

3. Grace O'Malley & the Spanish Armada

Granuaile. The Life and Times of Grace O'Malley c.1530-1603 by Anne Chambers, Wolfhound Press, Dublin, 0-86327-213-4, 115-18

The Armada dispersed

In July 1588 the supposedly Spanish Armada set sail for England. Despite its mighty strength, however, after a series of naval battles against the English fleet under the command of Howard and Drake, the Armada lost its crescent-shaped formation and the slow-moving galleons became scattered and easy prey for the fast-moving English warships. The elements then took sides and prevented the Spaniards from either re-grouping or retreating. The unwieldy galleons were driven helplessly along the coast of Scotland, across to Ulster and down along the west coast of Connaught where the terrible winds and rocky headlands took their toll of men and ships.

Reception in Ireland

The hapless Spaniards received a mixed welcome from the Irish. Some months previously, the English government had made it a crime, punishable by death, to aid or protect any of the Spanish invasion forces. The Armada vessels were known to contain untold treasures, the salvage of which appealed to both Gaelic and English alike. Coupled with this, the aims and objectives of the Spanish were not possibly understood by the inhabitants of the more remote regions upon whose coastlines the luckless ships were cast.

The O'Neill in Ulster sent provisions and aid to the survivors who had been shipwrecked in his territory and he bitterly reproved The O'Donnell who with some of his clan had aided the English in rounding up the Spaniards. (His son's imprisonment in Dublin castle may have had a possible bearing on The O'Donnell's actions.)

Slaughter by the O'Malleys

On the coast of Mayo, the mighty ship of Don Pedro de Mendoza foundered on Clare Island with 300 men on board. Don Pedro refused to surrender and Dowdarra Roe O'Malley, chieftain of the island at the time, killed all but one, including Don Pedro. It was a terrible slaughter, resulting from greed for the spoils of the shipwreck on the one hand, and out of ignorance and misunderstanding of the reasons for the invasion on the other.

Were the O'Malleys unique in their treatment of the Spanish?

The O'Malleys of Clare island were not alone in their treatment of the Spanish. All along the coast the castaways received a similar welcome from most of the natives; others escaped with their lives while the Irish stripped them of their belongings and abandoned them to make their own way. Further up the coast the second in command of the entire Armada expedition, Alonso de Leyva, with his ship the *Rata* with 419 men, was driven by the strong winds into Blacksod bay where the Devil's Hook's son robbed and imprisoned some of the survivors, de Leyva managing after some time to escape to Ulster.

A ship of 1,000 tons and fifty-four guns foundered near Grace's territory of Burrishoole. It was reported in London that this was the ship of the leader of the Armada, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, and that he was among the survivors. The English issued orders for his safe conduct, but the rumours proved to be untrue. However, the stricken vessel was indeed rich in treasure of a more mercenary nature.

Grace's attitude

Grace's attitude and behaviour towards the unfortunate Spaniards is unknown. The lure of treasure and plunder was a way of life to her and there is no reason to suspect that the Spanish cargo would be immune from her attentions. Her attitude to Spanish survivors was another matter. Her family's connections with Spain were long established and her understanding of the Armada's ambitions and aims may have been clearer to one who had spent some time with O'Neill in Ulster. But there was very little she could do to protect or hide the survivors. The ever vigilant Bingham now gave his undivided attention to the coastline of Connaught. Sir William Fitz-William, the new Lord Deputy, decided that even Bingham's methods were too lenient and he commissioned one Robert Fowle, deputy marshal, to seek out, dislodge and kill any of the unfortunate survivors who had managed to obtain refuge from the Gaelic chiefs. The consequence of harbouring Spaniards was death as the execution of the O'Rourke of Breffni clearly demonstrated later.

Grace, with her record by now well established with the authorities and especially with Bingham, must have received very special surveillance and her seagoing excursions would have been closely monitored. In spite of the threats by the English, some of the survivors found permanent refuge and swelled the ranks of some of the Gaelic chiefs such as the Devil's Hook and Sir Murrough-ne-Doe O'Flaherty. The west coast of Connaught took a terrible toll of Spanish lives and Bingham in one of his reports stated 'In my province there hath perished at -the least 6,000 or 7,000 men, of which there hath been put to the sword by my brother George and executed, one way or another, about 700 or 300, or upwards'.