



*David McEllin*

# NORTH by Northwest

By David McEllin



## GRANVAILE (THE PIRATE QUEEN)

**G**ranuaile (Grace O'Malley) was a legendary sea captain and pirate who operated out of the inlets and channels along the west coast of Mayo/Galway in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In these turbulent times life was a series of battles for survival when Gaelic Ireland was under threat from English expansionism. Much of eastern and southern Ireland was under English jurisdiction and inroads were being made into Ulster and Connaught. The Reformation was in progress throughout Europe; England perceived Ireland as a weak link in her defence against her great enemies Catholic France and Spain. Henry VIII's policy for the subjugation of Ireland was the 'carrot and stick method'. Pressurise the Irish Chieftains and Anglo Irish Lords to submit to the rule of the King's Lord Deputy, known as "*Submit and Regrant*". Irish noblemen would be given new titles and lands provided they submitted to English rule and laws. Those who refused were attacked and forced into submission and their lands confiscated. In the west of Ireland the O'Malley and O'Flaherty Chieftains did not submit and harassed the English merchant shipping in Galway Bay much to the annoyance of the merchant classes resident in Galway City, which was under English control.

Granuaile was born c. 1530 into the O'Malley Clan the hereditary lords of Umhall which included the inland territories along the Mayo coast from Louisburg in the south to the Nephin Mountains in the north and including Clare Island in Clew Bay and Achill. A lot of what is known of Granuaile is from legend and folklore but also from the English archives. In her childhood she wanted to go to sea and given her family's support it would appear that she was an accepted tomboy in the family. Her name Grainne Mhaol (which means Bald Grace) derives from her habit of cutting her hair short like a boy. One sea tale tells that when her father's ship was attacked by the English on its return from Spain she was ordered to hide below deck but refused and leaping on the back of an attacker saved her father's life.

At this time there were about sixty Chieftains in control of territories in Ireland many of them of

Anglo Norman descent, like the De Burgos in Mayo, who had invaded the country in the 12<sup>th</sup> century but had adopted Irish laws and customs (Brehon Laws) and had integrated and become allies with their Irish neighbours. The Irish Lords held sway by the sword and were frequently at war with their enemies. There was no central authority as in England where the Tudors had subjugated the Feudal Lords uniting the country under one king. In Ireland tribal warfare was the *Achilles Heel* of the Gaelic resistance to English domination and it would spell the end of Gaelic culture, tradition and lifestyle as it existed up to then.

Ireland had a population of about seven million people and was covered in forest, marsh and bogland. There were no roads or bridges which made travelling difficult except by sea and waterways. Granuaile was an only child of her parents Dubhdara and Margaret but she had a half-brother Donal who was illegitimate. Her father earned his living by sea

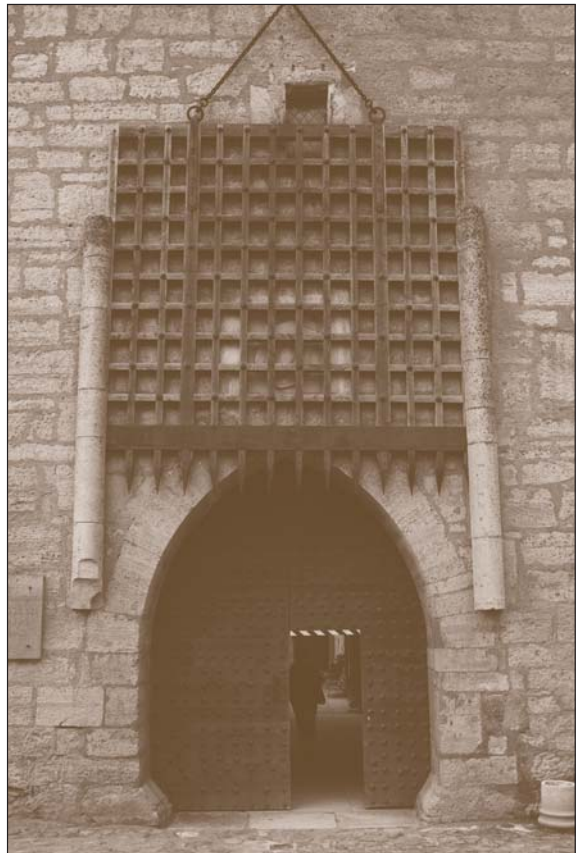


trading and fishing. The state of the country forced the O'Malleys to trade as far away as France, Galicia in Spain and the Hebrides in Scotland. Galway was a huge centre for trade and shipping but the merchants there imposed restrictions on the Gaelic Clans within the precincts of the city except on payment of taxes. A Bye Law of 1518 decreed that a citizen who entertained a Gaelic neighbour within the city walls on any feast day without leave of the Mayor and Council would be fined; this law ensured that... "neither O' ne Mac shall strut ne swagger thru the streets of Galway."

However fishing was not the main source of income for the O'Malleys. They raided coastal settlements in Ireland and Scotland where they burned, pilfered and took prisoners. Piracy was employed for centuries by many civilisations in the quest to gain power and footholds in many lands. St. Patrick came to Ireland as a slave in one such raid. Another business engaged in by the O'Malley's was the conveyance of mercenaries from Scotland (Gallowglasses) to assist the Chieftains in warfare against their enemies in Ireland. One of these the O'Donnell settled in the Umhall territory and became sub-chieftains of the O'Malleys.

Granuaile eventually succeeded to the leadership of the clan and became sea captain on her father's death. It was not unusual under Brehon laws for a female to succeed a male to the leadership role in the Clan. There was a tradition of female warriors in Celtic history. Under Roman Salic Law women were seen as inferior to men being relegated to domestic and childbearing roles. European women had less right to status, ownership, marriage, divorce, leadership etc. than their Celtic sisters. It was natural for Granuaile to succeed her father to command the O'Malley seagoing fleet. The O'Malley ships were probably a cross between the smaller Mediterranean and Hebridean galleys as English records show that Granuaile was able to offer Sir Henry Sydney three very good galleys that carried 200 men apiece.

To successfully carry out her escapades at sea it was



essential for Granuaile to retreat back to strategically placed strongholds in and around Clew Bay and many of her castles are still to be seen at Belclare, Cathar Na Mart, Louisburg, Achill Island, Burrishule and Clare island. These castles were built in secluded and strategic locations. Granuaile was married to Donal O'Flaherty (Donal of the Battles) who was son and heir to the famous O'Flaherty Clan of Co Galway. This was an arranged marriage strictly for political purposes. Donal was a violent and irresponsible character and was killed in battle with the Joyces. Granuaile attacked and defeated the Joyces taking possession of their castle which was known as Cock's Castle but thereafter became known as Hen's Castle. The English later attempted to capture the castle but were defeated when Granuaile melted down lead for ammunition and routed the English force. She later married Richard De Burce (Iron Dick) and moved back to Rockfleet Castle in Mayo. It was a token marriage and within a year she divorced De Burce under Brehon Law locking him out of the castle although they maintained the relationship until his death. She had sons from both marriages. One son Tibbott was born at sea when her ship was attacked by Algerian pirates and although exhausted she

came up on deck to join the battle which they won. She was a menace to the English and they tried to capture her a number of times at sea and on land. They laid siege to her castle at Rockfleet for 18 days after which she went on the attack and the English retreated. As the political situation worsened however she was eventually forced to pay lip service to the Crown but without delay continued to carry out raids on shipping and went her merry way. She was captured in 1577 and imprisoned in Dublin Castle for 18 months when the Chief Justice described her as a great spoiler and chief commander of thieves and murderers at sea. She somehow escaped from her prison and returned to her stronghold in Mayo. But as the English grip on the country tightened her situation became more and more untenable. A new Governor Sir Richard Bingham was appointed in Connaught and he set about the destruction of Gaelic Ireland and by implication the activities of Granuaile.

The English became more powerful at sea and eventually Granuaile and her followers were captured, tried for piracy and sentenced to death. She escaped death when her son in law took her place on the gallows. Her son Owen was murdered and Tibbott was incarcerated by Bingham. Granuaile appealed to the Queen Elizabeth 1 who was on the throne of England and received Granuaile at her court. By offering Elizabeth her allegiance and her fleet to fight the Queen's enemies she succeeded not only in saving her son but getting Bingham relieved from his office as Governor. The Queen was impressed by her Irish adversary and records show that Granuaile was most capable making her petition with uncanny political skill and acumen. The confrontation was conducted in Latin.

Granuaile continued as matriarch of her clan for many years until her death in c 1603 witnessing the final displacement of the Gaelic for a British system.

Ack. 'GRANUAILE' by Anne Chambers

