

Eliza Lynch (1835-1886): Courtesan and Unofficial First Lady of Paraguay



Elisa Alicia Lynch (1835-1886)
(*South American Pictures*, in Nigel Cawthorne, 2003)

Lynch, Eliza [*bap.* Elizabeth, *known as* Elisa Alicia] (1835-1886), courtesan and unofficial first lady of Paraguay, was born on 3 June 1835 in County Cork, the daughter of John Lynch and Adelaide Schnock. John Lynch was a physician and the family were from a Church of Ireland background. Little is known of Eliza Lynch's younger years but she probably received a good education.

Eliza Lynch's eldest sister Corinne was living in France in 1847. The family left Ireland that year and settled in Paris. On 3 June 1850, at the age of fifteen, Eliza Lynch married Jean Louis Armand de Quatrefages, a French military surgeon. The unhappy marriage led to a divorce within three years, after a residence in Algiers. Lynch was living in Paris with her mother, and perhaps a Russian nobleman, when in 1853 she met Francisco Solano López (1826-1870) of

Paraguay. It was love at first sight; Solano López was overwhelmed by her beauty and Lynch was attracted by the security he offered, with his position as heir to Paraguayan leadership. Shortly thereafter, Lynch became pregnant. Despite arguments with his younger brother Benigno, who did not want the affair to be carried on across the ocean, Solano López left his mistress with the financial resources and necessary instructions to travel to Paraguay, and departed for South America.

Eliza Lynch arrived in Buenos Aires in October 1855 and gave birth to a son, who was baptised in a private ceremony as Juan Francisco 'Panchito' López after her arrival in Asunción, Paraguay, in December. After an initial bout of depression and culture shock on encountering Paraguay and its people, Lynch learnt to take political and financial advantage of her status, despite the unofficial nature of her position and antipathy on the part of López family. By 1858 she was a social leader in the community, despite frequently becoming pregnant and being perceived by the bigoted local elite – particularly by patrician ladies – to be living in sin.

"Madame Lynch" – as she styled herself, though she was popularly known as "La Lynch" – was something of a snob and delighted in displaying her novel habits to the Paraguayans, refusing to ride sidesaddle and serving elegant French cuisine to guests. She became a lady to be emulated if not to have affection for, and her social reputation placed her on an equal footing with some foreign diplomats, for she did her part to modernise Paraguay. Thus began a cultural transfer of French, rather than English or Irish, customs to replace the native ones. She set the tone with her home and her lover's house, as well as clothing, cuisine, champagne, cosmetics, sewing machines, *de rigueur* music, formal dances, lithographs and other objects d'art.

Although in her youth Eliza Lynch had been a strikingly handsome woman, photographs taken around 1860 show her less as a young lady and more as a dowdy matron. Between 1855 and 1861 she gave birth to five sons, all of whom publicly bore the López name. She rose high in the world in a material sense, recipient of gift after gift from her admiring general. She became the world's largest female landowner. By 1865 she owned several large ranches and at least

twenty-six urban properties. During Paraguay's Triple Alliance War against Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, Solano López transferred vast properties into Lynch's name perhaps in order to protect some of his wealth in case he lost the war or had to abdicate. Solano López ordered the sale to Eliza Lynch of over 800,000 acres of state lands and forests located in the Chaco region. In addition, she acquired 12,000,000 acres in eastern Paraguay and another 9,000,000 acres of *yerbales* and forests in the contested area north of the river Apa. All of Lynch's landed property was confiscated in 1869.

In 1870 Solano López was killed in Cerro Corá. Eliza Lynch buried her lover and their son Panchito and fled to Paris with more than \$500,000 in jewels, gold and cash. In 1875 she returned to Paraguay on the invitation of president Juan B. Gill, who supported her claims to confiscated property. However, she was again deported to France and finally settled in Paris where she died in 1886, in penury and oblivion.

In the 1970s, under the influence of nationalist and revisionist historians, Eliza Lynch was proclaimed a Paraguayan national heroine and her remains were removed from a grave in Paris to her adopted country in South America. A central street in Asunción was named 'Madame Lynch' in her honour. The life of Eliza Lynch has fascinated modern writers of fiction and biography in English and Spanish. In 2003 two biographies by Nigel Cawthorne and Siân Rees, listed below, were published concurrently, with the same number of pages and identical duplicate opening scenes.

Edmundo Murray

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See also *Eliza Lynch (1835-1886): A Bibliography*.
[<http://www.irishargentine.org/elizalynchbiblio.htm>]