



The Empress of South America: The Irish courtesan who destroyed Paraguay - and became its national heroine

Nigel Cawthorne

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The Empress of South America is the true story of the Irish woman who started the biggest war in the Americas. A redhead from County Cork, Eliza Lynch rose to become the highest paid courtesan in Paris before bedding the son of the Perpetual Dictator of Paraguay who promised to make her the Empress of South America. When he seized power in Paraguay, she cajoled him into attacking Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay – simultaneously. Not a good idea. She was seen riding at the head of the army. In the six-year war, over a million died. There was no male left in Paraguay over nine years old. Her boyfriend cut down by the Brazilian cavalry, she was captured fleeing through the jungle in a ball gown. A young Brazilian officer took pity on her and smuggled her out of the country. Back in London, she was a wealthy woman. During the war she had looted the country. She had stolen the entire Paraguayan treasury, stripped the churches of their gold and stolen all the jewels of the rich families. She returned to Paris where she lived in some style. Dying in 1886, she was buried in Père Lachaise cemetery. In 1961, a Lebanese drug dealer climbed over the wall, dug her up and smuggled her remains back to Paraguay where she now lies in the largest marble mausoleum in South America and is Paraguay's national heroine. Talk about get away with it. The Empress of South America is the true story of one of the most remarkable – and forgotten – women of the nineteenth century. You couldn't make it up. You would not believe it if it hadn't actually happened.

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