

BOOK REVIEWS

Journal of Mammalogy, 95(1):187–188, 2014

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Ponsà Fontanals, M. 2011. OSVALDO REIG: LA VIDA ITINERANTE DE UN BIÓLOGO EVOLUCIONISTA (OSVALDO REIG: THE ITINERANT LIFE OF AN EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGIST). Eudeba (Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires), Buenos Aires, Argentina, 128 pp. ISBN 978-950-23-1865-3, price (paper), \$12.00.

In this biography, Montserrat Ponsà Fontanals offers an informative journey through the life and career of Osvaldo Reig, one of the foremost mammalogists, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists of the 20th century (Reig 1992; Anonymous 2002). In so doing, she illustrates the importance of and interaction among 3 universal themes: career (here, science), family, and politics. I anticipate that most members of the American Society of Mammalogists who can read Spanish will find the book fascinating and worthwhile.

The biography's structure is roughly chronological and follows Reig around Latin America (with brief stays in the United States and Europe) during turbulent times of the past century. The brief introduction gives the reader an overall feel for Reig—intelligent, outspoken, and controversial. The book then describes his childhood and adolescence in Argentina among (mostly immigrant) families of intellectuals and the educated business class. Succeeding chapters describe Reig's university days in Buenos Aires and La Plata (as a student activist), paleontological research at the Instituto Miguel Lillo (Universidad Nacional de Tucumán), 1st professorship (Universidad de Buenos Aires, where he began working on cytogenetics), and then short stints at Harvard University (via a Guggenheim Fellowship), Universidad Central de Venezuela, University College London (where he earned his Ph.D.), Universidad Austral de Chile, and back at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. The book then focuses on Reig's longer Venezuelan era, at the Universidad de los Andes and later the Universidad Simón Bolívar, where he undertook groundbreaking studies of speciation. Finally, it covers his later time back and forth between Argentina and Spain (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales), coordinating ambitious interdisciplinary collaborations.

From a scientific standpoint, the book emphasizes Reig's philosophies and motivations, his progression to increasingly complex integrative studies, and his ability to catalyze and lead research groups. Reig insisted upon high-quality research published in top journals. At the same time, he championed the ideal of conducting science relevant to the nation, and for the benefit of society. Overall, Reig was motivated to discover. Ponsà quotes a colleague who described Reig's participation at seminars succinctly: “preguntaba para saber, no para hacerse notar, ni para molestar” [“he asked questions to understand, not to be noticed or to annoy”], p. 9. However, Reig's most singular trait seems to have been his ability to set up research

groups and inspire everyone involved to conduct high-quality, innovative work.

The text paints a very personal picture of Reig, especially with respect to his family and friends. He was energetic and passionate—yet demanding and impatient. Reig married twice, 1st to Flora Pasatir and then to Estela Santilli, and had 2 children with each. Repeatedly, Ponsà emphasizes that the Reig household was lively, with frequent guests—especially friends and colleagues who came for meals that stretched for hours. Notably, Flora and then Estela repeatedly made major sacrifices in their careers in deference to Reig, especially when he felt it necessary to relocate. One illuminating exception only can be understood in the context of politics, as I describe below.

The biography makes it clear how important politics were to Reig. A leftist since adolescence, Reig nonetheless shifted somewhat toward the political center over his adult life. The book emphasizes his involvement in student protests and then repeated professional moves. Ponsà excels in placing events in Reig's career in the context of Latin American history. Sometimes, he left a place because he and his family were not safe; in other instances, the move was precipitated “merely” by an environment unfavorable for science. Reig repeatedly found new opportunity in other countries, putting together laboratories, and establishing collaborations with energy and optimism. Despite politics, later in life Reig was recognized (in 1986) as a member of 3 Academies of Sciences: those of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Third World.

I found that anecdotes at the interface between science, family, and politics give insight into Osvaldo the human being. Whereas he usually left an institution because of an unfavorable environment, 3 of his professional transfers stand out as telling exceptions. The 1st was his move in 1976 between 2 universities in Venezuela (from the Universidad de los Andes in Mérida to the Universidad Simón Bolívar outside Caracas). At the beginning of a particularly deplorable period of atrocities in Argentina, Reig had gone into exile, moving the family to Mérida and starting a new research group. Less than a year later, he received word from Argentina that his 1st wife Flora (and her then-husband) had been kidnapped and were unaccounted for. Soon thereafter, Osvaldo unexpectedly resigned from the Universidad de los Andes. His wife Estela had finally secured a good job in Caracas, after trying to no avail in Mérida. Ponsà intimates that for the 1st time, the loss of Flora motivated him to defer his career to that of his spouse. A 2nd “unforced” move was leaving the Universidad Simón Bolívar in 1983. Triggered not by a negative situation there, but rather by the return of democracy to Argentina, an inspired Osvaldo went back to help rebuild science in his home country. Finally, less than a decade later, Osvaldo had moved to Madrid



(Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales) and was leading a team of researchers based in various parts of Spain and Argentina. However, when a previous illness returned and became terminal, he decided to go home to Buenos Aires to write for as long as he could. In these instances, family, country, and mortality trumped science.

I have very few criticisms of the biography. It is not structured like a formal essay, but rather conveys a series of related stories. Ponsà occasionally invokes literary license—for example, employing sentences that lack conjugated verbs. A few mammalian genera are misspelled, but otherwise I found the book impeccably clean. It is peppered with colloquial (often regional) terms, as well as by quotes or paraphrases that appear in the dialect of the speaker. Continually infused with stories involving mammalogists and other scientists, it reminds me of the biography of Annie M. Alexander (Stein 2001), and a book regarding the process of science (Hull 1988), providing glimpses into past personalities and their activities. Although not essential, a time line would have been useful. I do note one curious oversight: Ponsà did not mention the spillover effects that Reig's activities had in neighboring countries. Colleagues have mentioned to me the direct positive influence of international meetings, workshops, and courses that Reig helped organize. He was important not just to researchers in Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, and Spain—but rather across the Americas and beyond.

I never met Osvaldo Reig (he died in 1992, the year before my 1st foray into Neotropical mammalogy), but I have been impacted by him in many ways, and now even more. I “knew” Reig via his publications (e.g., Reig 1977; Aguilera et al. 1995), and the person, Osvaldo, from stories told by colleagues. The book helped me put these together into a more complete and coherent whole. More importantly, it led

me to think about opportunity and responsibility. What do I need to be productive? What does this country, and humanity, most need me to work on? How can I make the right decisions when personal and professional perspectives seem at odds? I imagine that, after reading the book, many others will ponder questions like these as well.

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