

**GRACE O'MALLEY (Gráinne Ni Mháille) (pron Granya nah wallyah)
1530 – 1603**

family motto “Terra Marique Putens” translates to “Valiant by sea and land.

She was born in the west of Ireland while Henry VIII was King of England. She was the daughter of Eoghan Dubhara Ó Máille, Chief of the O'Malley clan. In her early years the Irish clans were left to their own devices with not much interference from England. But, this changed during the Tudor Conquest.

Tudor Conquest – 16TH C, Henry VIII was made King of Ireland and the system of “surrender and regrant” began; confiscation of land, plantations established, Irish law and language was banned sparking the Desmond Rebellions and the Nine Years War

Her family was based in Clew Bay, Co. Mayo and they controlled most of SW Co. Mayo. They were one of the seafaring clans of Connacht and they built a row of castles along the coast to protect their territory. They collected rent from those who fished off their coast.

They were also the overlords of a branch of the Bourke family. The Bourkes were Anglo-Normans who completely assimilated into Irish culture.

Under Brehon law it was possible for females to inherit if there was no male heir. She did have a paternal half-brother, Donal na Piopa, but he was illegitimate so, as the only legal heir she could take over as commander of the O'Malley fleet and lands. Their ‘piracy’ wasn’t what we think of today. They collected tolls by charging fees to any ships passing their coast, which she claimed were doing so illegally because these waters had been controlled by the O'Malley’s for generations. The waters of the west coast from Galway to Ulster and Scotland was a heavily traveled route and all ships paid passage.

They also made money with their established trade routes to Spain where they imported iron, weapons and wine for barrels of salted fish, fleece, cattle hides and tallow.

Her ships were large, carrying up to 200 men. They were modeled after the Viking longships with a triangular sail making them easier to steer. And, because they were shallow, they could sail close to the shore.

According to oral tradition, as a young girl Grace wanted to go to Spain with her father. He told her no because her long hair would get caught in the ropes. She cut her hair short to shame him into taking her; which he did. This got her the nickname of Gráinne Mhaol (grannya woll) - with mhaol meaning bald.

As a child she probably lived in Belclare, Clare Island, but she could have been fostered as was traditional to Gaelic nobility.

Also, as a member of the nobility she would have been educated. While she mainly spoke Irish, and she was said to know Latin, Spanish, French and some English. Later, in a meeting with Queen Elizabeth, they both spoke Latin.

In 1544 Henry was dealing with Wales, Scotland and a war in France and couldn't pay much attention to Ireland. When he died Elizabeth I allowed the English to expand into Ireland. She worried that Catholic Spain could capture Ireland, use it as a military base and invade England.

When she was 16 she married Dónal an Choggaídh Ó Flaithbheartaigh (O'Flaherty) in 1546 for political reasons; he was expected to someday rule most of what we now know as Connacht.

They had three children:

Eoghan (Owen), the first child and was known to be kind and forgiving.

Méadbh (Maeve), who was said to be just like her mother. Maeve married Richard "the Devil's Hook" Bourke and they had several children.

Murchadh (Murrough), was most like his father - he liked warfare. He often beat his sister and didn't listen to his mother only because she was a woman. There are sources that say that he betrayed his family at some point and joined forces with Sir Richard Bingham after his brother Owen was murdered.

In the western part of Galway is a medieval fortress with high stone walls, a drawbridge and a banquet hall called Aughanure Castle. It was built on a limestone outcrop on the south bank of the Drimneen river. The O'Flaherty's had

a tradition of building their tower houses with access to lakes, rivers and coastline and this was a visible statement of the family's wealth and status on an important route-way to the Corrib. This is where the O'Flaherty's ruled virtually cut off from the rest of Ireland by Lough Corrib and Killary Harbor and still immersed in ancient laws and customs.

They ruled as Gaelic warrior lords and depended on the sea for trade, food and transport while the green fields and mountain pastures provided grazing for their herds. By the sixteenth century they had built a network of small castles or tower houses along the Atlantic coastline and further east towards Lough Corrib from where they ran their kingdom, far out of the reach of English law.

In 1564 Dónal's ambitions were thwarted when one of his clan was named by Queen Elizabeth as Chief instead of him.

Later that year he was killed in an ambush while hunting in the hills surrounding Lough Corrib.

The Joyce clan was blamed for the assassination and when they came to try and claim control of Hen's Castle they were surprised to be met with resistance. Grace was able to force them to retreat, and she returned to Clare Island and established her residence there. (now known as Gráuaile's castle) It was at this time that she returned to piracy; telling Elizabeth I it was "maintenance by land and sea".

She had an army of 200 men who fought neighboring chieftains and raiding towns along Scotland's coast. She used gallowglass mercenaries from Scotland to help allied chieftains.

One story tells that in 1565 a ship ran aground on Achill Island during a bad storm. Some say she left a horse near the rocks with a lantern around its neck signaling it was a safe place to enter. Or maybe she just happened by, but in either case she took what she could from the ship. This included a shipwrecked sailor, Hugh deLacy, son of a Wexford merchant, as her lover. When he was killed by members of Clan MacMahon, she attacked their stronghold of Doona Castle in Blacksod Bay and killed those that murdered him on Caher Island. This earned her another

nickname, “Dark Lady of Doona” And, she now held an area along the coast that could control all passing ships, making her well known and wealthy.

In 1566 she married again for political gain; Rísideárd an Iarainn (“Iron Richard” Bourke) who got the nickname because he owned an ironworks in Burrishoole, which is also where his castle and residence was.

This time Grace married on her own terms, opting for a trial marriage for a period of one year which was allowable under Brehon law. After one year either person was free to withdraw from the arrangement.

Richard was wealthy with extensive lands and castles including Lough Mask Castle with 3,000 acres, Ballinrobe Castle with 1,000 acres and Kinlough near Shrule with 2,500 acres. He also had demesne lands scattered over the baronies of Carra and Kilmaine, in addition to the customary tributes and dues from the chieftains of Mayo.

They had a son, named Tibbot-na-Long (meaning of the ships) as he was born at sea. It’s said within hours of giving birth her ship was attacked by Algerian pirates and she fought alongside her shipmates, forcing the remaining Algerians to retreat back to their ships.

When Tibbott was 12 he was placed in fosterage with the local chieftain, Myles MacEivilly, owner of Kinturk, Kilboynell (later re-named Castle Bourke), Castlecarra and Manulla castles and adjoining lands.

“Gaelic fosterage commanded extreme degrees of loyalty and indebtedness and in a document in Westport House dated 1582, MacEivilly ‘chief of his name’ granted ‘to the use of my foster son Thibbott Bourk the castle and bawn and ten quarters of land in Kinturk...the castle, bawn and eight quarters of land of Castlecarry and the four quarters of land of Ballykelly...the castle town and barbican and four quarters of lands of Moynulla...together with all .. buildings, orchards, gardynes, moores, meddows, feeding pastures, woods”⁵

Late in life Tibbott left his home territory in Burrishoole to reside permanently in Kinturk Castle and over the years purchased other MacEivilly property in the area, including Castlebourke, to become the largest landowner in Mayo.

Tradition also maintains that when the marriage was at the 1st year anniversary, Grace with her army and navy locked inside Rockfleet Castle, she invoked the words of divorce 'Richard Bourke I dismiss you' taking his castle in lieu of her dowry.

After their divorce, they still remained a united powerful force and worked together for almost twenty years.

Even though she was a powerful force in her area, she couldn't stop the increasing power of the English spreading across the country and getting closer and closer to her. An English expedition from Galway attacked her in her castle on Clare Island, so she blockaded the port of Galway and began attacking English ships in Galway Bay.

In 1576 she took part in the surrender and regrant process with Sir Henry Sidney, of which Rockfleet Castle was part of. The terms were simple; stop fighting, pay allegiance to the crown, pay taxes to the queen, abide by English laws, return the Gallowglasses to Scotland, and establish an Irish contingent of soldiers in case Spain decides to attack. If all this was done, the chieftains could keep their titles, and some of their lands would be returned. O'Malley agreed but the crown had trouble trying to control this land because it was far from Dublin and O'Malley was usually at sea.

In 1577 or 1578, O'Malley broke her agreement by launching an assault on the Earl of Desmond who took it upon himself to advance Elizabeth's agenda. He managed to capture O'Malley and imprison her in Limerick for over a year, later moving her to Dublin, where she remained a captive. She was finally released owing to good behavior but, some think she was aided by Sir John Perrot, who objected to the harsh treatment of the Irish.

English aristocrats like Perrot were the minority, with most following Desmond's lead of furthering Elizabeth I's goals in any way they could. The key to complete control was to undermine the traditional social structure of the Irish the clan and the independent chieftains (lords) of those clans and their lands.

In 1584, Sir Richard Bingham of England became Lord President of Connacht and began systematically dismantling the old structure through ruthless military campaigns, bribery, and pitting one Irish lord against another.

Ann Chambers, author, states that “Bingham was one of the new breeds of Puritan military men in the service of the Queen.....His mantra “the Irish were never conquered by words but by the sword” he put into action in Connacht.... He was especially antagonistic to Grace, a woman as he wrote who “had overstepped the part of womanhood”³

According to historian and scholar Jonathan Bardon, “In 1585, the Lord President unveiled his ambitious scheme to impose an ordered regime upon the province he governed. This he called the 'Composition of Connacht'.

The lords of the province were no longer to live by billeting their warriors on the lands of their tenants and by seizing butter, corn, and cattle as tribute.

Henceforth, the employment of mercenary soldiers was forbidden.

Tenant farmers would hereafter pay money rents to these lords, who in turn would pay taxes to the English crown and abide by English laws.

In short, these great landowners were no longer allowed to be independent warlords. The Composition of Connacht worked well in southern Connacht, but it was a different matter in the northern part of the province. Here, O'Malley was among those who refused to follow the new regime.

In May 1593, Hugh Maguire, the Lord of Fermanagh, led a rebellion burning Ballymote, an area under the control of Bingham in a larger conspiracy against the English. Her youngest son, Tibbot, was captured in 1593, charged with treason and imprisoned in Athlone Castle. Her half-brother Dónal was also arrested by Sir Richard Bingham and charged with the murder of some English soldiers.

O'Malley mounted a resistance against Bingham, and he retaliated by killing her son Owen and imprisoning Tibbot, Murrough, and O'Malley's half-brother.

(Her son, Owen, was actually murdered by Sir Richard's brother, John, after a dispute between the two).

O'Malley herself was also arrested, but the Irish chieftains came together and offered up hostages in exchange for her release.

Even though she was out of prison, Bingham ordered the confiscation of her cattle and horse herds, driving her off her land and forcing her to live aboard her ship.

So now instead of trying to negotiate with Bingham, O'Malley decided to go over his head and speak directly with Elizabeth I herself in 1593.

She sailed along the southern coast of Ireland, through the straits of Dover and up the Thames to Greenwich Place to meet with Queen Elizabeth I.

Motivated to save the life of her son, she navigated her way through the Tudor court system to gain an audience. She knew enough about politics to know who to go to for help and guidance. State papers show the administrative process she had to go through which included writing a petition to the Queen (written by a scribe on her behalf in July 1593) and answering a series of questions, (Interrogatories) She was the only Irish chieftain to go to court, the other being Shane O'Neill in 1562.

She was asked 18 questions by Lord Burghley about her life, family and Gaelic customs, which she answered verbally and in writing. In answer to one question she describes the ordeal of her arrest in 1586 at Bingham's hand. She says he 'caused a new pair of gallows to be made for her last funerall wher shy thought to end her daies' and only the intervention of her son in law Richard Burke saved her. She also asked that Elizabeth grant Letters Patent for her sons and two Bourke nephews which would confirm that they owned their lands. And as a widow under

English law she asked to be granted the lands of her two late husbands as her own.

letters patent – formal documents issued by a monarch or government giving rights, privileges or authority

Her answers caught the Queen's attention even though Bingham strongly protested against granting her an audience, stating that O'Malley was the cause of all the rebellions in Connacht for the past 40 years.

But, in September 1593 she met with the Queen and as quoted by Anne Chambers in her book, "They sat down as elderly, experienced women, both leaders in what was perceived to be a man's world"

According to legend she refused to bow when she met the queen because she considered them to be equals. She was searched and found to be carrying a dagger which she claimed was for her own protection and was allowed, by Elizabeth, to keep; suggesting a significant level of respect, and trust, on Elizabeth's part. It's also said that O'Malley had sneezed and was given a lace-edged handkerchief from a noblewoman. She apparently blew her nose into it and then threw the cloth into a nearby fireplace, much to the shock of the court. O'Malley informed everyone that in Ireland, a used handkerchief was considered dirty and was properly destroyed.

Their conversation isn't recorded but was thought to be carried out in Latin as Elizabeth I did not speak Irish and O'Malley could not (or would not) speak English. The meeting seems to have lasted some time and concluded with the agreement that Bingham would release the captives and leave O'Malley alone. In return, O'Malley pledged 200 men and her fleet to Elizabeth I's service in keeping the peace in Ireland. (Anne Chambers disagrees and thinks English would have been spoken between the two women)

The Queen ordered her Privy Council to seek an explanation from Sir Richard Bingham regarding his treatment of O'Malley and her family and to investigate how her situation could best be relieved. Bingham defended himself replying "in defence of my own innocency ... to shew me instance of any one that ever I used violence against, havinge always (I thancke the Lord) had that consideracion of christian duty as I never sought any man's bloode otherwise then by course of her Maties. comon lawes to take away."

Towards the end of September 1593 the Queen wrote to Bingham ordering the release of Tibbott and Dónal- from prison. She also ordered for provision to be made for Grace out of her sons' estates, the amount to be deducted from their crown taxes. She requested Bingham to allow them ownership of their lands and property and "protect them to live in peace to enjoy their livelihoods". The Queen stated that O'Malley had "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"

After her meeting, the Queen's cartographer wrote her name on a new map of Ireland as 'Grany O'Maly; the only woman to be listed among chieftains. While one queen couldn't enoble another, her visit paved the way for her descendants to become anglicized / gain titles.

While her trip was successful, and her son Tibbott was released, Bingham didn't hurry to follow his orders. He took his time in releasing the prisoners because he thought she wouldn't keep her side of the agreement. Grace sent two more petitions to the Queen's secretary in April and May of 1595 again asking for support for the relief of her unjust impoverishment but no response is recorded. It could be because Elizabeth was preoccupied with the more urgent matter of stopping a major rebellion led by Hugh O'Neil, Earl of Tyrone.

Grace lent ships to the Irish rebels under Hugh O'Neill at the outbreak of the Nine Years' War in 1593, although there isn't evidence she fought in that war herself on either side. She seems to have encouraged her sons – at least Tibbot – to fight for Elizabeth I against O'Neill's forces.

In later years, O'Malley rebuilt her fleet with three large galleys and began to return to her former life. Bingham struck, quartering a troop of his soldiers on her ships to accompany her in her voyages and later forcing her into service against some of her own kinsmen who he claimed were in rebellion.

Bingham quartered another detachment of his soldiers on Grace O'Malley's property in Burishoole, leading to her impoverishment and forcing her and her sons to move to Munster where they lived in poverty.

In April 1595 O'Malley sought the aid of the Earl of Ormond at his Elizabethan manor at Carrick-on-Suir. Ormond wrote to Burghley on her behalf and sometime between 17 April and 5 May she returned to England to plead her case with

Burghley. O'Malley was rewarded when in August 1595, a commission was granted by the queen and the Privy Council to investigate the lands in Mayo claimed by her two sons, her grandson Dónal O'Flaherty, son of Owen, Dermot and Dónal O'Malley of "Owel O'Maillie", and Miles MacEvilly, Tibbott-ne-Long's foster-father, "with the intention of the Queen accepting their surrenders of the premises and re-granting them by letters patent."

As the Nine Years War escalated, O'Malley sought to retrench her position with the crown. On 18 April 1595 she petitioned Lord Burghley, complaining of the activities of troops and asking to hold her estate for Elizabeth I. She said "her sons, cousins, and followers will serve with a hundred men at their own charges at sea upon the coast of Ireland in Her Majesty's wars upon all occasions ... to continue dutiful unto Her Majesty, as true and faithful subjects". Throughout the war she encouraged and supported her son Tibbot to fight for the Crown against Tyrone's Irish lords.

As time went on though, the agreements made between her and the English weren't adhered to though. Bingham still tried suppressing the Irish and in the end she received less than was promised. She broke her agreement and wholeheartedly supported the Irish rebellion.

In September 1595, there was a conspiracy against Sir Richard Bingham who fled to England and was imprisoned. Sir Conyers Clifford was appointed Governor of Connaught.

Not much is known of the last ten years of O'Malley's life other than a petition she sent in 1595 complaining of English troops being quartered on her lands. She is thought to have died of natural causes either at Carraigahowley Castle or her stronghold of Rockfleet Castle in 1603. This was the same year that Elizabeth I died. Her family's usual burial place was in Clare Island Abbey.

Tibbot was imprisoned with his son and heir Myles in Dublin Castle in 1625 but was named Viscount Mayo in 1627 by King Charles I. He remained under suspicion of loyalty to the English his whole life even though he was, at the same time, accused of plotting with Spain and the exiled Gaelic lords.

In the 18thC her 3x great-granddaughter, Maria, married the 6th Earl of Coventry and her sister first married the 6th Duke of Hamilton and then the 5th Duke of Argyll. Another descendant, Howe Peter Browne, 2nd Marquess of Sligo from

Westport House became known as the emancipator of slaves while he was Governor General of Jamaica in the 19th C.

She lived on in folk legend up through the 20th century when she came to be associated with the cause of Irish independence from England. Her definitive biography was not written until 1979 by Anne Chambers, who notes her absence from some of the most important Irish histories:

The *Annals of the Four Masters* doesn't mention her name. The English State Papers, on the other hand, contain references to her as late as 1627, some twenty-four years after her death.

However, it is a measure of her greatness that her memory was preserved by folklore. Legends are not created about insignificant people. To be remembered in folk memory is as much a tribute to, and validation of her status, as any academic treatise.

While O'Malley's memory is alive in the west of Ireland, it's also remembered in England. In 1623 an English lord deputy who was trying to justify seizing shipping rights on the border of Mayo and Galway, reminded the Privy Council that "the inhabitants of Mayo had been always more apt to rebellion in so much that the very women have borne arms there, whereof Grany ne Maly was famous and is yet renowned by them....."

One legend involves the heir to Howth Castle. She arrived one evening and was refused hospitality by the local lord, St Lawrence Earl of Howth, which is a serious offense in Irish culture. When she was leaving she ran into the heir's grandson and kidnapped him. Days later she was offered her a large amount of gold and silver for his release, but she refused. Her terms were to leave a side door to the castle open and to always have an extra place at the table. The door is said to have remained open to this day.

According to Anne Chamber's books she's remembered as a fearless leader, by land and by sea, a political pragmatist and politician, a ruthless plunderer, a mercenary, a rebel, a shrewd and able negotiator, the protective matriarch of her family and tribe, a genuine inheritor of the Mother Goddess and Warrior Queen attributes of her remote ancestors. Above all else, she emerges as a woman who broke the mold and thereby played a unique role in history.

Professor Brandie Siegfried of BYU, writes "I was struck by how gendered the commentary was about O'Malley," Siegfried said, referring to letters written by male colonial officials. "They were afraid because she crossed too many boundaries."

O'Malley rose to a position of power through her successive husbands, aggressive sons and collection of castles. She earned the moniker "Grace of the Gamblers" by deeds such as attacking and ransacking a ship belonging to her own son, who had momentarily allied himself with the colonial English government.

"She came to symbolize Irish resistance to English colonization as well as resistance to English culture," Siegfried said.⁴

In August 1979, the Honorable Nicholas Brabourne (14th great-grandson of O'Malley and also a grandson of Elizabeth II's uncle-in-law, Lord Mountbatten with others) was killed by an Irish terrorist bomb off Mulloughmore, Co. Sligo.

O'Malley's life has inspired many musicians, novelists, and playwrights to create works based on her life and adventures and she has been used as a personification of Ireland.

Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising, used Grace O'Malley as a symbol of Irish nationalism. He changed the words of an older folk song originally written about bonny Prince Charles, who the Irish supported for some time hoping he would replace the Protestant king during the Jacobite Rebellion and remove English landlords. The song was *Óró sé do Bheatha Bhaile* and is often sung with a melody associated with "What do you do with a drunken sailor?"

To Pearse, O'Malley was a symbol of a home grown, Irish resistance, having used Irishmen in her battles and not the Spanish and French. Her imprisonment symbolized England's imprisonment of Ireland.

Oro Se do Bheatha Bhaile was sung by the Irish Volunteers during the Easter Rebellion and Padraig Pearse whistled the song as he was being escorted to the firing squad for his part in the rebellion.

Movies & Documentaries

Grainne Uaile: The Movie (2025): A feature film by Irish filmmaker Kirsten Sheridan, who is adapting Anne Chambers' biography of O'Malley.

Warrior Women: Grace O'Malley, The Pirate Queen (2003): A documentary film that tells the story of the 16th-century pirate.

The Pirate Queen of Mayo (2022): A PBS episode from the series *Ireland With Michael* that explores O'Malley's connection to County Mayo.

A Prelude to a War (2013): A 25-minute short film by Ciaron Davies about O'Malley's battles with the English in the 16th

Songs

The Pirate Queen: A Broadway musical with songs by Boublil and Schönberg, inspired by the historical fiction novel *Grania: She-King of the Irish Seas*.

Cathie Ryan: An Irish musician who wrote a song about O'Malley for her 2001 album *Somewhere Along the Road*.

The Gothard Sisters: This group also has a song about the pirate queen, based on her childhood adventures

Oro Se do Bheatha Bhaile (Patrick Pearse version)

welcome home, oh woman that was sorrowful
what grieved us was thy being in chains
thy beautiful land in the hands of rogues
and thou sold to the English

Oh-ro You're welcome home, (3x's)
Now that summer's coming!
Gráinne Mhaol is coming from over the sea,
With armed volunteers as a guard

Gaels they. And neither French nor Spaniards,
And a rout upon the English.

Thanks to the God of miracles that we see,
Though we live not a week thereafter,
Gráinne Mhaol and a thousand heroes

Proclaiming the scattering o the English.
Dispersing the foreigners!

Poem translated from the Irish of Séan Clarach O'Domhnaill

'Twas a proud and stately castle
In the years of long ago
When the dauntless Grace O'Malley
Ruled a queen is fair Mayo.
And from Bernham's lofty summit
To the waves of Galway Bay
And from Castlebar to Ballintra
Her unconquered flag held sway.

She had strongholds on her headlands
And brave galleys on the sea
And no war like chief or Viking
E'er had bolder heart than she.
She unfurled her country's banner
High o'er battlement and mast
And 'gainst all the might of England
Kept it flying 'til the last.

The armies of Elizabeth
Invaded her on land
Her warships followed on her track
And watched by many a stand
But she swept her foes before her
On the land and on the sea
And the flag of Grace O'Malley
Waved defiant, proud and free (...)

Hurrah! Their spears are backward borne
Their blood-red flag is down
And Sydney vanquished and pursued
Spurs hard to Newport Town,
This lesson taught the Saxon churl

To dread a free-man's blow
When the dauntless Grace O'Malley
Ruled a Queen in fair Mayo (...)

There's many a fearless rebel
In Westport and Clew Bay
Who watch with longing eagerness
For Freedom's dawning day.
There's many a brawny mountaineer
Prepared to strike a blow
For the old Green Flag and Freedom
On the soil of brave Mayo.

1. *Chambers, Anne (2003). Granuaile: Ireland's pirate queen Grace O'Malley c. 1530–1603. Dublin: Wolfhound Press. ISBN 0-86327-913-9.*
2. *Grace O'Malley: the biography of Ireland's Pirate Queen (40th anniversary ed.), 2018*
3. *Chambers, Anne (2003). Granuaile: Ireland's pirate queen Grace O'Malley c. 1530–1603. Dublin: Wolfhound Press. ISBN 0-86327-913-9.*
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Grace O'Malley Timeline

- 1530 born
- 1546 marries Donal ÓFlaherty
- 1565 ÓFlaherty is killed in an ambush, she moves back to her ancestral lands
- 1566 marries Richard Bourke, chieftain
- 1577-79 imprisoned in Limerick and then Dublin Castle
- 1583 her second husband, Bourke dies
- 1585 Sir Richard Bingham begins his persecution of the Irish, especially Grace and her family
- 1593 Grace meets with Elizabeth 1 hoping to free her sons and guarantee her safety
- 1603 Grace dies of natural causes in one of her castles