

TLC Showcase

RHIANNON LEWIS

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Introduction to No Little Fame

It's strange, what draws us to certain stories. As a little girl, I remember asking my grandfather about the series of framed etchings that hung on his workshop wall. I could see, by the dedication under the portrait, that the man was 'one of us' – a Davies. But why was there mention of a beautiful ship, insurgents, and the 'teeth of war'?

We were brought up on a small Welsh dairy farm. For my parents, the twice-daily routine of milking the cows meant that holidays were unheard of, and our days out were defined by the distance we could traverse, between milking times, in an Austin A40. Carmarthen and Aberystwyth were the edges of our known universe.

Yet, here was an ancestor who had sailed to an exotic country, and become involved in someone else's war. From the etching and other photographs, I could see that he was handsome and charismatic, and unlike other ancestors, his life still echoed down the generations.

But it was a chance remark by my mother, many years later, which really sealed the fascination. It was true, she said, that my grandfather idolized him. But her own mother remembered a very different person. Apparently, after retiring back to Wales, he could often be found languishing in some ditch, very much worse for wear after long evenings spent in the local Black Lion, where he sang Spanish songs and cried over a woman he'd 'left behind'. The contrast between the younger, successful war hero, lauded by the press and featured by contemporary magazines such as the *Graphic* obviously had another side to him. And it was the combination of these two sides that really drew me to his story.

TLC's support has been invaluable. The novel would not be what it is now without the help of Karl French and Michael Langan. Karl read an early draft and his response made me realize that writing a novel was not beyond my capabilities. Reading his report was honestly one of the best moments of my life. Even though there was still work to do, he made me believe that I was not mad to think I could write an entire novel. The second reading by Michael Langan forced me to ask uncomfortable questions about aspects of the story that I thought were fixed. Going back to the book at that stage was very hard, but ultimately worth it. I still refer to both reports

when I need words of wisdom and moral support.

Writing a first novel is a massive step in the dark. Unlike completing a Masters (which, compared to this was a doddle!), there are no seminars, no tutors, and no ego-boosting exclamations from friends about how clever you must be. Aside from the reader's reports, both Aki and Rebecca have supported my writing beyond the call of duty, and provided precious encouragement on the long and obstacle-ridden road to publication.

No Little Fame, by Rhiannon Lewis

1891: civil war has broken out in Chile. The *Imperial*, Davy's ship, has been commandeered by government troops under General Moraga. Davy and his crew are to transport soldiers and supplies along Chile's coast. They are being hunted by the congressionalists, and of all the enemy ships, they fear the *Esmeralda* the most.

11 March, Antofagasta

The *Imperial*, making its second attempt to land the troops and artillery it had collected in Valparaiso, cruised into the harbour at Antofagasta under cover of darkness. A dense covering of cloud hid the moon and all the stars from view with little prospect of them being revealed soon. There was not a breath of wind. Antofagasta was a wide open harbour and Davy was more than familiar with its rocks and landmarks. He leant on the rail, peering through the darkness for anything unexpected.

It was nearing two o'clock in the morning and all was quiet along the harbour side. Usually there would be a forest of masts lying in wait for their next consignment of nitrates, but the war was making merchants nervous and many were staying away. The engines of the *Imperial* were subdued as she slid past the deserted decks and the bare masts of the wooden barques. How the world is moving on, thought Davy, glad that he didn't have to sleep in a swaying hammock any more. He had been awake since five the previous morning and his eyes and limbs were numb with exhaustion. Moraga had been at his most demanding all day, needing desperately to get the troops ashore but wary of landing them in Antofagasta.

'I fear it is very exposed, Captain Davies,' he had muttered. 'How do we know that she won't be waiting for us? I fear the *Esmeralda* more than any other rebel ship.'

Davy could give no assurances. All he could say was that the *Imperial*, although fortunate to still have a good stock of coal on board, did not have an infinite supply with which to circle the Pacific in an eternal search for a safe harbour.

'It's a risk worth taking,' Davy had replied, thinking uncomfortably how strange it was that he should be saying this – it was not even his war. By rights, he was the one who should be urging caution. As it was, they seemed to be anchored safely out of harm's way for the evening.

Yet, they did not want to draw attention to themselves, and instructions were given with low voices and calm efficiency. Moraga had sent some of his officers ashore on the launch to reconnoitre. They were taking their time returning. Everything seemed quiet and unremarkable.

Moraga came towards him. 'Captain Davies, you should turn in now. All seems well. We will let the troops disembark at first light. I will send for you if there is anything unusual.'

It still jarred with Davy to be instructed by another leader on his own ship. Moraga was politeness itself so he could not fault him for his manner. This is a strange captaincy, he thought, so tired now that he barely cared. As his head hit the pillow, just before the oblivion of sleep obscured everything, he caught himself thinking of the trajectories of flying fish and whether he needed to make a calculation as to their speed and angle as they hit the decks.

12 March, Antofagasta

'Davy! Davy!'

In his dream, Davy is sitting in the second row of the Royal Opera House. Adelina Patti is singing an aria from *Aida*, the music reaching its glorious yet tragic crescendo. Suddenly, he recognises the woman in front of him. It's Maria. A section of hair has come loose from its pins. He wants to replace the strand for her. All the other women are immaculate in their silks and gems and feathers. But Maria's dress is plain. He does not want her to feel out of place, so he leans forward to touch her hair.

Davy! Wake up! The Esmeralda! She's here!

Only a little further, Davy thinks as he leans, I can pin that curl and no one will notice. He feels the person next to him in the audience leaning into him.

Let me be. Go away.

'Davy!'

His eyes opened. William was at his bedside, wearing what appeared to be a turban.

'We're off to India?' gasped Davy, still half asleep and wondering what his chief officer was doing in the opera house.

'They think they can see the *Esmeralda*.'

'Who?'

'Not 'who', 'what!'' hissed William.

Exasperated, William thrust a jacket into Davy's lap and led the way to the upper deck. Speaking quietly and with his head still bandaged from the cut to his scalp, William explained that as it was getting light one of the lookouts had seen a ship's hull tucked in at the bottom of the harbour. So far, it was still dark enough not to be seen, but not for much longer.

Moraga arrived on deck, followed closely by Evans who was the first to whisper, 'Sir, we have enough coal to get away, but as soon as she sees us we're done for.'

'Are we sure it's her?' asked Davy, putting on his cap.

Moraga did not reply but murmured gravely, '*Porco Dio*, we should have disembarked the soldiers last night.'

But there was no time for recriminations or analysis. There was urgency in the crew's tasks, but no shouting or indiscriminate clattering on deck. Davy took out his spyglass and peered at the mystery ship. Was it her? Through the soles of his feet he could feel the engines beginning to turn. The steel around him trembled. Evans would want to build up a good head of steam before moving out. How long could they wait before being spotted or heard? The troops were on their feet with their rifles at their sides. If it came to it, they would fix bayonets, but not yet. *Dear God*, thought Davy; it had not really occurred to him that they could be boarded, that he might see hand-to-hand fighting on board the *Imperial*. Then he thought of the *Esmeralda*'s torpedoes: it would not come to bayonets.

The *Imperial* began to make her way out of the harbour. The sky was getting lighter and the dark cloud that had shrouded the sky the night before was separating, revealing areas of inky blue sky. Davy caught sight of a distant lone star. *A clear sky, that's all we need*. In the tally of advantages and disadvantages, the *Imperial* would need to score highly to stand any chance of getting away. *If it is her?*

They were underway, and all the crew were at their stations. As they pulled further out into open water, away from the camouflage of ship masts, everyone held their

breath. Those with spyglasses peered silently and those without leaned over the rails and strained their eyes to see what they could.

Davy could feel blood pounding in his ear. *Is it her? Is it her?* Condensation formed on the lens. He drew back to let it clear then blinked hard and looked again. He focused, and as he did so two figures rushed into view on the ship's deck. The figures froze and stared at the *Imperial*: one of them had a spyglass. There was a brief exchange and one ran back along the deck. It was the *Esmeralda*. And they had been seen.

'*Mas Vapor! Mas Vapor!*' Now there were shouts all around. Davy found himself bellowing one order after another until his throat burned.

Within seconds the *Imperial's* speed had increased, all need for stealth redundant now. The deck was alive with activity and thick dark smoke surrounded them. Once again Davy prayed that Evans would work his magic and get them away. In the harbour the *Esmeralda* was still stationary. *Advantage to us*, thought Davy. There was a great deal of commotion on the enemy ship's deck, and steam began to rise from her funnel.

'She's in a tight spot,' William said lightly, coming to stand next to Davy.

Not half tight enough, thought Davy. William could always be relied on to find something positive to say even when the odds were stacked against them. Davy glanced either side to check that no one was near, then turned to his chief officer and said, under his breath, 'We're not going to make it, William. She has fourteen hours of daylight to give chase. We would need a miracle.'

William was called away by one of the crew before he could respond. For a moment, Davy stayed at the rail watching the shadow of the *Esmeralda* turn in the dark waters of the harbour. She was readying herself like a great white shark, lining herself up, making her calculations, sizing up her kill. Dawn would come soon; they would see their opponent all too clearly. The sky cleared briefly overhead. A star shone out between the clouds, and as Davy's gaze returned to the pursuing warship he thought he saw her bare her teeth.

'We will be within range of her guns by midday,' said Davy, who had been pondering the charts. By the time the *Esmeralda* had manoeuvred awkwardly in the harbour, the *Imperial* had put six miles between them. Even so, the *Esmeralda* was gaining on them now, and the missiles that she had been hurling at them in a fury of dramatic

effect would soon become real and serious threats. It would be no game of cat and mouse this time. She was no underpowered corvette, and the men's rifles and bayonets would be of little use.

Moraga leaned back in his chair and drew slowly on his cigar. The room was filled with smoke even though William had opened a porthole.

Davy had made his calculations several times. He had worked out the best- and the worst-case scenarios, all variations on a theme, depending on whether the *Esmeralda* could reach her top speed and whether Evans could keep going without having to clean out the furnaces. But whichever way he calculated, they were not going to get away. It was just a matter of time. Moraga blew a long puff of smoke in the air and, as if he had heard Davy's thoughts, looked up at him. 'I cannot surrender the ship.'

Davy had expected these words sooner or later. He had prepared himself for them, so that when the time came he would not betray his feelings. Even so, he suddenly felt very tired. He was not yet defeated, but he was caught between an enemy he did not hate and an ally that had a different vision of success.

'Colonel Moraga, sir,' said William, 'surely they will not want to sink the ship? It would be a useful vessel for them to commandeer themselves? What benefit would it be to them to sink her?'

Moraga smiled and leaned forward to flick ash into a small dish. 'You are right, of course. In the practical world, what purpose could it possibly serve? But in war we are not merely in the practical world. We are appealing to men's hearts, which, as you know, cannot be won with metal and machinery alone. *El Capitán* has raised the status of the *Imperial*. Before the war she was a fine mailboat, a fast mailboat to be sure – perhaps the fastest of all, but no more than that. Your conquests, Captain Davies, your dashing raids through the lines of blockade, have elevated her to the status of a worthy adversary. Everyone knows the *Imperial* has been supplying guns and troops to the government all along the coast. When Balmaceda had no other ships to speak of, the *Imperial* gave us a chance. The *Opposidores* will not be interested in surrender.'

In the background the men could hear the distant firing of the warship's guns and the nearer thud of missiles as they landed in the sea.

'But seven hundred Chilean troops? Surely?' urged William.

'Seven hundred *enemy* troops, Officer Whiteway.' Moraga shrugged and leant back again.

Moraga turned to Davy. 'Captain Davies, did you hear about Minister Rivero?'

Davy shook his head. He had not really been listening, but rather was wondering whether they should consider unloading ballast or ditching supplies to lighten their load and gain more speed.

'He was – or rather is, as he is still alive, they tell me – a very popular man. He was Balmaceda's second-in-command until the war began. He has, perhaps unwittingly, played some dubious role, given information to the wrong people.'

Moraga looked down and flicked more ash from his trouser leg. 'He has been tortured, they say.' He drew deeply from the cigar and concentrated his gaze on Davy. 'They dislocated his arms and crushed his hands. He cannot speak. He is destroyed. That is what they say.'

Moraga leant forward again to the desk and ground the remains of the cigar into the ashtray's base. 'I say "they" when I mean "we". We have done these things. I say this merely to underline the fact that, unfortunately for us, we have not shown mercy to the *Opposidores*. I don't expect we shall see much in return. If we get within range, I fully expect them to sink the *Imperial* regardless of who is on board. In truth, Captain, if they seem keen to preserve the ship and board us, I would rather we scuttle the ship ourselves. Balmaceda cannot win the war without the *Imperial*. At least, not until the *Lynch* and *Condell* arrive from England.'

The room descended into silence. Moraga was right of course. There would be no surrender, and they would go down. *But not yet*.

'Officer Whiteway,' said Davy, 'I want you to look at ways of lightening our load. If we can throw off anything that will damage the *Esmeralda*, then so much the better. I want every member of the crew to take turns moving the coal. I want it all close at hand so that Mr Evans can give us the greatest possible speed.'

William left to carry out instructions, and just as he reached the door himself Davy turned to Moraga, 'Do the lads know any good fighting songs, Commander? I think we could do with some encouragement now, don't you?'

About the Writer

Rhiannon Lewis was born in Cardigan, West Wales, and she comes from a long line of farmers and sailors. Her family was interested in history, and she grew up in an atmosphere of hand-me-down stories. One of those stories included her grandfather's memories of Captain David Davies and the Chilean civil war.

Educated at the Universities of Wales at Aberystwyth and Cardiff, Rhiannon worked as a teacher and lecturer before going on to work in public relations, marketing and communications.



Whilst researching Captain David Davies' background, Rhiannon discovered an amazing story that was crying out to be told. The result is *No Little Fame*.

Rhiannon is married to Gareth, and they live in Wales and London. She has a son, Steffan, and two stepdaughters, Rebecca and Darcie.