

## Beauty and the Beast: A Beautiful Irish Courtesan and a Beastly Latin American Dictator

By Edmundo Murray

*Once upon a time in a faraway land, there lived an ugly Prince who dreamt of a beautiful Irish Princess.*

Whether as a result of lack of direct knowledge of Latin American cultures or due to plain ignorance, European imagery of the continent abounds with legendary narratives and prejudicial accounts, frequently manifesting themselves as portrayals of natural anomalies. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'it is likely that the term barbarous etymologically refers to the confusion and lack of articulation perceived in the voices of certain birds, as opposed to the signifying value of human speech. Similarly, wild (*sauvage*) means "belonging to the forest", and refers to the animal kingdom, as opposed to human beings. In both cases the fact of cultural diversity is neglected, and all that is not within our world is rejected and located outside of culture, in the natural world.' (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 20).

Few aspects of relations between Ireland and Latin America have been as popular as the fate of the San Patricio battalion in the United States-Mexican War (1846-1847) and the life of Eliza Lynch (1835-1886). In accordance with Mikhail Bakhtin's categories for literary criticism, the San Patricios and Eliza Lynch are the only Irish-Latin American *chronotopes* who are the subjects of the work of historians as well as spawning a number of fictional works. The San Patricios battalion even inspired a Hollywood film, *One Man's Hero*, directed by Lance Hool in 1999. However, most texts relating to the San Patricios are historical studies, or at least popular history books.

The prolific bibliography on Eliza Lynch, a Cork-born courtesan in Paris who became the unofficial first lady of Paraguay during the rule of Francisco Solano López (1826-1870), covers not only history books and essays, but also novels, short stories and poetry, and spans the period from the era of South American historical revisionism in the early twentieth century to the exploitation of the lucrative market for historical novels in present-day Ireland and Irish North America.

The fertile field for both historiography and fiction writing in Spanish, English, French or Guaraní, one of the most important indigenous languages of Paraguay, presents at least three possible levels of audience analysis of Eliza Lynch's story. First, that Lynch lived a hazardous life, characterised by numerous exciting episodes with manifold concrete and psychological meanings which historians take pleasure in recording and accounting for in an endless series of biographies. Second, novelists relish the challenge of using fiction to fill in the gaps in the recorded periods or aspects of her life, enriching with their craft an already colourful life. Finally, the readers of biographies and novels based on Eliza Lynch's life enjoy the freedom of inventing a place and a period in which everything, or almost everything, is perceived as possible to a creative and wilful mind.

There are underlying aspects of the fascination with the history of Eliza Lynch which merit closer examination. In societies where women are considered inferior to men by the vast majority of people, whether men or women, it is attractive and somehow comforting to read the story of at least one woman who, availing of her seductive and intelligent personality, managed to attain the highest position in a country, even if she subsequently lost that position. Another interesting aspect is the juxtaposition of Eliza Lynch's presumed humble origins and her attainment of a high social rank. Despite the fact that her father was a physician and she came from a middle-class family in Cork, the relatively impoverished context in which she lived during her formative years is frequently emphasised to create the illusion of a strong character capable of changing her life and achieving social mobility. Finally, the fact that she was European, and more precisely Irish, should not be overlooked in the context of her cultural contact with a post-independence South American country. It is here that many works about Eliza Lynch, fictional works in particular, frequently have recourse to the beauty-and-the-beast paradigm.

According to this paradigm a couple, traditionally a man and woman, are united by some circumstance and become lovers. The peculiar quality of this relationship is that one of them, usually the man, less frequently the woman, is a monster or belongs to the world of the supernatural. Most renderings of beauty and the beast portray the latter as essentially a civil and kind being, who only appears superficially to be brutal or repulsive. Therefore the beauty's efforts are not aimed at

changing the beast but at discovering and falling in love with the gentle spirit hidden behind a fierce appearance. Typically in the closing passages of these narratives, the uglier of the two turns into a handsome - and frequently wealthy - person through the healing benefits of love. Incidentally, I was unable to locate any version in which the ex-monster subsequently reverted to its previous state, a fact that would be quite logical yet rather disturbing for the reader.

The first recorded fictional beauty-and-the-beast couple featured in Madame de Villeneuve's collection *La jeune Américaine et les Contes marins* (The Hague, 1740). However, a more inclusive account should include almost all Indo-European cultures. According to the Swedish anthropologist J-Ö. Swahn, there are over 1,100 variations of the beauty-and-the-beast narrative. In the animal kingdom, women fall in love with butterflies, dogs, wolves, snakes or toads, and men with ravens, goats, warblers, frogs or cats. In the world of fantasy, the combination of animal body-parts, for example a wolf's head with a snake's body, or of animal and human bodies, has generated an endless series of monsters. One common feature of the monsters is that they are mute, or unable to communicate through a human form of speech.

Glen Keane, the supervising animator of the Beast in Walt Disney's movie *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) 'spent months surrounded by a bestiary of animals for inspiration, including a mandrill in the London Zoo named Boris and a gorilla named Caesar in the Los Angeles Zoo' (*Disney Online*, 2003). Beast was inspired by the mandrill and later developed to incorporate elements of the bear and the wolf, but was principally based on the buffalo.

### The Irish Beauty and the Paraguayan Beast

One recent biography of Eliza Lynch, *The Empress of South America* by Nigel Cawthorne [1], represents a telling illustration of the beauty-and-the-beast paradigm. The author describes Lynch in exuberant language, 'she was tall and supple with a delicate figure admired for its beautiful and seductive curves. Her hair was reddy gold, her skin calcium white and her eyes "a blue that seems borrowed from the very hues of heaven"' (Cawthorne 2003: 63). In contrast, Francisco Solano López was 'the most unappealing of an unattractive family, [...] short, fat, ugly, barrel-chested and bandy-legged from learning to ride early in life. [...] He had a gross animal look that was repulsive when in repose. His forehead was narrow and his head small, with the rear organs largely developed. His teeth were very much decayed, and so many of the front ones were gone as to render his articulation somewhat difficult and indistinct' (47). There is no doubt as to who is depicted as the beauty and who as the beast, particularly as the latter demonstrated the traditional feature of the beast, that of the inability to speak.

Lévi-Strauss has explained that 'the original sin of anthropology is the conflation of purely biological notions of race – if these notions have any validity, a suggestion that modern genetics rejects – and the sociological and psychological productions of human culture (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 10). According to Cawthorne, the moral qualities of his characters reflect their physical features. Eliza Lynch was 'strong and independent-minded' (Cawthorne 2003: 59) and, citing Héctor Varela, she 'had an expression of ineffable sweetness' (64). To illustrate her intelligence, Cawthorne mentions that she was 'educated, cultivated and sophisticated' (77), 'mastered French, Spanish and Guaraní, the tongue-twisting Indian language of Paraguay and she was the cultural superior of even the most highly educated in Paraguay at the time' (54). In fact the author also acknowledges Eliza Lynch's profession in Paris as that of *grande cocotte* (courtesan), along with describing her endless ambition and greed in her relations with Solano López, and her cruel treatment of the Paraguayan people. Though Irish-born, Eliza 'thought of herself as an Englishwoman' (211), was proud of being a British

subject and her 'sympathies seem to have extended only to English speakers' (205). Perhaps influenced by Eliza's charisma and their common Irish origin, the United States consul Martin T. McMahon, who according to Cawthorne conducted a romance with Lynch, reported that she was 'a lady of Irish parentage, of English birth, and of French education' (244).

As for Solano López, his negative definition in opposition to the beauty suffices to characterise the beast. However, Cawthorne further relates that he was 'spoilt, arrogant, boastful and greedy. [...] He had no knowledge of music, art, literature or the classics' (48). He 'did not understand [...] the use of Latin quotations, [and did not hear of] classical authors' (236). His moral profile was characterised by a 'weakness for young aristocratic virgins' (49). While in Paris, 'he went drinking, gambling and whoring' (52). His imperial ambitions led him to initiate the calamitous war against Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, and, in conclusion, he was a 'vain, credulous, and greedy savage' (133).

The author's characterisation of the dictator as *savage* identifies Solano López with Paraguay in particular and with South American in general. His views on Paraguayans are evident in Cawthorne's narrative, and illustrate his beliefs not only with regard to the cultural differences between South American and European - particularly Irish and British - culture, but also concerning the perceived superiority of the latter. In Eliza's time, Paraguay was inhabited by 'ferocious Indians' who were invariably 'barefooted' and spoke 'in nasal Guarani' (74). They 'preferred their native folk songs to Bach and Beethoven' (93), and in a remote village *even* the Indians mocked his [Fr. Palacios's] ignorance of the scriptures' (89, my italics). Also, the Brazilians were 'superstitious' (165), and the Argentines lawless. In fact other Europeans - though never the British - also bear the brunt of Cawthorne's insensitive irony and belittling adjectives. According to Cawthorne, the Italians would envy the Paraguayan record of having three heads of state in one year (279), and Irish women, citing Cunninghame Graham, are 'often marked by untidiness' (288).

### Marketing Historical Fiction and Fictional History

Cawthorne's is not the worst biography of Eliza Lynch. When it appeared in 2003 critics were bewildered by the publication of Siân Rees' *The Shadows of Eliza Lynch* in the same month, on the same subject and with the same number of pages and identical opening scenes. A few months previously Anne Enright's *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* was published but did not achieve notoriety in spite of its deliberately distasteful opening sentence, 'Francisco Solano Lopez put his penis inside Eliza Lynch on a lovely spring day in Paris, in 1854.' This was undoubtedly a real incident but was erroneously situated one year later. [2]

Many reviewers agree that Cawthorne's language is fiery, that Rees' narrative is less passionate - and abounds in errors - and that Enright's novel reveals the reality of Eliza as a human being. Lamentably critics do not remark upon the authors' frequent use of the beauty-and-the-beast dichotomy between Eliza Lynch and Francisco Solano López, and the fact that it in turn is analogous to the civilisation versus barbarism model which juxtaposes a seemingly uncivilised Latin America with an ostensibly modern, industrious and refined Europe.

There is nothing sinister about historical fiction and fictional history. I personally enjoy both very much, particularly books written by authors of the calibre of Cawthorne, Rees and Enright. The problem occurs when editors at publishing houses commission books from professional writers solely for profit. This process renders the pleasure of writing and researching secondary to the demands of budget sales. As Cawthorne puts it in his website, 'unlike other writers, I don't see the point in writing for myself, an audience of one. My duty is to service my readership' (*About Nigel Cawthorne*, 2002). Unlike Cawthorne, most writers of high-quality historical novels and biographies write for themselves and their friends. If they are fortunate, an intelligent editor discovers them and markets their books.

Writing for clients instead of for readers requires adapting to and incorporating their values and beliefs so that the book is easy to advertise and to sell. Clients simply purchase the book; readers are capricious and are not always easy to convince. The utilisation of the beauty-and-the-beast paradigm is a simple

technique to appeal to the clients' principles and prejudices. Paraphrasing José Luis Corral Lafuente, the Spanish medievalist and successful writer of historical novels, it is 'a show-off history, a weak-spirited history, a fictional history à la carte [which] becomes a vehicle for political alignment' (Corral Lafuente 2005: 129). Publishers, authors and critics of these biographies about Eliza Lynch do a disservice to history and literature when they simply respond to the exigencies of the market instead of making an effort to try to understand and learn from different cultures.

The good news is that even if a historical topic climbs to the top of the best-seller list, there is always a demand for well-researched and well-written books. Ultimately, it is always possible for the beast to become the beauty.

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### Notes

[1] On his personal webpage ([www.nigel-cawthorne.com](http://www.nigel-cawthorne.com)) Nigel Cawthorne explains that he has 'written, contributed to and edited more than sixty books on subjects as diverse as skiing, computing, finance, fashion, sex, war, politics, art, music, engineering, science, history, crime and American football.' He lives 'in a flat girlfriends have described as a book-writing factory in Bloomsbury, London's literary area.' His reputation is such, according to himself, 'that people will tell you I am a more often seen drinking in Soho's famous bohemian watering hole, the French pub - still known to some denizens as the Yorkminster - with a beautiful young black woman on my arm' (*About Nigel Cawthorne*, 2002).

[2] Even John Hoyt Williams in his excellent account of modern Paraguayan history applies the beauty-and-the-beast dichotomy when he argues that Eliza Lynch 'was almost the exact opposite of Francisco Solano' (Williams 1979: 173).

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Eliza Lynch (1835-1886)  
(from Williams, 1979)



Some of the biographies of  
Eliza Lynch: Cawthorne  
(2003), Rees (2003),  
Enright (2002), and Varela  
(1997).



Francisco Solano López  
(1826-1870)





House of Eliza Lynch at Asunción (at present the Law School).



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