

***RICHARD
FRANCIS BURTON***



***LETTERS FROM
THE BATTLEFIELDS
OF PARAGUAY***

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Preface

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The principal object of these letters is to tell a new tale of modern Paraguay, to place before the public simple, unvarnished sketches and studies of what presented itself to one visiting the seat of a campaign which has, in this our day, brought death and desolation into the fair valleys of the Paraguay and the Uruguay Rivers. In no case, let me say, has distance better displayed its effects upon the European mind. Returned home, I found blankness of face whenever the word Paraguay (which they pronounced Parāgay) was named, and a general confession of utter ignorance and hopeless lack of interest.

Many in England have never heard of this Five Years' War which now appears to be an institution. Even upon the Paraná River I met an intelligent skipper who only suspected a something bellicose amongst the “nebulous republics” because his charter-party alluded to a blockade.

It speaks little for popular geography when we read year after year such headings as “Hostilities on the River Plate,” whereas the campaign was never fought within 300 miles of the Rio de la Plata. The various conflicting accounts scattered abroad, with and without interest or obligation to scatter them, make the few home-stayers that care to peruse South American intelligence accept as authentic, and possibly act upon, such viridical information as that for instance supplied by the following clipping:—

Telegram received at the Brazilian Legation in London.

The war is over. (No!) Lopez has either fled to Bolivia, (No!) or is concealed at Corrientes. (Impossible!) The execution of his brothers (?) Burgos (?) the bishop (?) and prisoners (?) is confirmed. (No!) The Paraguayan population was returning to Assumption (Never!) which has been occupied by the Marquis de Caxias.

And lastly, M. Elisée Reclus, in the "Revue des Deux Mondes," can term Paraguay with the impunity of impudence, "état pacifique par excellence," when her every citizen was a soldier, and when even during the rule of the Jesuit, the tiller of the ground was also a man-at-arms.

The war still raging upon its small theatre of action is a spectacle that should appeal to man's sympathy and imagination. Seldom has aught more impressive been presented to the gaze of the world than this tragedy; this unflinching struggle maintained for so long a period against overwhelming odds, and to the very verge of racial annihilation; the bulldog tenacity and semi-compulsory heroism of a Red-skin Sparta, whose only vulnerable point, the line of her river, which flows from north to south, and which forms her western frontier, has been defended with a stubbornness of purpose, a savage valour, and an enduring desperation rare in the annals of mankind.

Those who read, dwelling afar, see one of the necessary two phases. Some recognise a nation crushed by the mere weight of its enemies; drained of its population to support the bloody necessities of a hopeless war; cut off from all communication with the world outside, yet still as ever fired with a firm resolve to do and die before submitting to the

yoke of the mighty power that is slowly but surely crushing it. Others again behold nothing but a barbarous race blotted out of the map, an obscure nationality eaten up, as the Kafirs say, by its neighbours; a rampant tyranny whose sole object is self-aggrandisement, a conflict of kites and crows, the slaves of a despot, of an " American Attila," fighting at the despot's nod, for the perpetuation of a policy of restraint which a more advanced state of society cannot tolerate, and of an obsolete despotism which the world would willingly abolish.

Those who write have in almost all instances allowed their imaginations and their prejudices to guide their judgment, and mostly they have frankly thrown overboard all impartiality. The few " Lopezguayos" or " Paraguayan sympathizers ," the " thick and thin supporters" of the Marshal President, make him the " Liberator of South America;" the " Cincinnatus of America;" the " King Leopold of the Plate;" they quote the names applied to him by his subjects, Great White Man (Carai guazú) and " Big Father."

Paraguay is to them another Poland in the martyrology of peoples, a weak, meek inland Republic to be strangled, after an "odious struggle of three to one," in the huge coils of the Imperial Anaconda. They accuse the Brazil of the most interested views, they charge her with boundless profligacy and the " most hideous vices," as if these had aught to do with the subject; they declare that no nation has a right to impose upon a neighbouring and independent people a government not of its own choice; they irrelevantly predict terrible crises when the Negro question and that of the great feudal domains shall demand to be settled, and they even

abuse “ l'Empire Esclavagiste” because she has not madly freed her slaves, or rather because she has freed them to enslave her free neighbours.* Many there are who term the Marshal President, alias the “ Tyrant of Paraguay,” the “ Monster Lopez,” a “ Vandalic and treacherous aggressor,” a Nero, a Theodore, “ O barbaro do Paraguay:”

- " Revue des Deux Mondes," of February 15th, 1865, and August 15th, 1868, by M. Elisée Reclus: November 15th, 1865, by M. J. de Cazane, and September 15th, 1866, by M. Duchesne de Bellecourt. The ignorance of fact paraded in these papers is to be equalled only by the animus which pervades them.

they hold his military republico-despotism a hornets' nest, a thorn in the side of the progressive Brazil, and they look upon the long campaign as the battle of civilization, pure and simple, against the Japanese isolation and the Darfurian monocracy which are erroneously dated from the days of Dr. Francia.

It is hardly necessary for me to declare that
Tros Tyriusque mihi nullo discrimine agetur,
or to hope for immunity from the pains and penalties which attach to the purely neutral. My sympathies are with the Brazil, as far at least as her " mission" is literally, not liberally, to unlock the great Southern Mississippi; to “keep open and develop the magnificent water system of the

Paraguay-Parana-Plate,” and to sweep away from the shores of its main arteries the Guardias and Piquetes, the batteries and the ridiculous little stockades which served to keep its waters comparatively desert, and to convert a highway belonging to the world into a mere monopoly of Paraguay. I have spoken somewhat harshly of the Brazilian army: here *hablar fuerte*, the sermo brevis et durus is the duty of a writer. Its personnel as a rule, admitting many brilliant exceptions, imperfectly represents the noble Brazilian people; its successes have been hailed with an enthusiasm run frantic, and its spare merits have been commended with an exaggeration whose consequences, operating upon public opinion, may do the country much real harm. The Brazilian freeman, as his history shows, may court comparison with the bravest of soldiers. The case is not the same with the freed man and the servile fresh from the hoe.

On the other hand, I cannot but admire the wonderful energy and the indomitable will of Marshal President Lopez and his small but sinewy power, which will never be forgotten nor want admirers as long as history shall endure. In many actions one-third of the number engaged was placed *hors de combat*, and often of a battalion numbering 400 men only 100 returned.

The Paraguayans have indeed fought for their altars and their fires, fought for the green graves of their sires, their God, their native land, for the “vindication of their outraged honour, the guarantee of their threatened existence, and the stability of their wounded rights.”

As regards the “atrocities of Lopez” — to quote another popular heading — his “unheard-of and fiendish cruelties,

his extorting by torture the testimony required from foreign employés, his starving to death prisoners of war; flogging to death men, women, and children; his starving and killing the wounded, and his repeatedly shooting and bayoneting, amongst others, his brothers, his sisters, and the bishop, the reader will, I venture to assert, do well to exercise a certain reservation of judgment, like myself. Truth seems to be absolutely unknown upon the banks of the Plate. After the most positive assertions and the most life-like details concerning the execution of some malefactor (or victim) in high (or low) position have been paraded before the world, a few days will prove that the whole has been one solid circumstantial lie. The fact is that nothing about Paraguay is known outside the country, and of its government very little is known even inside its limits. The foreign employés themselves must generally speak from hearsay, and some of them have not failed to supplement their facts by fancies, theories, and fictions. The most trustworthy will own that in the case, for instance, of a whole corps being decimated, they remained, though almost upon the spot, in ignorance of the executions till two years afterwards.

The war in Paraguay, impartially viewed, is no less than the doom of a race which is to be relieved from a self-chosen tyranny by becoming *chair á canon* by the process of annihilation. It is the Nemesis of Faith; the death-throe of a policy bequeathed by Jesuitism to South America; it shows the flood of Time surging over a relic of old world semi-barbarism, a palæzoic humanity. Nor is the semi-barbaric race itself without an especial interest of its own. The Guarani family appears to have had its especial habitat in

Paraguay, and thence to have extended its dialects, from the Rio de la Plata to the roots of the Andes, and even to the peoples of the Antilles. The language is now being killed out at the heart, the limbs are being slowly but surely lopped off, and another century will witness its extirpation.

This Crimean Campaign,

Si licet in parvis exemplis grandibus uti,

abounds in instances of splendid futile devotion. It is a fatal war waged by hundreds against thousands; a battle of Brown Bess and poor old flint muskets against the Spencer and Enfield rifles; of honeycombed carronades, long and short, against Whitworths and Lahittes; of punts and canoes against ironclads. It brings before us an anthropological type which, like the English of a past generation, holds every Paraguayan boy-man equal, single-handed, to at least any half-dozen of his enemies. It is moreover an affair which, whilst testing so severely the gigantic powers of the Brazil and threatening momentous effects to its good genius—democratic imperialism, has yet been prosecuted with so many laches, with an incuriousness, an *inconséquence*, and in many cases with a venality which, common as are such malpractices in the non-combattant ranks of all semi-disciplined and many disciplined armies, here presents an ethnographical study.

Nor is the subject without its sensational side. These pages will offer details concerning places and persons whose names are more or less familiar to the public ear: Asuncion, the capital of this "inland China;" Humaitá, the "Sebastopol of the South," that gigantic "hum" whose "grim ramparts" (wretched earthworks) appeared even in the *London Times* as "the Gibraltar, or more properly the

Mantua, of South America;" the Amazonian corps raised by "Mrs. President Lopez," the mysterious Madame Lynch, *en personne*; the Marshal President, who though separated by half a world from our world, must ever command a sufficiency of interest; the conspiracy that has been so fiercely asserted and denied, the new Reign of Terror, called by some the Reign of Rigour, and the executions which, if they really took place, can be explained only by the dementia preceding destruction, or by the most fatal of necessities. In the purely military sketches the most interesting details are those concerning the much talked-of earthworks, a style of defence becoming in these days of breech-loading and couchant drill, more and more necessary as the means of offence shall improve, and calling for as much practical information as we can collect.

The Paraguayan campaign is essentially a war of entrenchments as opposed to the siege and the pitched battle, and entrenchments have now taken a high position in strategics.

I made two visits to the seat of war. The first, from August 15th to September 5th, 1868, led me to the mouth of the Tebicuary River, when the Paraguayan batteries of San Fernando were being stormed. The second began on April 4th, lasted till April 18th, 1869, and showed me the curtain rising upon the third act of the campaign—the Guerilla phase preceding the conclusion. During a residence of some three and a half years in the Brazil, the Paraguayan question was the theme of daily conversation around me, and where my personal experience failed it was not difficult to turn to account that of others.

In making up the map, the trustworthy and satisfactory labours of Captain Mouchez of the French Imperial navy, which have been adopted by the Allied Armies in the field,* have of course been taken as a base. The northern part of the republic is borrowed from Colonel du Graty, whose geography, whatever may be his politics, is, in this portion, better than that of any other traveller. The whole has been corrected by the map illustrating the work on the Paraguayan War, by Lieut.-Col. George Thompson, of whom more presently.

I have not yet had leisure to reduce to writing the printed documents of the Brazilian War-office, obligingly supplied to me by the enlightened Minister H. E. the Burão de Muritiba. He, however, who would produce a detailed and connected study, a complete and satisfactory account of a four years' campaign, interesting even after Custoza, Sadowa, and Lissa, and certainly the most complicated, topographically and strategically, that has been fought since 1850, must have more time and better opportunities than I possess. He should have access to the private as well as to the published reports of Rio de Janeiro, of Buenos Aires, and of Monte Vidéo. Nor will his account be aught but incomplete unless he be enabled to collate with those of the Allies the official correspondence of the Paraguayan commandants, whilst a complete set of the *Semanario*, the *Moniteur* of the republic, is becoming almost unattainable. Whatever victory the Brazil has claimed, Paraguay, as may be expected, has revindicated it, and *vice versâ*.

All accounts which have hitherto appeared are necessarily one-sided: the Allies — Brazilian, Argentine, and

Oriental—have told and re-told their own tale, whilst the Paraguayans have mostly been dumb perforce.

Since these remarks were penned, I have had an opportunity of reading, and I have read with the utmost interest, "The War in Paraguay, with an Historical Sketch of the Country and its People, by George Thompson, C.E., Lieutenant-Colonel of Engineers in the Paraguayan Army, Aide-de-camp to President Lopez, &c." (Longmans, 1869). By the kindness of the author and of the publishers the proofs were sent to me before they were made public, and I delayed for some time my own pages in order that Lieutenant-Colonel Thompson should take the precedence to which his knowledge of the subject, and experience of eleven years spent in hard labour and in actual field-service, entitle him. The two books, however, are by no means likely to clash. The "War in Paraguay" is semi-historical, treating of what the author witnessed during the hostilities. "Letters from the Battle-fields" is a traveller's journal of much lighter cast, and necessarily more discursive.

I have attempted also to sketch the campaign, than which, rightly explained, nothing can be more easily understood. It is composed of three great acts, and the following is the skeleton:*—

Act No. 1. President Lopez raises a force of 80,000 men and resolves to brook no interference on the part of the Brazil in the affairs of the Platine States. He engages in hostilities and he determines to be crowned at Buenos Aires Emperor of the Argentines. For this purpose he marches (April, 1865) two corps d'armée of 25,000 men under General Robles, and 12,000 men under Lt.-Col. Estigarribia,

down the rivers Paraná and Uruguay, intending that they should rendezvous at Concordia or some central point and jointly occupy Buenos Aires. He himself

- The reader will kindly remember, that these pages treat only of the Paraguayan war in the south. Nothing is said touching the campaign in Matto-Grosso, and on the northern waters of the Paraguay river.
-

remains with a third corps d'armée of supports and reserves, behind his proper frontier, the Paraná River. Both the invading columns are defeated in detail, the survivors return by the end of October, 1865, and the central body retreats to Paso. Thus ends the offensive portion of the campaign, which lasted about five months.

Act No. 2. President Lopez, commanding his armies in person, vainly attempts to defend the frontiers of the Republic, and gradually retiring northwards, before vastly superior forces and a fleet of ironclads, he fights every inch of ground with a prodigious tenacity. This defensive phase concludes, after upwards of three years, with the affair of Loma Valentina, the "Waterloo of the war." This terrible blow was struck December 25th-27th, 1868.

Act No. 3, and as yet not "played out" (September, 1869). The Guerilla phase, when President Lopez, compelled to abandon his capital, Asuncion, falls back upon Cerro Leon, and makes "Paraguay"* provisionally his chief town. Whilst this state of things endured I left the Rio de la Plata.

Named by her Gracious Majesty, Consul at Damascus, I now bid, and not without the sincerest regret, a temporary adieu to the Brazil, that glorious land, the garden of South America, which has so long afforded me a home.

R. F. B.

August, 1869.

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- Our periodicals mostly print the word Paraguay, thus confounding the little country town with the country.

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