



Liberty or Death!: The Life and Campaigns of Richard L. Vowell: British Legionnaire and Commander - Hero and Patriot of the Americas

Maria Páez Victor

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This is the story of Richard Longfield Vowell, an audacious and intrepid young English adventurer who abandoned his studies at Oxford in 1817 to fight against the Spanish Empire that had ruled Latin America for 300 years. It is also the story of the little known British Legion, formed of English and Irish volunteers, which became an integral part of Simón Bolívar's patriot army. The British Legion played a crucial role in training the patriot forces to face Spanish troops battle-hardened in the Peninsular Wars.

With the words 'Liberty or Death!' emblazoned on a black banner, Bolívar set out to liberate Venezuela, and indeed, South America. For the bold and the idealistic, his quest was the stuff of dreams, and in England, there had never before been such intense interest in the destiny of the Spanish colonies. Bolívar's exploits were reported assiduously in the English press, so much so that the Spanish authorities called it 'a South American mania.'

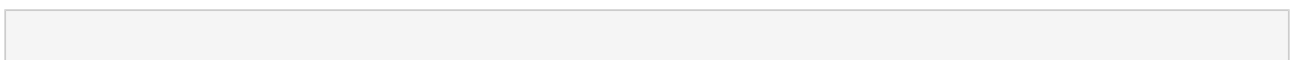
Bolívar lacked a modern army and with England awash with officers and soldiers demobilized from the Peninsular Wars, he took the opportunity to obtain campaign-seasoned fighting men. So it was that in distant Venezuela, Vowell and fewer than 2,000 other British volunteers, distinguished themselves in battle.

In Chile, there was a desperate need for a navy to counter Spanish warships and so Bernardo O'Higgins sought British officers to help form the celebrated First Chilean Squadron. Richard Vowell was recruited by the British naval hero, Admiral Lord Thomas Cochrane, to sail with the Chilean Squadron, and he became Commander of the Infantry Marines. He took part in the final naval battle that vanquished forever the Spanish Navy in the Americas.

After the wars in Latin America ended, Vowell returned to England and wrote a seminal book on the campaigns in Venezuela, New Grenada and the Pacific Ocean. Though not well known in the English-speaking world, he is considered to be a heroic figure and an insightful historian among Latin American scholars who frequently cite his work.

This important first biography is based on extensive research undertaken in three continents. It uncovers information previously unknown about Vowell's exciting life and daring exploits – from his birth in a genteel English country town, to his campaigns in the far-off Americas, and to his period in the harsh landscape of Australia, where he confronted another empire and was subsequently and unjustly imprisoned on a remote Pacific island from which he made a dramatic escape.

This absorbing account sheds light on a lost but fascinating episode of British endeavor and valor and its contribution to the shaping of the modern Americas.



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