

Grace O'Malley

She is known by many names: **Grainne Mhaol (Bald Grace)**, **Grainne Ui Mhaille (Grace of the Umhalls)**, **Grania, the Dark Lady of Doona**, **Grace O'Malley**, and **Granuaile (Gran-oo-ale)**. She was a contemporary of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Edmund Spencer, Walter Raleigh, and Francis Drake. She was a mother, a pirate, and one of the many great women of Ireland.

Born c. 1530 into the O'Malley family, the hereditary lords of Umhall which included Clare Island, Inishturk, Inishbofin, Inishark and Caher, Grace married into two of the powerful families of Western Ireland, the O'Flaherty of West Connacht and the Burke of Clew Bay. Tradition has it that she is buried (1603) on Clare Island at the Abbey which bears the O'Malley coat-of-arms; Terra-Marique-Potens. Indeed a fitting family motto, for Grace was powerful on land and especially on the sea.

Granuaile's life parallels the House of Tudor's efforts to reconquer Ireland. She married Donal O'Flaherty in 1546 while in this same period of time Henry VIII was pressuring prominent Irish chieftains and Anglo-Irish lords to submit to the rule of the King's Lord Deputy. The O'Flaherties and O'Malleys did not submit and, denied access to Galway Bay, they poached on merchant ships bound for Galway. They were so obstreperous that the Mayor and Council of Galway reported them to the English Council. Grace busied herself with her three husband's death in 1567. Before this, another historically important woman, Elizabeth I, assume the throne of England (1558). In time, the paths of these two extraordinary women would cross.

Even as an O'Flaherty, Granuaile had maintained an independent force of 200 O'Malley men on land and sea. Characteristically, Grace treasured the sea and the O'Malley allies: "I would rather have a ship full of Conroy and McAnally clans than a ship full of Gold." Tradition tells us that Grace's forces maintained a series of forts on Clew Bay, Lough Mask and Lough Corrib which helped her through arms and signal fires to defend her castle in Lough Corrib against English soldiers. There, the story goes, she melted a lead roof to pour molten lead on her besiegers. Grania's toughness is also revealed in the story about her sacking of Doona Castle where she punished the supporters on the MacMahons for slaying her lover.

Even after Grace married again, to Richard Burke, she remained active on the seas. If she could not contract for cargo, her ships preyed on vessels off the coast of Mayo. Although Burke was powerful enough to be appointed the Mac William lochtar of Connacht in 1580 and Grace and he had a son Tibbot, Grace and Burke lived rather separate lives. In 1576, the Howth Castle story centering upon an insult to her was set into Irish legend. It seems when

Grania sought to rest at Howth Castle from a trip to Dublin, the Castle gates were shut to her. She abducted a son of the lord and ransomed him for a promise to leave the gate open to visitors and to set an extra plate at every meal. These conditions are observed still today.

When Richard Burke died in 1583, Grace's clashes with the English intensified. Sir William Sydney referred to her as "a most notorious woman in all the coasts of Ireland." She was arrested in 1584 as Governor Richard Bingham forcefully brought Connacht into the Tudor line. Her son Tibbot was held hostage to assure her good behavior, a common Elizabethan practice to pacify the chieftains and to Anglicize their sons. When Governor Bingham penetrated Grace's sea domain and impounded her fleet, she went over his head to Queen Elizabeth for "free liberty during her life to invade with sword and fire all your highness' enemies."

Tradition, and some history, says that Granuaile, the Queen of Connacht, met the Queen of England in September 1593, and gained most of her petitions by agreeing, in Elizabeth's words, "to fight in our quarrels with all the world." Sadly, in the great battle of Kinsale (1603) when Hugh O'Neill and Hugh Roe O'Donnell were defeated, Grace's son Tibbot and other Mayo chiefs fought with the Queen's forces.

In a man's world, Granuaile developed her own power base contrary to Gaelic and English law. She was a woman of singular strength of character and for that became, along with Roisin Dubh and Caitleen Ni Houlihan, a poetic symbol for Ireland:

*The gowns she wore was stained with gore all by a ruffian band
Her lips so sweet that monarchs kissed are now grown pale and wan
The tears of grief fell from her eyes each tear as large as hail
None could express the deep distress of poor old Granuaile.*

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