

## GRACE O'MALLEY

Grace O'Malley (Grainne ni Maille) was a famous pirate, seafarer, trader and chieftain in Ireland in the 1500's. She was born in 1530 in County Mayo, and was the daughter of sea captain. As a young child, Grace always knew she wanted to be a sailor but, as a female, she was discouraged repeatedly. So, she cut off her hair and dressed like a boy in the hopes that her father would take her on trading missions overseas, which he did. She even saved his life when their ship was attacked by an English vessel.

Grace married two times in her life. Her first husband, Donal O'Flaherty, was the son of the chieftain of the O'Flaherty clan and next in line for the post as chieftain. Grace and Donal married when she was about 16 years old. The O'Flahertys were a seafaring people, much like the O'Malleys, so Grace was right at home with their clan. Over the course of their marriage, Grace learned more about seafaring from Donal and his clan and added to her knowledge of sailing and trading at sea. Grace was soon in charge of the O'Flaherty fleet of ships and ruled the waters surrounding their lands. Although it was unusual for a woman to lead men, Grace earned the respect of all who followed her through her shrewdness as well as her knowledge of sailing and bravery at sea. Her husband had a reputation for being quite a "hot head" and his temper eventually cost him his life in battle against a rival clan. They were married for 19 years and had three children.

According to Irish law, widows were entitled to a portion of their husbands' estates. But for some reason, the O'Flahertys did not follow this tradition and Grace was forced to rely on the O'Flaherty clan for support. She did not like this, so she set out on her own, taking with her a loyal group of followers and traded on the seas to earn her own way. She eventually was able to break away from the O'Flaherty clan altogether. Grace moved back with the O'Malley clan bringing her followers and became a chieftain in her own right and the heir as chieftain of the O'Malley clan.

Since Donal's death, she had built her empire to include five castles and several islands in Clew Bay, but needed Rockfleet Castle in the northeast side of the bay to complete her stronghold on the area. Legend has it that she travelled to Rockfleet Castle, knocked on the door and proposed marriage to Richard Burke for a period of one year and a day. She explained that the union would enable both clans to withstand the impending invasion by the English who were slowly taking over the Irish lands around them. It is believed that after one year, Grace offered Richard the option to end the marriage, but he must have really fallen for her because they remained married until he died 17 years later. They had one son together.

At 56 years old, Grace was captured by Sir Richard Bingham, a ruthless governor appointed by the Queen. Bingham sent guards to arrest Grace and have her hanged. Grace was apprehended and along with members of her clan, imprisoned and scheduled for execution. Determined to die with dignity, Grace held her head high as she awaited her execution. At the last minute, Grace's son-in-law offered himself as a hostage in exchange for the promise that Grace would never return to her rebellious ways. Bingham released Grace on this promise but was determined to keep her from power and make her suffer for her insurrection. Over the course of time, Bingham was responsible for taking away her cattle and horses, forcing her into poverty, and even the murder of her eldest son.

When Grace was 58 years old, the Spanish Armada was waging war against the English along the Irish and Scottish coastlines. It is not known whether Grace assisted the English against the Spanish or if she was merely protecting what little she had left, but Grace slaughtered hundreds of Spaniards near the castle on Clare Island. Even in her late 50's, Grace was fierce in battle.

Still virtually penniless, she wrote letters to the Queen demanding justice, but received no response. In 1593, her son and brother were arrested and thrown into prison. This was the final straw that prompted Grace to go to London in person to request their release and ask a meeting with the Queen. She told the Queen of how her rightful inheritance from both husbands' deaths were wrongfully withheld from her and asked for them to be returned. She also asked for the release of her son and brother. In return for all of this, Grace agreed to use her strength and leadership to defend the Queen against her enemies by land and by sea.

Legend has it that at Grace's meeting with the Queen, Grace sneezed in the presence of the Queen. A member of the court, in an act of politeness, handed Grace an attractive and expensive lace handkerchief. She proceeded to blow her nose loudly, then tossed the handkerchief into a blazing fireplace. The members of the court were aghast that she would be so rude as to toss an expensive gift into the fire. The Queen then scolded her and said that the handkerchief was meant as a gift and should have been put into her pocket. Grace replied that the Irish would never put a soiled garment into their pocket and apparently had a higher standard of cleanliness. After a period of uncomfortable silence, roaring laughter followed. The Queen was quite amused and it was then that she ordered the release of Grace's son and brother. They actually became friends.

Grace O'Malley was known as a fearless leader and fierce fighter. In her 73 years of life, she and her family saw the English rule spreading throughout Ireland, but through her strength and leadership saw that her clan and those around her were mostly unaffected by it. It is said that from the year of her death in 1603 and onward, that no Irish chieftain had been able to preserve the old Gaelic way of life as she and her family had done in her lifetime.



*Grace O'Malley*



*Rockfleet Castle*

See: <http://www.rootsweb.com/%7Enwa/grace.html>

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