

# Grace O'Malley & Elizabeth I

Granuaile. *The Life and Times of Grace O'Malley c.1530-1603* by Anne Chambers, Wolfhound Press, Dublin, 0-86327-213-4, 142-52

*At the beginning of September 1593 Grace received her summons to appear before Elizabeth, at Greenwich Castle. This castle was a favourite place of abode particularly during the summer months ....*

*The details of the meeting of these two women, each outstanding and unique in her own special role as ruler and leader and alike in their personal characteristics, must unfortunately remain in the realm of fantasy and legend. Curiosity must have been a motivation for them both, curiosity about each other.*

## Elizabeth

Elizabeth, as a ruler in a male dominated preserve, must have marvelled at how Grace, without the supporting facilities of state that she herself enjoyed, could successfully lead and govern so effectively and perform all the exploits for forty years credited to her by Elizabeth's own Irish deputies and governors.

Grace in turn must have been anxious to see this paragon of English power whose orders and plans had affected and altered her very lifestyle so completely. The palace of Elizabeth was far removed from the stone castles of the west of Ireland, fortresses which were built with comfort as the minimum and security the maximum consideration; whose bare walls were constantly exposed to the Atlantic; the luxury of the Elizabethan court must have been over-powering.

We can picture the stately Tudor court of the Queen with its luxury, colour, culture and refinements. Tapestry-covered walls, carved oak wainscots and furniture, ceilings ornate with intricate plaster-work; the long corridors leading to the royal apartments humming with the subdued and modulated tones of courtiers, emissaries, petitioners and many fair and fragile court ladies in exquisite dress and shining jewels, powdered and coiffed like tropical birds, flitting hither and thither trading the latest court gossip.

## Grace

And among this gathering, Grace O'Malley, leader of men, seawoman without equal, pirate, trader, self-appointed ruler contrary to law and tradition but too powerful to be dethroned, an elderly woman whose lined and weather-beaten face proclaimed the harsh conditions of her trade

Restless and dark, its sharp and rapid look  
Show'd a fierce spirit, prone a wrong to feel  
And quicker to revenge it. As a book  
That sunburnt brow did fearless thoughts reveal,  
And in her girdle was a skeyne of steels.

O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees*, II, p.675 (from the Irish)

Elizabeth and her court possibly did stare at the only Gaelic woman ever to appear at court.

In the wild grandeur of her mien erect and high  
Before the English Queen she dauntless stood  
And none her bearing there could scorn as rude  
She seemed well used to power, as one that hath  
Dominion over men of savage mood  
And dared the tempest in its midnight wrath  
And thro' opposing billows cleft her fearless path.

O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees*, II, p.675 (from the Irish)

## Dress

According to tradition Grace wore a chieftain's cloak of green over a yellow bodice and petticoat. A long mantle is said to have covered her head and body, while her hair was gathered on her crown and fastened with a silver bodkin.



Grace and Queen Elizabeth  
Frontispiece to *Anthologia Hibernica*, Vol II, 1793

It is more likely, however, that Grace was dressed in the traditional dress of women of the higher ranks of Gaelic society. This would have consisted of a long linen saffron smock or leine, reaching to the ankles with long wide sleeves, under a long dress with the sleeves slit and tapered to allow the wide sleeves of the leine to hang through and with a low-cut bodice laced in front. Over this she would have worn the Irish brat or cloak, a large woollen, sleeveless cloak reaching to the ground with a fringe of fine wool all around and, at the neck, a deeper fringe to give the appearance of a fur-like collar. Shoes were in general use by all classes in Ireland, so the legend that Grace O'Malley went barefoot for her audience with Elizabeth is rather absurd. What a contrast in style the meeting of these two women produced - the sober dress of Grace and the elaborate and ornamental style of Elizabeth who despite her age had not lost her passion for dress and jewellery.

'The Queen's dresses were not distinguished by refinement of taste: it was rather at a magnificent display that she aimed, and her predilection was for gowns richly embroidered and sewn with jewels, so that they were as encrusted with ornament as the buildings of the early English Renaissance. This passion became no less as she grew older, and at her death her wardrobe is said to have contained more than two thousand gowns, with all things answerable.'

### A meeting of equals?

Tradition states that at the introduction of these two remarkable women, Elizabeth held her hand high, but Grace was the taller of the two and the English queen had to raise her hand to that of the Irish woman. A portrait of the meeting is from an old engraving made two centuries later and professes to show the dress and attitude of Grace on that occasion.



Grace O'Malley before the English Court  
From an 18th century woodcut

It is said that during her conversation with Elizabeth, which was conducted in Latin, one of the ladies-in-waiting perceived that Grace required a handkerchief. A minute cambric and lace one was handed to her. After using it she threw it into the fire but Elizabeth informed her that it was meant to be put in her pocket. Amazed, Grace declared that in her country they had a higher standard of cleanliness than to pocket a soiled article.

Elizabeth was in her declining years yet the chalk-like features, piercing eyes and haughty demeanour had made many, more powerful figures tremble; yet Grace, knowing her own long record of unloyal activities had preceded her to Elizabeth's court, dared to ask not necessarily for forgiveness but for special favours and protection from Elizabeth's own administrators in Ireland.

Legend would have us to believe that the meeting of these two women was, from Grace's viewpoint, the meeting of equals; Grace in her capacity as queen of Connaught and Elizabeth in her capacity as queen of England, and that when Elizabeth offered to confer the title of 'Countess' on her, Grace haughtily declined on the basis that a title could not be conferred on one of equal rank. The character and intellect, of Grace makes this legendary assertion absurd; Grace was a realist and a leader who fully realised the personal risk she undertook in her mission to Elizabeth and knew that she must tread warily indeed in presenting her case to the power in whose hands her very life rested.

### A successful mission

Elizabeth's own correspondence after the meeting is itself conclusive proof of how well Grace succeeded in her mission....

The favours won by Grace from Elizabeth reflected on the one hand the courage and ability of Grace and on the other the admiration and compassion Elizabeth entertained for Grace. Shortly after the meeting, on 6th September 1593, the Queen wrote the following letter to Sir Richard Bingham:



One of the 'civil Irish' portrayed in a neat vignette beside a map of Ireland by Hondius Jocodus, 1616

‘Where our Treasurer of England, by his letters in July last, did inform you of the being here of three several persons of that our Province of Connaught under your charge, that is, of Sir Morogh O’Flaherty, Knight, Grany ne Maly and Roobuck French, requiring to understand your opinion of every of them concerning their suits; we perceive by your late letters of answer what your opinion is of them, and their causes of complaint or of suit, whereof you have given them no just cause. But where Grany ne Maly hath made humble suit to us for our favour towards her sons, Morogh O’Flaherty and Tibbott Burk, and to her brother Donell O’Piper (na Piopa), that they might be at liberty, we perceive by your letters that her eldest son, Morogh O’Flaherty, is no trouble but is a principal man of his country, and as a dutiful subject hath served us when his mother, being then accompanied with a number of disorderly persons, did with her ‘gallyes’ spoil him; and therefore by you favoured, and so we wish you to continue. But the second sori, Tibbott Burk, one that hath been brought up civilly with your brother and can speak English, is by you justly detained because he hath been accused to have written a letter to Bryan O’Rork, the late traitor’s son, though it cannot be fully proved but is by him utterly denied; and for her brother Donald, he hath been imprisoned 7 months past, being charged to have been in company of certain that killed some soldiers in a ward. But for those two you think they may be both dismissed upon bonds for their good behaviour, wherewith we are content, so as the old woman may understand we yield thereto in regard of her humble suit; so she is hereof informed and departeth with great thankfulness and with many more earnest promises that she will, as long as she lives continue a dutiful subject, yea, and will employ all her power to offend and prosecute any offender against us. And further, for the pity to be had of this aged woman, having not by the custom of the Irish any title to any livelihood or position or portion of her two husband’s lads, now being a widow; and yet her sons enjoying their father’s lands, we require you to deal with her sons in our name to yield to her some maintainance for her living the rest of her old years, which you may with persuasion assure them that we shall therein allow of them; and you also shall with your favour in all their good causes protect them to live in peace to enjoy their livelihoods. And this we do write in her favour as she showeth herself dutiful, although she hath in former times lived out of order, as being charged by our Treasurer with the evil usage of her son that served us dutifully. She hath confessed the same with assured promises by oath to continue most dutiful, with offer, after her aforesaid manner, that she will fight in our quarrel with all the world.’

The contents of the Queen’s letter indicate that Grace was in fact granted all her requests by the Queen in spite of the opinions and recommendations of her governor, Bingham. Grace’s son, although strongly suspected of collusion with O’Rourke, was to be freed, as was her brother Donal. The compassion shown by Elizabeth for Grace’s personal plight is evidenced by the provision for her maintenance for the remainder of her life from her sons’ estates and that the amount be deductible from their taxes payable to the state. It was an unprecedented act of clemency and understanding of a woman’s plight on Elizabeth’s part and Grace must have departed from the royal presence with her ‘burden’ much lightened.

Grace returned to Ireland and reached Mayo about 19th September. Her visit to the English court must have been the subject of much discussion and no doubt her lonely fortress of Rockfleet hummed as she told and re-told the details of her exciting adventure. But the actual results of her mission took longer to emerge. Bingham proved reluctant to implement the Queen’s commands regarding Grace’s welfare and the welfare of her son and brother, but Grace was not prepared, after her hazardous endeavours, to allow the provisions of the Queen’s letter to be negated by deliberate inaction. She sought to force and threaten Bingham to implement the Queen’s instructions. Finally, Bingham acquiesced and on 24th November he wrote to Lord Burghley: ‘I have enlarged Grany O’Mally, her son Tibbot and brother Donell na Pipee, upon such slender surtyes (sureties) as they gave us, the woman urging it some importunely swering that she would elles repair presently to England.’

The Queen, in providing for Grace and her family, had neglected to obtain the sureties or pledges usually extracted from a petitioner in lieu of favours to be conferred. Elizabeth had underestimated the capabilities of the ‘aged woman’ who had appeared before her. The apparent frailty and agedness belied the true extent of her boundless energy and plotting talents. Bingham realised that the Queen had, in effect, given Grace a carte blanche to operate as she pleased and to return to her old trade of ‘maintainance by land and sea’, despite all Bingham’s past endeavours to render her powerless. If the provisions of the Queen’s letter were enacted, Grace could once more put to sea in her galleys under the guise of fighting the Queen’s ‘quarrel with all the world’. The consequences of Grace’s actions would have to be borne by Bingham and these could be far-reaching indeed, as Bingham fully realised, Grace’s status as a leader had, since her successful mission to London, risen to at least its former strength. However, the Queen commanded and Bingham, with pressure and threats from Grace, had to obey....

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**Granuaile’s Petition To Queen Elizabeth I - see next page**

## Granuaile's Petition To Queen Elizabeth I

To the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty

In most humble Wise showeth unto your most excellent Majestie your loyall and faitfull subject Grany ny Mally of Conaght in your highnes realme of Ireland:- that wheras by meanes of the continuall discord stirres and dissention that heretofore long tyme remained among the Irishrye especially in West Conaght by the sea side every cheeftaine for his safegard and maintenance and for the defence of his people followers and countrie took armes by strong hand to make head against his neyborhes which in like manner constrained your highnes fond subject to take armes and by force to maintaine her selfe and her people by sea and land the space of fortye yeares past. During which tyme she married Offlahertye being natural mother of his lawfull sone and heire nowe living and after his death married Mac William the cheefe of the Bourkes of West Conaght who died X yeares past, since which tyme she remaineth widowe and is likewise the mother of his lawfull sone and heyre nowe living. The countryes and territories of which cheeftaines after the rude custome of their ancestores never yeilded doweries or thirds to the ladies thereof, and the rents services and reservation of the same was not certayne but confused the people for yelding to the cheeftaines whatever they would crave more than of ryght they aught to have. And now whearas by your gracious meanes the said province is reduced to that civill course that the cheeftaines freeholders or gents. hath compounded and is assigned what and how much he is to have; in which composition no order was taken for your fond subject what maintenance she aught to have of her former husbands lands and by the same is restrayned to use her former course to her utter decay and ruine: In tender consideracon wherof and in regard of her great age she most humbly besechethe your Majestie of your princely bounty and liberaltye to grant her some reasonable maintenance for the little tyme she hath to lyve. And wheras your said subjects two sones are the lawfull heyres of the lands of there foresaid fathers wherof they nowe stand seized and possessed, that it would please your Royall Majestie to direct your gracious letters to your L. Deputy of your said realme willing him to accept a surrender at her hands of her said sones yelding to Your Majestie your heyrs and successors such yearly rents as conveniently such lands may yeld and they to hold the same by letters patents to them and ther heyres for ever and to grant the like for the lands of Walter Burgh Fitz Theobald Reogh and Shane Burke Mac William Mac Moiler cosen germaine to her said son. And lastly that it would please your Majestie to grant unto your said subject under your most gracious hand of signet free libertye during her lyve to invade with sword and fire all your highnes enemyes whersoever they ar or shat be without any interruption of any person or persons whatsoever. Thus shall your said subject according to her bounden duty ever remayne in all obedient alleagance to the resist all remnants of rebellious enemies and pray continually for your Majesties long life and prosperous reygne.

Source: State Papers Elizabeth I, Public Record Office London.

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