

Granuaile: In search of Grace O'Malley

Kelly Gardiner

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Thank you for doing me the great honour of inviting me today.

When I told my mother I was speaking here, she said: 'Make sure you tell them you're a Hegarty.'

So – I'm a Hegarty.

Of course, I'm a mixture of many other names as well, but apparently there's some kind of genetic gerrymander which means the County Cork blood gets more votes than any other family, even though none of us now are even called Hegarty. My grandfather was the last of his name – in our branch of the family, that is.

My Irish grandfather – that's how I always thought of him, the centre of our world. He sang Irish songs and told Irish stories and jokes. If he was here today, he'd gently steal the microphone and give us a song or two. At some point his voice would crack and he'd weep with nostalgia for Ireland.

He's been on my mind a great deal over the past few years as I've been researching *Grace*, a novel based on the life of Granuaile, the pirate queen of Clew Bay, also known as Grace O'Malley. More of *Grace* in a moment.

But first, my grandfather, and the idea of diaspora, and Irishness in Australia, in salute to you all and this day.

You see, my Irish grandfather never set foot in Ireland. He was born and died in an Irish community right here, in Port Melbourne. He was baptized by an Irish priest and later excluded from the Church for marrying an Irish Protestant. But he never went to Ireland. He was poor, and it was a time before cheap air travel, so it was always beyond his horizon.

Over the years since he died, his children and grandchildren have, one by one, been to Ireland, and looked out over Galway Bay, whispered the words of one of his favourite songs, and cried for the missing of him.

It wasn't until I'd spent weeks and weeks in Galway and Mayo, that I finally understood that my Irish grandfather wasn't really Irish at all. His people were, of course. They'd come out here during the Famine like so many – like my grandmother's people. None of them probably ever sighted Galway Bay. Part of me had always known that. But he was a miracle to me, and I believed in the emotional Irishness of him – in the tears and the songs and the stories.

So he wasn't a man of Ireland itself. He was a man of the diaspora. But, as I read in a friend's new novel the other day: 'Irish is forever.'¹ My grandfather would tell us tales of his heroes, from the time he was a boy – 1916 – and when we were very small we didn't realise who those people were. He knew them only from the Australian newspaper reports of the Easter Rising and the stories the tough young men of Port Melbourne told each other.

And the songs and stories that he loved so much were songs and stories of the diaspora – sentimental music hall songs from his youth, dripping with longing, and written by immigrants in England or Melbourne or Tin Pan Alley in New York. He'd sing them, and

he'd cry for a place he'd never been, for the idea of Ireland. But he was always and proudly Australian as well.

I should have known.

'If you ever go across the sea to Ireland,' the song goes². That was our lullaby. It's a song of exile. A song of loss and love. A song from another place. About Ireland.

I've often reflected on this idea of distance – of writing beyond the horizon, from the other side of the world. Some of my previous books have been set in Malta or France or Venice or London. But this project about Grace O'Malley feels different to me. I've thought about the culture of my own family and the ways in which our heritage affects how we see the world, even at such a distance of place and time. And I've wondered what readers of the twenty-first century might seek in the story of a pirate from the past.

Which brings us from Port Phillip Bay to Clew Bay on the Atlantic coast.

On St Brigid's Day in 1565, or thereabouts, the good people of Clare Island were observing the saint's day, as always, in the Abbey. It was one of those wild winter mornings along that rocky coastline, blowing a gale and the waves foaming on the rocks. Nobody in their right mind would be out at sea if they could help it.

Word came – a ship had foundered on Achill Head.

In the congregation that day was the unofficial head of the O'Malley clan, the widow Granuaile. She motioned to her men and they tiptoed out of the Abbey and sailed out in all that weather.

Here's my version in the novel, in Grace's voice, of what happened next:

All the way across the bay, the wind howled like a banshee. Achill Island was hidden — by cloud, by vicious rain, and by a swell so high I could barely see over the prow.

We spent the morning scouring the shore for anything we could find. We can use almost anything — timber, rope, canvas, barrels — but we hope for better. There were bales of sheepskin and cowhide bobbing about, but the hull and the men had gone to the bottom. Except one.

I climbed on a boulder to see if there was any more flotsam washed up further along. Sure enough, there was a bundle of cloth, something blue and reddish, floating in a rock pool. I gave the boys a shout.

‘Hey there. Go look.’

A few minutes later they called out. ‘It’s a fellow.’

‘He dead?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Cut his throat and throw him back.’

I heard a squawk.

He always swore, afterwards, that I’d truly meant to kill him. I let him think that. But a live gentleman is worth more to us in ransom money than a damned bale of soggy sheepskin. Still, we like to have our jests, and all the better if the hostage thinks we’re serious.

The boys dragged him, rough as they could, over to me and threw him on the ground at my feet. He looked up.

‘Please,’ he said. I knew I was in trouble from that very moment, but I never let on.

Please.

I slipped my dagger from its sheath.

‘Who are you?’

‘My name is de Lacy — Hugh de Lacy.’

‘What brings you to our island?’

‘I hardly know,’ he said. ‘I was asleep and then I was in the water. Everyone was screaming. Where are they?’ He looked around.

‘You’re the last one alive,’ I said, and let him imagine whatever he wanted.

‘Dear Lord,’ he whispered. ‘Have pity on their souls.’

... He kept staring at me. ‘I know who you are,’ he said at last. ‘I’ve heard tales of you.’

‘Truly? What tales?’

‘You are Granuaile,’ he said. ‘The lady of Clew Bay.’

St Brigid’s Day, when Grace rescued her lover Hugh, was, perhaps, one of the few tender moments in one of the most colourful lives in history. Grace was famous in her lifetime, and that fame has ebbed and flowed across the centuries, but she remains one of those people who is fixed in our collective imaginations.

So who was she, this pirate queen of Connaught?

I'm sure some, if not all, of you have heard of Grace. Some of you might even be related to her.

She's a legend, and that means that it can be very hard to sort out documented data from myth, and history from myth-making.

But here's what I know, in brief.

Grania was born in 1530. Both her parents were O'Malleys – her mother Margaret was wealthy in her own right and her father Owen, known as Black Oak, was chieftain of the O'Malleys of Murrisk.

His daughter sailed with him, and there's a story that once, when he wouldn't let her go with him on a long voyage, she stowed away and didn't emerge until they were too far out to sea to turn back.

It was the start of a career in seafaring and piracy spanning over 40 years.

But at sixteen, she was married off to the young Dónal O'Flaherty, known as Dónal-of-the-Battles. It was not a harmonious marriage, but they had three children – Owen, Murrough, and Margaret. Dónal loved a good scrap, especially with the Joyce neighbours, and was often out on the warpath. In his absence, Grace was in charge. She established a small fleet, sailing off the coast near their home – Bunowen Castle in Connemara – and learned how to manage a clan across many strongholds and hundreds of warriors.

One of the most disputed holdings was known as Cock's Castle, and it was here – a small fortress in the middle of a lough – that Grace really showed her mettle. Dónal's cockiness led to his death, and Grace took over as leader of the clansmen, fighting off the Joyces in such style that they renamed the fortress Hen's Castle – and it's still called that today.

But after her husband's death, Grace was denied the third of the dowry usually provided to widows, and displaced within the O'Flaherty clan. So she returned home, to Clare Island, and it's a measure of her leadership that many of Dónal's own clansmen decided to go with her.

And that's when her career really took off. It's said that she started with 200 men and a small fleet inherited from her father. Over the years, estimates of her fleet ranged from three to twenty ships, though it's likely there were a handful of the large galleys for which she's famous, and greater numbers of smaller craft suited to the sheltered waters of Clew Bay.

Her fleet dominated that stretch of coastline, exacting tolls from passing ships in the form of cargo, coin, perhaps even the ship itself and its crew.

As I said, in 1565 she rescued Hugh de Lacy from the sea and he became her lover. When Hugh was later murdered in cold blood by the McMahons, she set about a violent revenge for his death, and took the castle at Doona from them – an adventure that was later romanticised in *The Dark Lady of Doona*³.

Her next marriage was by her own choice, but it was again strategic. Richard-in-Iron Bourke was in line to become the MacWilliam, controlled the north of Clew Bay, and his castle, Rockfleet, was less exposed than Clare Island. The story goes that she moved into Richard's castle and then divorced him, threw him out, and kept Rockfleet for herself. But either they reconciled or remained close friends and allies, because they were a formidable combined force in Connaught politics until his death.

Either way, in 1567 she gave birth to her third son Tibbott – known as Toby-of-the-Ships. He was born in the middle of a battle at sea, in which Grace gave birth and then rushed on deck to rally her men and stave off an attack.

All of this took place in a constantly shifting political scene of clan rivalries and the Tudor push into Ireland, beyond the Pale, with English law introduced over the top of Irish law, affecting inheritance, land and titles, and the inevitable rebellions against the colonisers.

In 1584 Queen Elizabeth appointed the Puritan, Sir Richard Bingham, as English Governor in Connaught. He became Grace's implacable enemy, torching lands and villages, bombarding her strongholds, and threatening her livelihood as well as her independence. Bingham's brother killed Grace's eldest son, Owen, and she was proclaimed a traitor, and sentenced to death. She was freed at the last moment, possibly by direct order of Elizabeth, and fled to Ulster to consult with the O'Neill on his plans to unite the Irish and rise up against the English.

By now, Queen Elizabeth was receiving regular reports of this wild woman from the west, and one of her favourites was the story of how Bingham convinced Grace's second son, Murrough, to support him. Grace was so furious, she attacked her own son's castle to remind him who was in charge.

But in 1593 Bingham arrested her youngest son, Tibbott, and her brother, Dónal, and charged them with treason.

In desperation, Grace wrote to Elizabeth complaining about Bingham, asking her to spare the lives of her son and brother, and seeking redress for the destruction of her lands and fleet.

And then, as you do, she sailed off to London to meet the Queen.

She wasn't the only Irish leader to do so. But, amazingly, the Queen agreed to meet her. More about that in a moment.

Let's just say that Grace never retired gracefully. The last mention of her in the official records is her attack, at the 'great age of 67', on MacNeils, off the Scottish coast.

She died in 1603. So did Queen Elizabeth. It's thought Grace is buried in the Abbey on Clare Island.

So those are the bare bones of the story – some documented, some hearsay, some possibly mythical. How to capture such a life, such a woman, on the page?

The story I'm telling is of the meeting of Grace and Elizabeth – those two elder stateswomen, both shrewd politicians, both famous for their tempers and their intransigence. It can't have been an easy conversation. They were, in theory, lifelong enemies. They were also, possibly, more alike than anyone either of them had ever met.

Grace, it's true, had freedom to rove about and had possibly met some of the other powerful women in Ireland.⁴ But Elizabeth, although surrounded by brilliant and well-educated women, was always their queen.

I also wanted to tell the stories of their communities, the clash of two worlds revolving around a woman leader – their friends, supporters, enemies, and loves. The novel is told in both voices, alternating between them, recounting their experience of each other, and remembering the key moments in their own lives.

But the thing that interests me most is that they surely both experienced the shock of meeting a woman as assured, as cunning, as dangerous, as themselves. Under Elizabeth's rule, the English moved further into Ireland, demanding allegiance from the chieftains in exchange for titles and the regrant of their own lands, and trying to conquer the west – and

elsewhere – by force. It was under Elizabeth, for example, that the borders of the County known as Mayo were laid down.

To Elizabeth, Ireland was part of her New World, and she would subject it to her will. And to Grace, this was a fight to the death between armies, between cultures, and in defence of the ancient ways. So she fought back. Over and over, and for years. She was not alone, of course. The O'Malleys fought in small, local skirmishes, in raids and counter-raids; she supported major uprisings of the Bourkes and the O'Neills, and ferried Scottish mercenaries across the sea to help things along.

But it was her all-out war with Governor Bingham that brought her near to ruin, and then to London.

The two queens met at Greenwich Palace in September 1593. Nobody knows what they said to each other. And in that shadow, in that absence, lies my fiction. There's a story that Elizabeth offered a hanky to a weeping Grace, who threw it into the fire.

But it's one of those stories that were first told much later.

If you were writing a book of history or a biography, you'd have to note the improbability of that tale, and its provenance. A novelist has to decide whether the action is likely – is it credible? Does it fit with the character you've created? Or is it too *incredible* to be part of the story as you tell it?

I admit that in this case I thought it unlikely but included it anyway, because I wondered what would happen in a monarch's Presence Chamber, if someone actually did that. Here's what I decided to do – this is in Grace's voice:

The Queen is not moved by my tears, real enough though they are. She and Burghley don't care about my plight. Why then am I here? They want something of me, but I can't see clearly what it is. Not yet.

She grows restless. Bored with me. Or is it like those moments when the salmon plays dead, and you think it's slipped the hook, until it rises, jumping clear out of the water, in the hope of freedom?

But now I am here, we can neither of us escape the other.

She waves to one of her ladies who produces a scrap of lace and hands it to me. I wipe my tears with it, blow my nose, and throw it in the fire.

Everyone gasps.

The Queen laughs. 'Usually, in such a circumstance, we would tuck our handkerchief somewhere about our person.'

'Why?' I say. 'That's disgusting. It's full of snot now.'

'And that is why we have laundresses.'

I don't tell her we do too, of course, and that none of us is wealthy enough to burn our linen after every use. Let them think me a savage. Now they're paying attention.

Other legends about Grace seemed to me to be too unlikely, out of character, or not necessary to the narrative. A novelist looks for the stories that help explain the people, and keep the plot humming along. We may never know which of the outrageous tales told about Grace's life really happened. Even the escapades reported at the time bear the marks of

partisan reporting from one side or the other. The accounts written by Grace herself, when she was pleading her case to Elizabeth, are extraordinary, but obviously biased.

Because most of what we know of Grace comes from just a few remarkable documents – her letters to Elizabeth and the queen’s councillor Lord Burghley, her responses to a series of questions they posed, and Bingham’s incandescently furious reports from the front line. And then there’s Elizabeth’s declaration after meeting Grace, which announces that:

... the old woman may understand we yield thereto in regard of her humble suit; so that she is ... departeth with great thankfulness and with many 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... she will fight in our quarrel with all the world.⁵

Whatever happened in that meeting, Grace left London with an order for the release of her son and brother, a pension, and authorization to act on Elizabeth’s behalf against the queen’s enemies.

And over the next few years, when Tyrone struck again in his final uprising against English rule, the O’Malleys stayed at home for as long as they could, until finally, Tibbott, Grace’s son born of battle, rode into war *against* the rebels – although admittedly only against his old enemy, Hugh O’Donnell.

Although a rebel herself for most of her life, Grace was seen as a defector in her old age.

That may be why, as her biographer Anne Chambers suggests, when the Irish scribes wrote the Annals of their history, they usually left out the story of Grace O’Malley. Or it may

be because she was a woman. Or both. What we know now is largely to be found in the English records – the colonisers were nothing if not fiends for filing. You can read those extraordinary letters of Grace, Bingham, and Elizabeth in the Irish State Papers. I spent precious hours poring over them in the National Library in Dublin, only to discover months later that there's a copy – because of course there is – right here in the State Library of Victoria.

The Irish writer Emma Donoghue has said that 'stories are a different kind of true.'⁶ So how do we get to some truth of these two women's stories? Can we? Whose truth is it? Theirs? Mine? The reader's?

I'm writing a novel, not a biography, but it has to be as historically accurate as possible. I'm not one of those authors who easily shifts the past around to make it fit the story I want to tell.

That means I have to get everything right – all the biographical and historical data – as well as all those moments that I can and must imagine. When we write fiction, when we read fiction, we want the woman to leap out of the page, a sword in each hand, roaring. How might she have felt, out on the open sea, or in a prison cell facing execution, or going to the palace to meet her enemy?

In many ways, Elizabeth is just as difficult to capture on the page. Her life was more regimented *and* more documented, and as she once said, 'A thousand eyes see all I do.'⁷ But she's still enigmatic. How did she feel about meeting Grace? About herself? About Ireland?

Elizabeth called the Irish 'a rude and barbarous race.'⁸ We know that she and Lord Burghley obsessively pored over the reports from their officers in the field, and drew maps of the country and the clans. Elizabeth was keenly interested in the New World, the creation of

colonies, and what became an empire. And she was fond of her Sea Dogs – pirates, ratbags and slavers who also happened to be among the finest sailors of their time – men like Drake, Hawkins and Raleigh.⁹

For me, Elizabeth is also just a little *too* iconic. I admit that when I write her dialogue I hear Glenda Jackson's perfect diction in my head. So on one hand, you have this famous profile, a queen portrayed even during her lifetime in extraordinary portraits, more recently played on screen by the most powerful actors of their eras – not just Jackson, but Bette Davis, Cate Blanchett, Judi Dench, Helen Mirren, not to mention Quentin Crisp. Larger than life, Elizabeth was a prolific author and poet, patron of Shakespeare and Tallis, and perfecter of the regal public persona.

We think we know her, but we don't, and in spite of being just a little obsessed with her since my teenage years, I found it tricky to get behind her mask, inside the white paint and red wig.

On the other hand, we have this elusive Irish pirate, this woman of action, and of mystery. We have a few written reports of people who met Grace, such as Sir Henry Sidney, who called her 'a notorious woman in all the coasts of Ireland.'¹⁰

But there's not all that much on paper about Grace – what was she like? How would it have felt for her, to be the obvious leader of a family but never officially acknowledged as such? To be hunted, imprisoned, tormented? To be, as she must so often have been, a woman in a world of men?

Then again, so was Elizabeth. She had ladies in her household, many of whom were extraordinary, and loyal to their graves. She was one of many brilliant and powerful women of the era such as Marie de Medici, Marie de Guise and Catherine de Medici. But she never met any other queens, never laid eyes on Mary Queen of Scots, and her relationship with her

own sister had been fraught – indeed, almost fatal. Grace, although only a lowly rebel, was arguably the first and only powerful female leader Elizabeth met during her reign.

So I started thinking not about the worlds of difference between Grace and Elizabeth but all the things they had in common. I mapped them out – fear, being abandoned or threatened at a young age, finding their power, defeat, victory, betrayal, grief, cunning, courage. I realized that in both their lives, and often around the same age, there were parallel stories to tell, and as they grew older those stories tangled together. One obvious example is that of the Spanish Armada, the moment of Elizabeth’s great and glorious speech to her army at Tilbury:

Let tyrants fear, she said. [...] I am come amongst you [...] to lay down my life for my God and for my kingdom and for my people, my honour, and my blood, even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too.¹¹

I should acknowledge that, just like some stories about Grace, that one is a bit dodgy too. But it’s such a good speech you want it to be true.

A few weeks after her speech, the shattered remnants of the Armada were blown onto the shores of Ireland. Some ships were wrecked, and many sailors drowned. But some were spirited away, while others were hunted down and massacred by Bingham and, allegedly, by O’Malleys (although I suspect they spun Bingham a tale, and sailed the Spaniards off to Scotland).

So these two women had much in common. But there were also tremendous gulfs between them – years of misinformation and outright hostility, vastly different experiences. Grace had sailed as far as Scotland and perhaps to Spain. Elizabeth never left England. She

was queen of all she surveyed but in many ways her life was far more restricted. Grace had two husbands and at least one lover who was very dear to her. Elizabeth was the Virgin Queen, no matter what you might read in certain other novels. Grace had fought in battle; Elizabeth in many ways hated war, or at least the cost of war.

Grace was, according to Bingham, ‘the nurse to all rebellions in the province for this 40 years.’¹² These two women ought to have been enemies for life.

And yet.

And yet somehow these two weary, wary, wily women found common ground and, perhaps, some form of mutual respect. How? That’s the question I want to explore.

In search of Grace, I’ve roamed far and wide. The journey begins and ends at my desk. I researched a great deal from here in Melbourne – there are a number of biographies of Grace and people around her, endless books about Elizabeth, academic and popular histories of Ireland and Tudor England. I read widely about economics, politics, social history, gender studies, fashion, food, and particularly maritime and military history. I read contemporary accounts – admittedly many by English or Anglo-Irish settlers and soldiers – studied maps, drawings, Privy Council minutes, government reports.

And I walked the ground. In London, you can still see traces of the Elizabethan city, and although Greenwich Palace is long gone, other palaces such as Hampton Court are an excellent substitute if you need to understand, for example, how far away from the Presence Chamber were the kitchens, and what a person might see if they wandered in there.

I spent weeks in Connaught, hunting down old O’Malley, O’Flaherty and Bourke strongholds, visiting – or trying to visit, which isn’t easy in winter – every place associated with Grace and her family.

I bought books of regional and family history from local bookshops, visited tiny museums and archives. And everywhere I went, people told me stories about Grace. Some of those stories might even be true. True or not, they're cracking stories.

But there are things that only make sense when you walk the ground – or sail the waters of Clew Bay. The traders heading to or from Galway City were no match for Grace, and they failed miserably in attempts to put her out of business. Now I understand why.

I went looking for remnants of old watchtowers not mentioned in the mainstream histories – there's one in a corner of the Westport Golf Club, another in someone's backyard. And it became obvious how the O'Malleys managed their affairs. There was once a tower on every crucial headland or island, or in sheltered inlets with a clear view out to sea. Many have vanished. But perhaps you've visited, or seen photos of, her towers on Clare Island, Achill Island or, most famous of all, Rockfleet near Newport, all still intact. Grace installed her brother at Burrishoole, near the Abbey. Her daughter and son-in-law took over Doona. Her sons held Ballinahinch and Kinturk, and her cousin Owen was on Clare Island.

The sight-lines, the triangulation, are perfect. No ship could enter Clew Bay or sail past Achill, Inishbofin, and Clare Islands without being spotted. Then Grace would put to sea to extract a toll from the traveller. They were slow-moving, heavily laden sitting ducks.

She didn't call it piracy though. She told Elizabeth it was 'maintenance by land and sea.'¹³

For a researcher from the other side of the globe, scribbling on photocopied maps and ploughing through digitized records, names and dates and places are only part of the picture.

To create an imagined world for the reader, based on the records and the maps, you have to feel the wind belting off the headland, hear the way the pebbles slip under your feet on a beach, climb the side of Croagh Patrick and look out over the islands and sandbars and

channels of Clew Bay, hear the gulls cry, sniff the peat smoke, and try to imagine the music and the mysteries of a past – and most extraordinary – life.

Grace O'Malley is a legend today in Connaught and across Ireland and the globe. I feel sure she'd be quite chuffed to know there are statues of her, and murals, and songs and plays and stories. Far be it from me to question any tourist signage, but half the castles west of Dublin seem to have some association with her. She has been reclaimed as a figure of Irish independence, as a proto-feminist, as a brilliant sailor, as an inspiration. And so she was – and is.

So one last extract from my draft, from Grace's voice as she sits in Greenwich Palace, in the great battle of wits with the queen:

I must win it, this gamble. Here rests not just my boys' lives, but the life we have known — the world that is ours, that was always ours.

Oh, it's changing. I realise that. But it can't disappear altogether. The English have already taken our laws and our inheritance. I'll not let them steal our souls or our songs.

What does the Queen know of the damp yew forests and the mountain passes? She's never sailed around Achill in a storm or seen the waves break over the boulders below Inishbofin. She's never heard our bards, or the voices of the ancients. Why, she's never even touched a lover's skin or held an old man's hand in his last, dark, rattling hours.

This Queen doesn't know who we are.

We're nothing to her but trouble.

And by God, I'll give her trouble.

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1 Mira Robertson, *The Unexpected Education of Molly Dean* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2018).

2 By Arthur Colahan, who grew up in Galway but as an adult lived in Leicester.

3 William Hamilton Maxwell, 1834

4 Such as Eleanor, Countess of Desmond

5 Anne Chambers, *Granuaile: Grace O'malley, Ireland's Pirate Queen*, Third ed. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009).

6 E. Donoghue, *Room* (Pan Macmillan UK, 2010).

7 Chambers, Anne, 2009

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