

Magallanes, Magallanes · Romy Hecht

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“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger. Safe return doubtful, honor and recognition in event of success”.

Irish explorer Ernest Shackleton’s 1914 famous add is a perfect description of the Endurance’s failed voyage to reach the South Pole, which resonates to this day as a feat of survival in one of the planet’s most remote and desolate territories. Although perhaps one of the most recognized, Shackleton’s voyage was not unique.

Thanks to Fielding Dupuy, Catalina Valdés, Amarí Peliowski and Samuel García-Oteiza’s work, *Traveling Southward from the Strait of Magellan* (Pehuén Editores, 2022), the locally unknown book by American artist Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) has come to light for the first time in Spanish.

Kent’s account and portrait “of the splendor and horror” of Tierra del Fuego and its inhabitants percolates honestly and, dare I say, reliably, in every fragment of the record of his 1922-1923 journey, reminding us that you don’t have to go all the way to Antarctica to be confronted with an *uncharted*, unexplored landscape: “My soul was stirred by the vast glamour of that unseen wilderness, with fear of the terrific forces of the darkness, with wonder at what world the night concealed, with pride at the achievement of my being there, and with utter humility at my alien identity, diminutive, obscure, unseen in that boundless solitude beneath the stars” (p.54).

I have said it in these pages more than once. Tierra del Fuego oppresses, but at the same time it expands you. Kent does not escape that sensation, nor that intrinsically human need to configure shapeless landscapes, or that ambivalence of wanting to simultaneously preserve and conserve nature.

His diary exudes the civilizing anguish of the untamed and reveals the double face of “the very dregs of humankind”, that of “those blood and thunder fellows who, it is supposed, under pressure of misfortune at home, or natural lawlessness, have fled to the frontier and over, as to the only refuge that would tolerate them..... Among them are cannibals, poachers, soldiers, brawlers, missionaries, a governor, a murderer or two, a minister’s son, and a Holy-jumper” (p.vii). But also, that of indelible engravings, inks, oil paintings and photographs where Kent fixes the wind and the steppe as symbols of the Patagonian biodiversity, the same one that today reveals hydrogen and peat as Chile’s possible future splendor.