

Grace O'Malley: the historical background

Grace O'Malley or Granuaile is a name associated with the west of Ireland and more particularly with the western coastline around Clew Bay. Legends and stories of her exploits in the sixteenth century abound, some based on fact exaggerated with the lapse of time, others founded completely in the realm of fantasy. The name 'Grace O'Malley' conjures up for some an image of an amazon-type woman, ruthless and domineering, performing incredible deeds with no particular end in mind; for others the name is associated with a figure of fiery patriotism, whose sole aim in life was to expel the foreign invader from native soil.

Sources and evidence

Grace O'Malley lived at a critical time in Irish history. However, references to her in the pages of Irish history books have been few. Grace remains strangely absent from the Irish annals of that time: 'the Irish annalists, whether out of chagrin that a mere woman could figure so remarkably in the affairs of the time or because that era produced too many such remarkable personages or simply because of lack of space, completely excluded Grace from their record.' Her memory was largely kept alive through her re-invention in song and literature as a nationalist symbol.

However, while much that is remembered of her has gained the status of myth, there remains enough evidence of Grace as a historical person to merit a re-evaluation of her role. Evidence from the English State papers and manuscripts suggests that she played no small part in Irish affairs at that time.

Her name is recorded for posterity in the Elizabethan State Papers; her exploits are reported in official state dispatches of such notables as Sir Henry Sidney, Sir Nicholas Malby, Sir Richard Bingham, Sir John Perrott, Lord Justice Drury and Queen Elizabeth I of England. Her name finds its way into the Sidney, Salisbury and Carew manuscripts, the *Dictionary of National Biography* and a fascinating and informative narrative of her life and lifestyle occurs in her own replies to the eighteen articles of interrogatory put to her by the English government in 1593.

Such records show that, while the mythical figure of Granuaile in song and story has a certain magic, the real Grace O'Malley is more interesting still. She was 'an exceptional woman, alive, vital and daring, who lived life to its limits, and who possessed all the requirements necessary for survival in that era. A woman who plied her family trade with all the expertise it required, and who above all else put her own interests and those of the small remote domain over which she ruled first, in the never-ending struggle for survival.'

Context

The story of Grace O'Malley is 'larger than life', but so also is the turbulent and eventful age to which she belonged. The character of Grace O'Malley must be examined within the context of her time. A century of exploration and discovery, of wars and intrigue, of armadas and invasions; of glorious empires at the pinnacle of their power. She lived in a time in which Ireland saw the final clash and eventual submission of the ancient Irish order, with its hopelessly outmoded medieval structures, to its powerful and persistent English neighbour.

Tudor conquest of Ireland

Sixteenth-century Ireland witnessed the derisive conflict between the Gaelic and English civilisations. The Tudor Conquest of Ireland in this period is arguably as significant as the Norman incursion four centuries before, precisely because it was so complete. It transformed the political, social and economic life and altered the landscape of Ireland.

The arrival of the Normans did not result in the subjugation of Ireland: the Normans superimposed their control on the existing society and coexisted with it. The great Gaelic lordships retained their autonomy and the Normans adjusted easily to the local and regional power structures of the country. By 1500 government control over the country was feeble and haphazard.

A century later, the situation was transformed. The significance of the Tudor dynasty (1485-1603) is that the Tudors consolidated the position of central government in a manner hitherto unknown, and gradually curtailed and ultimately subdued the power of the local lords. This revolution in government affected England and Wales as well as Ireland, but in the Irish case the process was most painful and was achieved only through a series of conflicts, most notably the Nine Years War (1594-1603), and plantations. The apparatus of government was extended, the bureaucracy developed, common law supplanted local custom and Brehon Law. The extension of Tudor control meant that the days of independent figures like Grace O'Malley were numbered.

Apart from the extension of government control, the Reformation was the other great development of the sixteenth century. The fact that the two came together guaranteed that the new religious ideas would receive a hostile reception in Ireland.

Irish economy

While the population of Europe doubled during the sixteenth century, the Irish population was at best static. It is estimated that by the end of the century the population was just over 750,000. Agriculture was mainly pastoral in nature, with cattle, sheep and goats being the major source of wealth. Trade was centred mainly in the port towns where the Old English were strong. Hides, tallow and linen yarn were traded for wine, salt and manufactured goods.

The O'Malley clan

The family into which Grace O'Malley was born was an ancient one whose traditional territory covered the area of north-west Mayo from Achill Island in the north to beyond Louisburgh in the south, and encompassed the islands of Clew Bay, Clare Island, Inishbofin, Inishturk and the smaller islands surrounding them. The arrival of the Normans in Connacht in 1235 did not alter the lives of the O'Malleys to any great extent. They reached an accommodation with the de Burgos which allowed them to co-exist peacefully. The de Burgos renounced their allegiance to the English crown in 1342, becoming the Burkes of Mayo with the title of the MacWilliam Iochtar. Richard an Iarann Burke, Grace's second husband, was tanaist to this title.

The O'Malleys were a seagoing clan of some renown. Their galleys ploughed the dangerous seas off the west coast and maintained trade links with Spain and Scotland. There is evidence from the annals that the O'Malleys were also given to piracy and plunder. Certainly, Grace was not the first pirate in the O'Malley Clan though she remains the most famous 'a woman that hath impudently passed the part of womanhood and been a great spoiler, and chief commander, and director of thieves and murderers at sea'.

The O'Malleys also hired out their galleys and crews as mercenaries in times of war. This was a practice continued by Grace as is evidenced by this excerpt from a letter written by the Lord Deputy, Sir Henry Sidney, to the Queen's secretary, Sir Francis Walsingham: 'There came to me also a most famous feminine sea captain called Grany Imallye, and offered her services unto me, wheresoever I would command her, with three galleys and 200 fighting men, either in Scotland or Ireland.'

Brehon system

Grace's father ruled his territory according to the Brehon system, being elected chieftain and receiving the tributes and rents due a chief under this system, 'chief of his name and nation'.

He 'had chief rents of barley, butter and money out of several lands within the barony of Murrisk and County of Mayo'; that he was 'seised of the castle of Cathir-na-Mart, the castle and island of Carrowmore and numerous other lands and possessions there, in right of tanistry, and that he as chief ought to have, as his ancestors had all fines for bloodshed, all skins of animals killed, or to be killed, within that barony with all customs and other casualties'.

The native Brehon customs pertaining to succession, the rights of chiefs and their tenants and the dispensing of laws and justice would seem to have survived in the territory of the O'Malleys long after their abolition in many parts of the country.

The Gaelic life-style

The life-style of a Gaelic chieftain's household was geared to out-door activities, a fact reflected in the buildings of the time which were primarily shelters and defences rather than luxurious and stately homes.

Stone fortress

Owen O'Malley lived in the stone fortress of Belclare with his family and household.

Around the outskirts of his castle nestled the thatched mud and stone cabins of his followers, while in front lay the sea, on which his livelihood mainly depended. In the nearby fields grazed the clan's herds of cattle and sheep and the small but hardy Irish horses, used for ploughing and for the few excursions made inland.

English accounts

Accounts of the way of life in Gaelic Ireland of the sixteenth century were mainly recorded by English travellers who visited the country during this troubled and unsettled era and who were, unfortunately but not surprisingly, biased in their portrayal of the Gaelic customs, manners and practices which differed so much from those of England.

Summer 'booley'

They also tended to visit the Gaelic parts of the country during the summer months when, by custom, the chief and his clan left their permanent castle or fortress to live in a temporary summer dwelling called a 'booley' for the purpose of grazing their cattle herds in the uplands. There, the comforts and refinements of their permanent quarters were neglected, given the different and temporary nature of these summer dwellings.



In the summer, Grace's father left his permanent residence at Belclare and with his household left for the 'booley' to graze the cattle herds, but unlike his landbound contemporaries, to fish and trade as well. This custom of 'booleying' had its origins back in Celtic times and survived in O'Malley territory into the twentieth century.

An O'Malley 'booley'

In the seventeenth century while on a visit to the summer residence of Grace's grandson, Murrough-na-Mart O'Flaherty, John Dunton, an English traveller, gives a glimpse of the lifestyle of a Gaelic chieftain while booleying:

The house was one entire long roome without any partition. In the middle of it was the fire place with a large wood fire which was no way unpleaseng tho in summer time. It had no chimney but a vent hole for the smoake at the ridge.

He was told by O'Flaherty that

'They had newly put up this for a 'Booley' for summer habitation, the proper dwelling or mansion house being some miles farther neare the sea, and such a one they commonly built everie year in some one place or other, and thatched it with rushes. I had sheets and soft white blankets . . . and they assur'd me no man ever gott cold by lyeing on the green rushes, which indeed are sweet and cleene, being changed everie day if raine hinders not.'

Dunton was treated well during his stay:

We had at dinner no less than a whole beef boyl'd and roasted, and what mutton I know not so profewsly did they lay it on the table. At the end where the lady sate was placed an heap of oaten cakes above a foot high, such another in the middle and the like at the lower end; at each side of the middle heap were placed two large vessells filled with Troandor or the whey with buttermilk and sweet milk . . . We had ale (such as it was) and Bulcaan, and after dinner myn host ordered his doggs to be gotten ready to hunt the stagg. He had his horse saddled and one for me too . . . Eighteen long greyhounds and above thirty footemen made up the company.

Hostile portrayals

Dunton's account of the O'Malley's al-fresco lifestyle in the summer months is sympathetic. It is in marked contrast to the way in which such a way of living was often portrayed in England, as in, for example, one of the most influential contemporary accounts of Irish life, *Image of Ireland* by John Derrick. Published in 1581, *Image of Ireland* is a book of 'stolid verse' accompanied by twelve vivid woodcuts. Derrick's woodcuts have become familiar illustrations in Irish history books. However their message is often ignored, sublimated, or misunderstood (see IIS, 'Images of Ireland 7', John Derrick,).

One of the main subjects of *Image of Ireland* was the glorious exploits of Sidney for one of the book's objects was to inflate Henry Sidney's reputation. As one caption put it: 'O Sydney worthy of tryple renowne,/For playing the traytours that troubled the crowne'. Certain drawings, such as the governor's departure from Dublin Castle, can be checked for accuracy against contemporary maps, but others are figments of the author's imagination. The other main subject was the depredations of the wild Irish kern. While revealing the extent to which Irish chieftains had adopted some Elizabethan domestic principles along with Elizabethan dress, *Image of Ireland* also took pains to stress how in other respects they fell crudely below Elizabethan standards.

While excluding from its strictures the civil subjects of the Pale, *Image of Ireland* is heavily laden with anti-Irish, anti-Catholic views. Most notably, the friars are shown exhorting and absolving the rebellions of the Gaelic lords.

This woodcut of the MacSweyne's alfresco feast emphasises the barbarity of the proceedings - the lack of a proper table, the proximity of the slaughtering and cooking, and the less than delicate manners of all concerned with two individuals warming their backsides against the cold!

Earning a living

The O'Malleys were mainly dependent on the sea for their income and much of the clan's work centred on the building and repair of the small hide-covered coracles and currachs and the maintenance of the larger galleys and caravels.

Hide-curing, both for export and for their own use, was a major occupation.

Fishing was very important and English, Spanish and French fishing fleets, under licence and payment to Grace's father, fished with him for the rich harvest abounding in O'Malley waters. O'Malley fished with net, hook and line both in the sea and on the rivers and lakes, and much attention had to be given to the maintenance and repair of equipment and implements which were held in common by the clan.

Leisure

Fishing, trading and tending the cattle herds were not their only outdoor pursuits; like the O'Flaherties some of their leisure was spent hunting both the fallow and red deer which abounded in the Umhalls with the help of their great wolfhounds. According to Dunton:

a paire of which kind has been often a present for a king, as they are said to be a dog that is peculiar to Ireland, for I am told they breed much better here than anywhere else in the Kingdom. They were as quiet among us as lambs without any noys or disturbance. I enquir'd the use of them and was told that besides the ornament that they were, they kill'd as many deer as pay'd eerie well for their keeping.

He also noted:

on the sides of these hills I wonder'd to see some hundreds of stately red deer, the stags bigger than a large English calfe, with suitable antlers much bigger than I ever saw before.

Falconry was another popular activity and the best falconries were to be found in West Connaught.

Grace's father

Grace's father, Dubhdara, i.e. Black Oak, was a proud man, one of the few Gaelic chiefs never to have acknowledged the English crown.

He conjures the image of a tall broad-shouldered swarthy man possessed of great strength, a handsome man, his hair falling to his shoulders and cut in a 'glib' or fringe across the forehead, as was the custom.

He dressed in the tight worsted trews of the time, with a saffron 'leine' or shirt with wide sleeves falling loosely through the short sleeves of a tanned leather jerkin. On his feet leather shoes and in his belt a 'Skeyne' or knife.

His chieftain's cloak was fastened with a gold pin at the neck and fell in folds to the ground.

Grace and her mother

Grace's mother, Margaret, as wife of the chieftain saw to the management of his household and played hostess to the clan gatherings and social visits by neighbouring chieftains, and their retainers.

Gaelic women

According to contemporary English accounts, sixteenth century Gaelic women were:

very comely creatures, tall, slender and upright, of complexion very fayre and cleare skinned but freckled, with tresses of bright yellow hayre, which they chayne up in curious knotts and devises. They are not strait laced nor plated in theyr youth, but suffered to grow at liberty so that you shall hardely see one crooked or deformed, but yet as the proverb is, soone ripe soone rotten. Theyre propensity to generation causeth that they cannot endure. They are women at thirteene and old wives at thirty . . . Of nature they are very kind and tractable

...

Whether Grace or her mother answered to this peculiar English description of Gaelic women we do not know. According to tradition, Grace would seem to have been dark-haired and of dark complexion.

Her mother, as the wife of a Gaelic chieftain, would have dressed in the traditional leine or smock reaching to the ankles and over it a long sleeveless dress with a laced bodice, and on her head a rolled linen headcloth (see *Ireland in Schools, 'Images of Ireland 3. Irish Dress and Appearance', p. 6*).

Grace's mother would have supervised the work of the women which included spinning, weaving and dyeing of the clothes worn by the family, butter-making, baking, the preparation of meals for the household and the upkeep of the castles and their contents.

Eating

Mealtimes

The main meal of the day was taken at evening and it was usual to have a light meal at mid-day.

Food

Contrary to many English reports of the time that the entire Gaelic nation existed on buttermilk or 'Bonnyclabbe', the Gaelic diet was quite varied.

Porridge or stirabout made of oatmeal flavoured with honey, butter or milk was eaten widely. Venison was a favourite meat, particularly in the West, and mutton and beef were plentiful. Fish was also an important item in the O'Malley diet. Vegetables such as cabbage, onions, wild garlic, leeks and watercress were in use and each family within the clan grew their own supply. Dillisk, eaten with butter, was a delicacy. Hazel nuts were also eaten.

Meat was boiled or roasted and a spit (bir) made of iron was a very important household implement.

Drink

Buttermilk was a favourite drink among all classes and was 'wonderful cold and pleaseing' to quote one English description.

The native uiscebeatha or whiskey, ale, and wines from Spain and France were drunk.

Mead was a drink very much in demand in Ireland and the area that produced it in quantity was regarded as most praiseworthy. O'Malley's kingdom, particularly in the vicinity of Murrisk, was noted for its plentifulness of mead, as the old laudatory expression, 'the mead-abounding Murrisk', suggests.

Dining

Meals were served in the chieftain's house on low wooden trestle tables.

Meat was placed on large wooden platters from which everyone helped himself by cutting slices with his knife and placing them on wooden plates.

Food was eaten with the hands as forks were not in use in either Ireland or England at this time.

Entertainment

In winter, the chieftain's household was entertained from time to time by travelling bards and rhymers who were also the main sources of news and gossip from other parts of the country.

These bards were important to the Gaelic structure, for as well as poets and musicians, they were genealogists, historians and chroniclers of current events and were treated with respect in every chieftain's house.

Gambling and card-playing were popular pastimes and ones at which Grace clearly excelled - one of her nicknames was Grainne-na-gCearbhach (Grace of the Gamblers). Indeed, one contemporary English account suggests that the entire Gaelic nation was addicted to gambling:

they nourished a third generation of vipers, vulgarly called carrows, professing (forsooth) the noble science of playing cards and dice, which so infected the public meetings of the people and the private houses of the lords as no adventure was too hard in shifting for means to maintain these. And indeed the wild Irish do madly affect them, so as they will not only play and lose their money and moveable goods, but also engage their lands - yea their own persons, to be held as prisoners by the winner, till he be paid the money for which they are engaged.

Grace's upbringing

The early childhood of Grace centred mainly around the family residences at Belclare and Clare island.

Our knowledge of the life of children under the social structure of the old Irish order remains vague, and that of a chieftain's daughter, unknown. Given the unorthodox and unfeminine role Grace was later to adopt, it is likely that from an early age her interests lay, not in her mother's domain of household management, but in her father's world of ships, trade, politics and power; this world must have been the training ground for her future untypical role.

These early days, spent on the edge of the ocean, her family's benefactor both in peace and war, no doubt instilled in her a love and aptitude for the maritime life which was to be her career. It is reasonable to assume that she travelled now and then on her father's ships to Spain and Portugal where she would have seen for herself the places and people with whom her family traded.

Grace's nickname

There is one delightful legend told in explanation of her nickname Granuaile, Grainne Mhaol (i.e. Bald). According to the legend, as a young child, she begged to be taken on one of her father's ships which was leaving for Spain. She was reminded by her mother that a seaman's lot was no life for a young lady and thereupon, she departed and returned later with her long locks cut as a boy's, much to the amusement of her family who promptly nicknamed her Grainne Mhaol.

It is far more likely, however, that the name 'Granuaile' is a corrupt amalgam of the Gaelic Grainne Ui (Ni) Mhaille or Grainne Umhaill (Grace of the Umhalls).

Encountering Tudor power - Lord Deputy Gray visits Connaught

In 1538, when Grace O'Malley would have been about eight, the rumblings of English power and administration drew a little nearer to Western Connaught.

After the revolt and bloody suppression of the House of Kildare, Henry VIII's Lord Deputy in Ireland, Lord Leonard Grey, made a tour of the country to see for himself the state of affairs in Henry's neglected domain. On 11 July he arrived in Galway. Lord Grey 'was the first Deputy of Ireland who deigned or rather ventured to approach these western regions'.

While in Galway, Lord Deputy Grey received the submissions of The O'Flaherty and The O'Madden; Ulick Burke of Clanrickard, who was The Upper MacWilliam, had submitted earlier.

The submission of these prominent Gaelic and old Anglo-Irish lords must have signalled the death-knell to a life of self-determination and relative freedom to the neighbouring O'Malley and his ally across the bay, Theobald Burke, The Lower MacWilliam.

Why did Grace not settle down to 'normal married life'?

It is difficult to establish why Grace chose this extraordinary way of life. Was there some weakness in her husband's character that forced her to assume the role of leader, or were the qualities of leadership and thirst for power and adventure so much of her being that they became a force within her greater than any of the conventions of her time?

Certainly there is evidence in the later life of Donal O'Flaherty that leadership may have been forced upon Grace out of necessity, but there must have been a responding spark in her make-up as a woman for her to undertake such a daunting and dangerous career, at a time when the life of a Gaelic woman was expected to be one of total domesticity.

Traitor or realist?

Increasing Tudor intrusion in the west convinced Grace that the foreign power which was expelling leading Gaelic chieftains in contradiction to the Brehon system was far more powerful than the Gaelic chiefs. The queen's representative appeared to wield more power and influence than the highest-ranking Gaelic chieftain.

In order to survive politically it was imperative to play along with the power of the day. Grace had seen mightier leaders than herself take their *bonnacht* from the Queen and survive. It was necessary to further one's own interest as the opportunities arose in order to survive the political upheavals, as the Irish and English systems of government continued to come more and more into conflict under Elizabeth's reign.

This is the key to Grace's politics and life.

Traitor

If one considers the political stand of Grace O'Malley without considering the era to which she belonged, then she must emerge at best an enigma or worst a traitor.

Born into an ancient Gaelic family who had governed their territory according to the Brehon law and Gaelic custom, her father unlike his contemporaries, had never submitted to an English governor or Lord Deputy.

Yet, his daughter sought and gained pardon from the English queen in order to secure her rights; she aligned herself at times with the forces whose ambitions were to destroy the Gaelic world into which she was born while, at the same time, aided those who were seeking to preserve it.

Realist

When Grace's political involvement in the affairs of Connaught is placed within the context of the time, she emerges as a realist.

Patriotism was not applicable to this sixteenth century Ireland. Survival was the spur either to resist the English if one was powerful enough or to accept the changes to whatever degree would guarantee survival. Ireland was still the nation of individual and divided loyalties, where Irish fought Irish and Irish and English combined against Irish in the continuous battle for personal advancement and power.

In Grace's position, to hold on to what she had and to survive the political and social upheavals of the time was her only concern as it was the concern of every Gaelic chieftain and Anglo-Irish lord. The common enemy had not yet been identified and would not be until decades later, when the word patriotism might then be applied. Entrapped in the collision course of two widely differing systems, one had to be nimble of mind not to be trodden underneath in the scramble for political survival.

Grace's political ability ensured her survival as a leader and power in Mayo for many years. She acknowledged English presence and power when, unrequested, she submitted to Lord Deputy Sidney in 1577. She played her part in securing the MacWilliam title for her undeserving husband, who had been too open in his hostilities towards the English. At the same time her standing in the Gaelic world did not diminish and, when the opportunity arose for supplementing her income, her services by sea were available to Gaelic and English alike.

Under Bingham's administration in Connaught her fortunes and position underwent a complete reversal. Bingham was too shrewd an operator, too thorough an administrator to allow any transgression of the laws he was ordered to implement. Grace had transgressed too far and too often for his liking and he fully realised her capabilities and power and promptly set about stripping her of them.

By appealing to Elizabeth over Bingham's head, Grace played her trump card. She bargained on Elizabeth's womanly instincts and sympathies and won the day. But it was Bingham, and not Elizabeth, who administered Connaught, dim and distant from the court in London, and while not directly opposing the Queen's wishes, Bingham managed to postpone her recommendations regarding Grace, indefinitely.