, in 1901, would become Argentina's Minister of the Navy and who would usher in Sobral as the Argentine member selected to participate in the Swedish Antarctic Expedition.

Sobral also served for a year on the gunboat cruiser ARA *Patria*, where again he met Irízar, this time serving under his command.

During his schooling, training, and assignments to naval ships, Sobral learned and adapted quickly. He exhibited an interest for technical and scientific subjects. In addition to his training in all things involving the maritime vocation, Sobral was also proficient in languages. He learned to speak and write the English language to an impressive degree.

As of 1901, Sobral was back in Buenos Aires. On October 28, he visited a Sanatorium Quirurgico (surgical clinic) on Avenida Montes de Oca where he had radiography done on his foot (Quirurgico 1901). Whether the foot problem was related to the health situation that had caused his early discharge when he first enrolled in naval school, or whether it was due to an isolated incident, is not certain. Interestingly, it foreshadowed problems he would later have in Antarctica. But certainly, the reason for the X-ray did not stand in the way of his resuming his immediate duties. For, a mere two months later, he would be called upon to take on the role of his lifetime.

Ever since his childhood, Sobral had harbored a dream to become a Polar explorer (Sobral 1904: 45–46):

> . . . it was always my wish to make a trip like the one I was going to undertake.
>
> I had read the account of many explorers, and of course I did not ignore the dangers and hardships that those who go to those regions must suffer, but I was completely sure of my physical resistance, and I did not doubt my morality.

> I knew that the frozen masses had been the shroud covering the remains of many of those who had gone to the Polar regions, transmitting to posterity, from that solitary sepulcher, the respected names of martyrs who had succumbed for the sake of science, but also that more were the number of those who had returned to refer to humankind the mysteries that nature keeps there.
>
> And since many have returned. Why should not I return?

And so, when the opportunity arose—through Argentina's noted scientist Francisco P. Moreno, and through the Minister of the Navy Onofre Betbeder, as well as through future director of Observatory Island, Lieutenant Commander Horacio Ballvé—for Sobral to join Otto Nordenskjöld on the Swedish Antarctic Expedition in December of 1901, Sobral jumped at the chance.

After meeting with Nordenskjöld on December 17, and gaining the great scientist's approval, Sobral received his official orders from the Navy. He was now a full member of the Swedish-Argentine Antarctic Expedition. There was only one thing left to do: go on a shopping spree.

Walking around Buenos Aires in the searing sun, and hurrying along the hot streets of the city, Sobral began looking for warm polar clothing. A more impossible task was difficult to imagine.

He tried on all manner of layers of clothing to create enough covering for the Antarctic weather, as the Buenos Aires stores did not carry parkas or reindeer boots or anoraks or snow gloves. Neither did the fashionable stores on Florida, nor did the midrange shops downtown carry even the lightest winter clothing.

And so he was inventive, putting together a winter outfit that could take on the Antarctic temperatures.

In store after store, he piled on shirts and sweaters, hoping they would work. When he had exhausted the stores, he proceeded to the Navy depot, frantically foraging through the warehouses.

An assortment of pants, shoes, shirts, sweaters, boots, hats, and jackets was the best he could do. It would have to do.

He was about to embark on his lifelong dream—to sail to the Antarctic.

On the morning of December 20, Sobral found himself in front of the *Antarctic* ship. The crew aboard was preparing to set sail in the damp warmth of the Buenos Aires summer. The Polar vessel was being seen off by hundreds of well-wishers gathered at the docks to convey their *buen viaje*. The hour was early, but the energy was high.

The ship stood over 33 m high above the water and over 4 m below the waterline. It was over 41 m in length, and its waistline was 9 m wide. The vessel ate coal like a humpback whale eats krill—insatiably, and in mass quantities. At least four tons of the pure carbon was poured down its throat a day, gobbled up quickly and *en masse* by the engine. The fossil fuel fueled the ship's speed—a maximum of six knots. And while the ship ate like a whale, its true vocation was that of a whale-eater. Everything about the *Antarctic* equipped it for the hunt: the hull with large bindings made of greenheart hardwood; the reinforced bow, with half-inch irons and side-by-side strappings on the outside, and metal and wood on the inside; the several whaling boats for one-on-one (or more accurately

twenty-on-one) sea mammal retrieval; and the observation barrel strategically located on the main mast.

With this whaling pedigree inherent in its very being, and the additional retro-fitting the ship had undergone in Sweden prior to the departure the previous autumn, the *Antarctic* was fitted out and fit for travel in Antarctica.

Standing on its deck, Sobral was outfitted in his uniform—his "winter" clothes stowed for the time being. Besides the winter clothing he had frantically tried to obtain, Sobral had armed himself with a diary journal—a large one, most likely meant to be used as a ship's log. Measuring approximately 27 cm across and 39.9 cm high, the diary had a dark, hard cover and a red label declaring "Diario" in gold embossed lettering. It would be his companion on this expedition. He would use this as his personal voyage diary.

At 21, and at an average height and physique, especially in comparison with some of the veteran explorers surrounding him, he looked very much the part of the Ensign—the junior, the symbol, the representative of the Navy and the Argentine flag. But he knew he had a voracious appetite for study, and a brain and frame fit for exploration.

This ship he stood upon had carried the very first humans to step foot on the Antarctic continent; now, it would carry the very first Argentine to explore the white continent.

Sobral may not have thought about the whaling legacy that had brought this ship to this port, but he was eager for the Polar adventure.

Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5.



Fig. 2.1 José María Sobral, Navy ensign, Under-Lieutenant, and later Doctor of Geology, had dreamt of being a Polar explorer from a young age (Departamento de Estudios Históricos Navales, Archivo Histórico, Archivo Fotográfico, P-0140 c, Sobral, José María. Alférez.)



Fig. 2.2 The house where José María Sobral was born, in Gualeguaychú, in the province of Entre Rios (Departamento de Estudios Históricos Navales, Archivo Histórico, Archivo Fotográfico, P-0140 j, Sobral, José María. Casa de Gualeguaychu donde nació el Alférez.)



Fig. 2.3 Navy Midshipman José María Sobral (Departamento de Estudios Históricos Navales, Archivo Histórico, Archivo Fotográfico, P-0140 h, Sobral, José María. Guardiamarina.)



Fig. 2.4 The *Presidente Sarmiento* training ship upon which José María Sobral served (Departamento de Estudios Históricos Navales, Archivo Histórico, Colección Sobral, Box 2, Envelope 1, newspaper cutting.)



Fig. 2.5 José María Sobral, Alférez [Departamento de Estudios Históricos Navales, Archivo Histórico, Archivo Fotográfico, P-0140 b, Sobral, José María. Alférez (Sector A-planera verde).]

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