

Gráinne Mhaol: Ireland's Pirate Queen

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, Ireland stood as a wild place, the scene of clashes between the native clans and the invading forces of England, however, things began to change when Henry VIII came to power. Conditions in Ireland under Tudor rule quickly began to decline as the Irish Gaelic way of life came under threat. In 1530, a girl was born on Clare Island on the west coast of Ireland, a girl who would do whatever was necessary to protect her family and culture. Gráinne Ní Mháille's name would be remembered long after her passing as synonymous with the fight for Irish freedom. She dedicated her life to keeping her clan free from English rule and protecting the Gaelic way of life she and her clan had known for centuries, persevering despite many challenges. Gráinne was a mother and wife, but she was also a sea captain, the chieftain of her clan, a great warrior, a leader, and of course, a freedom fighter. Throughout the coming centuries of turmoil between the English and the Irish, Gráinne would remain as the symbol of Irish independence because of her determination to protect what she loved and stand for what she believed. She is a prime example of speaking truth to power, a woman who dedicated her life to resisting oppressive imperialism that threatened her family and way of life, even sailing to England to meet with Queen Elizabeth I to barter a peace agreement. While seemingly mythical, Gráinne's life is one of fact.

Gráinne Mhaol: Ireland's Pirate Queen

Centuries ago, the coasts of Ireland were dominated by one woman whose name could strike fear into any who heard it. Gráinne Mhaol acted as a constant thorn in England's side, as the threat to destroy her way of life grew. Determined to protect what she loved, she would risk death to achieve her goals, even facing the formidable Queen Elizabeth I, face to face.

Since the Anglo Normans invaded Ireland under William the Conqueror, Ireland stood as a wild place embroiled in the ongoing struggle between the native clans and the invading forces of England. What seemed to be a symbiotic relationship between the English and Irish quickly changed when Prince Henry, the second son of Henry VII, was crowned Henry VIII. Henry was never meant to take the crown, but the untimely death of his older brother from a terrible illness, which his bride, Katherine of Aragon, also faced, but survived, meant that Henry inherited both the crown and his brother's wife, who was about five years his senior (Lipscomb, Jones, Henry VIII and his Six Wives). By the reign of Henry VIII, England had held Ireland as its first official colony for 15 years (Lipscomb, Why does Tudor History...). Henry established a new Kingdom of Ireland and declared himself King of Ireland rather than simply Lord of Ireland as prior monarchs had, a designation which stood until 1800 (Chambers, chapter 3). This would begin a 500 year conflict between England and Ireland, which never really would be resolved. All throughout Henry's reign, the grip on Ireland became more and more tyrannical, eventually leading to the destruction of the Irish language and way of life. As David Edwards wrote in his chapter of *The Routledge History of Genocide*, "To at least some of the crown's officers who observed it, the Tudor conquest in Ireland could evoke some disturbing memories" (Tudor Ireland: Anglicization, Mass Killing, and Security).

In 1530, a girl was born on the west coast of Ireland in a small castle fortress in the Ó Mháille territory of Clew Bay, on Clare Island. The girl's father was the clan chieftain, a man named Eóghan "Dubh Dara" Ó Mháille, anglicized as Owen "Black Oak" O'Malley. Named Gráinne Ní Mháille, anglicized as Grace O'Malley, she was the second child Eóghan had fathered (Warrior Women). He had a son some years prior with a different woman, making the boy, who was named Dónal, Gráinne's half brother. When he reached maturity, it soon became evident that Dónal was a useless drunkard, earning himself the nickname of Dónal of the Pipes. As Anne Chambers, a leading authority on Gráinne's life, put it, that could mean one of two things, either he was musically inclined, or liked a particular kind of wine that came in pipes from Spain a little too much (Warrior Women). The fact that Eóghan effectively disowned him for his uselessness would strongly suggest the latter. This would lead to Gráinne becoming the son her father didn't have, but not without being tested and fighting for it.

Little is known of Gráinne's childhood other than the fact she would have been highly educated both in the ways of language and in the art of seafaring, as well as a high probability that she spent the first few years of her life being raised by another family, as most clan leaders had their children raised in this manner (Chambers, Chapter 3). However, the first recorded story of her life occurred when she was a child, most likely between ages of eight and ten. The Ó Mháille clan was quite different from most other clans in Ireland at the time. They lived off the sea, whereas most clans lived off of the land with their primary food coming from beef, dairy, and a cocktail of bland vegetables. Thus the Ó Mháille's made profit from fishing and from trade, and often, Spain was the trading center of choice, though France was also a highly regarded center of trade for the Ó Mháille's (Chambers, Chapter 2). Gráinne longed to join her father on trips to Spain, but he denied her. One story tells of how he insisted she stay home

because her long hair would get caught up in the sails, another story relaying how both parents forbid her to go, as life at sea was no life for a girl (Warrior Women). This did not deter her spirits, and she began to, as Lucy Lawless put it, plot the first of her many rebellions. She chopped off her long hair so it was short like that of a boy, and snuck onto her father's ship, stowing away until they were too far out at sea to turn back (Warrior Women). It was this act that would earn her one of her first nicknames, Gráinne Mhaol, the anglicized spelling being Granuaile or Grania Uiale, meaning Gráinne the bald or Gráinne cropped hair, which was derived from the old Irish name for Gráinne.

Her father had been testing her resolve, and when she took this extreme step, he felt she had earned her right to join him. There were several other trips that Gráinne joined her father on, all detailed by her in the English State Papers, that is a governmental archive of British records (Princeton University), but one in particular stands out from when she was about age twelve. As it goes, they were returning home from another trading trip to Spain, when the Ó Mháille fleet was attacked by the English. Eóghan commanded Gráinne to hide below deck, but, being stubborn, she decided not to. Soon the decks of the Ó Mháille ships were flooded with conflict, sword on sword, and gun against gun. Gráinne watched the battle unfold and her father fall to the deck, wounded by an English blade. She ran toward her father, and, while shrieking an Irish curse, she pounced onto the soldier who was about to kill Eóghan. To the amazement of the other soldiers, she struck him dead. The Ó Mháille crew proudly claimed the wild girl as their own, creating the catalyst for Gráinne's sea kingdom (Arnold-McCulley, 6).

As a teenager, Gráinne's life at sea seemingly came to an end. As all young ladies, especially those the daughters of chieftains and clan leaders, did, Gráinne was to marry. Along with her parents, they chose a man named Dónal "an Chogaidh" Ó Flaithbheartaigh, anglicized

as Donal “Of the Battles” O’Flaherty, the son and prince tánaiste of another seafaring clan, the Ó Flaithbheartaigh clan, which was located just south of the O’Malley territory, in northern Galway (Warrior Women). The two married when Gráinne was just sixteen years old, and soon she found herself setting up her base of operations in Aughnanure castle, one of the two castles in which she and Dónal lived; the other was Bunowen castle (Warrior Women). The harbor at Aughnanure went right up alongside the castle, meaning one could easily sail a small ship from the sea to the door, making it a perfect location from which to continue running her clan’s trading business. During this time, she began devising a plan to control the flow of English ships through her territory. To England, this became an act of piracy, as all of the sea was thought to be the property of the Crown, but to Gráinne, she was simply protecting her land and her sea (Warrior Women). She put a tax on her waters, which any ship sailing under the flag of England would have to pay in order to pass through. Should they refuse, she would take the small boats that the local fishermen used and gather up a band of her men, then sail out to the English ship. Because of the small size and quick speed of these fishing vessels and her considerable knowledge of the Irish coastline, Gráinne could easily slip up alongside the ship, raid it, then slip back into one of the many rocky inlets, unable to be followed by the much larger English galley ships. The rocky coastlines were a death trap to anyone who dared venture into the inlets without knowing their intricacies (Warrior Women).

Along with her knowledge of the coastlines, Gráinne was known to spend hours by the sea, studying every movement, every swell of the Atlantic. She knew the signs of a storm approaching, and knew when it would be best to set sail. The sea was very much her ally, and she used it to her advantage (Warrior Women). But marriage to Dónal put a halt on her prior life at sea and motherhood bound her to the land. In the time she was married to Dónal, she gave him

three children, the oldest, a son named Eóghan, then a daughter named Meadhbh, and finally a third son named Murchadh. Eóghan was often known for his good nature and hospitality, two traits which would eventually lead to his demise. Meadhbh, anglicized as either Meave or Margaret, was very much like her mother, marrying and having several children while also being a strong individual (Lafferty). Meadhbh's husband was close with his mother-in-law, being an ally and friend to her, and even saving her on a few occasions. Murchadh, anglicized as Murrough, was the exception of all of Gráinne's children, and the one she had the greatest trouble with. He was cruel toward his sister, often beating her, and would refuse to listen to Gráinne, simply because she was female. He was very much like his father, being hot headed, short of temper, and highly stubborn (Lafferty). Later in his life, Gráinne had enough of him and refused to ever talk to him again, unless it was to swear at him (Warrior Women). The two never got along, and Gráinne made sure he knew where he stood in regards to her authority over him, both as a clan leader and as his mother.

However, despite having three children and being largely tied to the land, she did manage to make it out to sea on a number of occasions. Even motherhood couldn't entirely keep her from the sea. Upon Dónal's death in 1560 at the hands of another clan, she took her followers and returned to her clan's stronghold on Clare Island, and there she set up a new base of operations (Warrior Women). Clare Island castle provided a perfect vantage point for anyone occupying it as it sat in the mouth of Clew Bay. No ship entered Clew Bay without Gráinne knowing about it.

In the time after Gráinne's first marriage had ended, a lover came into her life. Word reached her of a wreck off the shores of Achill Island, where she had a castle, so she gathered some men and traversed the coast of the island in search of the wreck so as to retrieve any spoils which may have washed up onto the beach. Instead of finding goods, however, she found a

nearly drowned man. Deciding he was worth keeping around, she brought him back with her to Clare Island and revived him. This man was Hugh DeLacy (Warrior Women). The two fell in love, and rumours surrounded their relationship, some even claiming she had a son with him. This was, however, never proven. Tragically, only a few months into their relationship, Hugh was killed. While out hunting one day, he became the hunted when he was caught in the crossfire of an intertribal feud between the Ó Mháille clan and the McMahons. Gráinne was heartbroken when she learned they had killed Hugh. She hunted down the two men who were responsible and took her revenge, but killing just the two of them was not enough. Dissatisfied, she rallied her men and sailed north to their castle at Doona, obliterating the entire clan and capturing the castle. This earned her yet another nickname - The Dark Lady of Doona (Warrior Women).

After capturing Doona, only one castle remained for her to capture before her empire would control the entirety of Clew Bay. She had her eyes set on the perfect stronghold, situated precisely so as to overlook the whole of the bay and also be accessible by sea during high tide (Warrior Women). This stronghold was Carraig an Chabhlaigh castle, anglicized as Carrickahowley, and more famously known as Rockfleet Castle. Only one thing stood in Gráinne's way of capturing Rockfleet: Ríseárd an Iarainn Bourke. Anglicized as Richard "In Iron" Burke, he had a reputation much like Gráinne's own, thus, instead of simply capturing the castle as she normally would have, she took a very different approach. She went to Bourke at Rockfleet and spoke with him, proposing marriage to him (Warrior Women). According to the Irish-Brehon laws of the land, a marriage would consist of a trial period, lasting for the time of a year and a day. In this time, the betrothed would decide if they wanted to actually be married. Should either party decide otherwise, the union could be broken with no formal divorce put forth (Stair Na hÉireann). Gráinne used this to her advantage, and, just before this period was up,

Bourke returned home to find himself locked out of his own castle. From the top window, she called to him “I dismiss thee,” thus breaking off their union and gaining control over his castle (Warrior Women). At this point their union was under what was called “the third degree,” which meant that the woman had more land than the man, and the man must therefore surrender his land to be managed and controlled by someone in the woman’s family (Stair Na hÉireann).

Rockfleet castle was officially Gráinne’s, and by gaining Rockfleet she gained control over all of Clew Bay. Her reputation was growing, and she now had an army of 200 men, including a band of Scottish mercenaries. At the same time, however, the reputation of Queen Elizabeth I of England was also growing (Arnold-McCulley, Author’s note). The tides had shifted once more, and Elizabeth was determined to have Ireland submit. Bourke remained a close ally of Gráinne’s, one who would prove most valuable to her as England began to finally put up a fight against the famed Pirate Queen of Connacht. Sir Philip Sidney, who had been the previous governor of Connacht, was replaced by Sir Richard Bingham, a man who was determined to destroy Gráinne in the most damaging way possible. In order to do this, he went after her family (Warrior Women).

Now in her thirties, she continued the old family work of trading, even having fine galleys made by Spanish craftsmen to her precise standards (Warrior Women). The most notable of these trading trips at this point in her life occurred after she had broken her marriage to Bourke. Even though she had stolen his castle from him, the two had formed a lifelong bond, and soon, Gráinne was expecting her fourth child. While out at sea on the way home from trading in Spain, she went into labour and delivered a son, naming him Tioboid, which is alternatively spelled Tibbott, Teabóid, or Tepóitt. Later nicknamed Toby of the Ships, in Irish Tibbott “na Long” Bourke, he was Gráinne’s favorite son (Warrior Women), and later in his life, he would

be named the first Viscount of County Mayo (Webb). If one calculates the time in which it would have taken an Irish Galley to travel from Rockfleet to the nearest port to Madrid, which is a distance of approximately 969 miles, it likely took a one-way trip of only five days, in favourable conditions. Should the weather be poor, the trip would have taken no more than seven days, meaning a round trip would have been no more than two weeks in total. Not even bearing a child could keep her from the sea.

Toby was born in the very early morning hours, and Gráinne was below deck nursing him when, at dawn, their ship fell under attack. Quickly, Gráinne's men were losing the fight without the direction of their leader. Upon realizing this, Gráinne is said to have burst out onto the deck, trading her child for her blunderbuss, a type of flint lock gun, which could be loaded with anything from metal scraps to pieces of wood. The fighting came to a standstill as the invading crew watched in bewilderment at the sight of this. The silence was broken when she fired at the invaders, killing the officers, and sending the rest on the run (Rennie). The question remains about who really ambushed the Ó Mháille fleet, as there are several names given but none proven. Chambers states it was a band of Northern African pirates, others claim it was Turkish pirates, and yet some others claim it was the English who attacked.

Being Gráinne's favourite son put Toby at the top of the Governor of Connacht's hit list later in his life, yet Toby was not the first to be targeted by Bingham who, unlike many others, did not make the same mistake of underestimating Gráinne. He sent a force of 500 men to hunt down her son, Eóghan, and some 20 clansmen. Eóghan was arrested and dragged off, only to be brutally murdered. The report that Bingham sent to Elizabeth I back in England noted that there were some 12 wounds inflicted upon Eóghan, and he justified himself in this horrific brutality by claiming Eóghan had tried to flee (Warrior Women). Nearly three decades after it occurred,

Gráinne herself would recall the events surrounding the murder of Eóghan. She was very much a mother still grieving the loss of her child. As Anne Chambers described it, “The pain in her words are very, very evident of a mother having never recovered from the loss of her eldest son” (Warrior Women). Bingham knew exactly where to strike, and in doing so, he ignited the rebellion and hatred of the English in Gráinne even more. The struggle against the English she had spent her lifetime fighting against had, as Lucy Lawless explained “gone personal” (Warrior Women). This meant war, and Gráinne’s retaliation was so intense that even Bingham was caught off guard. Rallying her men and leading a series of revolts against Bingham and his men, and anyone who aided Bingham or allied themselves to him, became a sporting game to Gráinne. This included Murchadh, already in poor standing in Gráinne’s eyes (Warrior Women). Bingham used force to threaten the chieftains into choosing which side they would stand on, and, as Lucy Lawless put it, “All Hell broke loose between and even within the clans”, and Murchadh was among those who chose to align themselves with Bingham (Warrior Women). As stated by Anne Chambers, “It infuriated Gráinne to such a degree that she manned out her navy of galleys, sailed around the coast to where her son lived, attacked his castle, killed at least four or five of his defenders, burned his ships, and, in other words, taught her son a lesson such that he would never ever go against his mother again” (Warrior Women).

This battle began to turn against Gráinne, despite how many of the skirmishes she had won, and for the first time, she found her match; Bingham was succeeding. In 1578, Bingham cornered Gráinne at Rockfleet, sending a fleet of warships into Clew Bay after her, tricking her into believing he was offering the terms of a truce. She fell right into his trap, and was arrested (Warrior Women). They took her to Dublin castle where she remained in prison for many months with the end seemingly drawing nearer (McKeown). However, Bingham had not quite

won yet, and she managed to escape the gallows. She succeeded in sending word to those who had grown fond of her in the old administration of Sir Philip Sidney, many of whom shared the distaste for the cruel way Bingham had been governing Connacht, and soon, above his head, a deal was struck by Bingham's superiors. Other members of her clan were to take her place in prison, showing their loyalty to her and setting her free with the promise of good behavior. Her followers gladly took her place, as without their leader, they would not survive (Warrior Women). Years passed and she could do very little to halt Bingham's destruction of the other Connacht clans. It seemed as though he was winning, and Gráinne was powerless. In her absence, a good number of her followers had been executed, Clew Bay had been taken over by the English Navy (Warrior Women), and, as happened in other parts of the country, the land had been burnt and villages abandoned. Famine had taken over the land, and Ireland had been effectively taken from the Irish, and was now controlled by the English crown (Edwards).

For the Ó Mháille clan, Gráinne was all they had left, and she was determined to take back what was hers. She turned to the only weapon she had left, and thus went straight to the source, writing directly to her lifelong rival, Queen Elizabeth I. The two had lived parallel lives, and Elizabeth had a growing fascination with Gráinne and her achievements in her lifetime (Warrior Women). She explained to Elizabeth that the issue she had was not with England, but simply with Bingham himself. In great detail, she recalled how he had murdered Eóghan without cause, and pillaged her land, thus provoking her to act as any mother would and retaliate to protect her children and home, purely out of self defense. Bingham sent his own course of letters, ranting to Elizabeth, writing his apparent disbelief with Gráinne on how she had the stomach to write to Elizabeth when she had spent her lifetime earning a living by way of piracy against the

English ships and who had blatantly been revolting against Her Majesty's forces (Warrior Women).

Bingham then captured Toby of the Ships, who was now a captain in Gráinne's fleet, as well as Gráinne's brother, throwing them both in prison, with their lives in jeopardy. The letters Gráinne and Bingham both sent to the Queen continued on for years, until finally, Gráinne's request for an audience was granted, and her passage to England was ensured. Gráinne and Elizabeth would come face to face in England. The spring of 1593 marked the voyage that would bring the first Irish chieftain to England. Upon her arrival, Gráinne, who was now in her early sixties, took her first step onto English soil (Warrior Women). For months she remained in temporary quarters until she finally had her audience. In July of that year, Gráinne entered Greenwich Palace; the Pirate Queen faced the Virgin Queen. The exact details of the conversation between the two remains unclear, however, the atmosphere within the room was tense. Gráinne spoke no English and the Queen no Irish, thus they held their discussion in Latin, which was the only language that the two shared (Warrior Women). This is a likely reason for a lack of a record of the audience. Whatever was said during this time struck a chord with the Queen, as it is described that the Queen, who was hard to please, was very fond of Gráinne, and the two forged something that bordered on friendship (Warrior Women).

Gráinne was victorious that day, having won her lands and fleets back, her son and brother were released from prison, and Richard Bingham was removed from his post, stripped of his authority. The agreement required Gráinne to serve England by sea, however, the rebellious spirit in her could not be quelled by promises, especially when they proved to be short lived. Gráinne's true loyalty remained with Ireland, and within the next couple of years, two more petitions from Gráinne reached the personal secretary of Elizabeth and once more asked for relief

from “unjust impoverishment,” as Bingham, though removed from office, had “sought to undermine the terms of her recent agreement with Elizabeth.” No reply was ever given (Trowbridge). The last time she appeared in an English report was in 1601 when a warship captain’s record stated, “a galley I met . . . she rowed with thirty oars and had on board . . . 100 good shot . . . This galley comes out of Connacht and belongs to Grace O’Malley” (Murray). Gráinne retired home, either to Rockfleet, which she had regained, or to the place of her birth at Clare island, where she died peacefully in her sleep, at the age of 72 or 73, in 1603, the same year as Elizabeth. For many years the location of her grave was unknown until an elaborate tomb in the wall of the chapel on Clare Island, where Gráinne would have spent much time in prayer before long voyages, was identified as belonging to someone of high standing, and ultimately, as belonging to Gráinne (Warrior Women).

While not often outright stated, nor often admitted, the validity of Gráinne’s life often gets called into question, mostly indirectly. Conflicting reports entwined with rumour and legend plague her story, making it hard to distinguish what is indeed the truth. The lack of a consistent and factually-based story for centuries after her death lead to much of her life becoming word of mouth, changing over time like a game of telephone, such as the extensive folklore and poetry which took the meeting between Gráinne and Elizabeth I and turned it into an act of nationalistic defiance than it was in truth, painting it as though it were of two queens of equal standing, the Pirate Queen outwitting her lifelong rival and refusing to bow. Such romantic notions were embraced until Anne Chambers set out to uncover the truth in the late 1990s and early 2000s; Gráinne was very much lost to history and overwhelmed by legend and a lense that twisted the story to suit the eyes of the Irish patriots in the centuries following her death. But recent discoveries, such as the location of her grave, the work Anne Chambers put into teasing the truth

from the lore, especially in her location of and research on the actual documentation from the English State Papers, and the involvement of the descendants of Gráinne have come to put truth and validity back into the life of this amazing woman. Backed by Anne Chambers in her book, a coherent and factual record of Gráinne's life has been laid out, and, in the words of Lucy Lawless who worked with Chambers and with a former O'Malley clan chieftain herself for the Grace O'Malley episode of the television mini series *Warrior Women*, the truth is even better than the legend. The spark that Chambers has reignited grows once more as more developments lead to new findings and years of work by dedicated clans members and people like Anne Chambers showed the truth that Gráinne Ní Mháille is indeed more fact than fiction. Gráinne deserves to be remembered for the true person she was, an amazing woman who spent her life protecting what she loved, and speaking out against the tyrannical authority threatening her way of life, even if it meant risking her life. It is this legacy that inspired many to take their own stand for freedom, and continues to inspire patriotism in the hearts of those who are proud to be Irish.

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