



## **Fiannaíocht – Gráinne, The Pirate Queen of Ireland**

---

### **Leaders Note**

This has inspired by the historical accounts life of Grace O'Malley (Gráinne Ní Mháile)

*This story has been rewritten for macaoimh and it can be read directly.*

### **The Story of Gráinne Ní Mháile - the Pirate Queen of Ireland**

By Ann Connell

When night's blackness is momentarily cracked by lightning and eerie silence shattered by the distant peal of thunder, it is said that scenes of times long past echo along the western shores of Ireland, there to be seen by anyone. Anyone that is, who dares to look.

Looking out to sea, there may be nothing but tossing waves between you and the horizon ahead but as your eyes relax and become accustomed to midnight shades and shadows you suddenly become aware of it. A large ship, a galleon, is sailing steadily through the waves. Its appearance is odd, not only because of its antique form but also because it seems at once solid but not solid, real but not real. A few moments pass as your brain argues with your eyes. Finally you conclude, it is ... it has to be a phantom galleon. Don't turn and run, instead look more closely. Read the name carved out on the hull, The Grey Wolf. This ship is more than four hundred years old and has spent almost all of that time sailing up and down the Galway coast. Our interest however, lies not so much in the ship but in her captain, Gráinne Ní Mháille, the pirate queen of Ireland.

The Uí Mháille or O'Malley family was the Rí's or chieftains of Connemara and the sea all around the Galway island for centuries. The best way to describe them is as pirates. They were probably among the toughest and fiercest of all the pirates. If a ship entered O'Malley waters a high price was paid. Her cargo was seized, her crew tied up and, sometimes her captain might even be killed. The O'Malleys were especially feared by merchants from France & Spain who shipped wine, spices and silks to Galway City.

As a child Gráinne often joined her father and his men on their ships. By a very young age she had mastered the art of seaman-ship. No one could wield a sword more skillfully nor could they hoot a gun with an aim such as she displayed. Yet she was also kind and compassionate, often saving children from death at the hands of her fathers men. In fact by the age of sixteen she captained her own ship, The Grey Wolf and was served as loyally and obediently as any captain ever was. Three years later her father died a bloody death and the respect Gráinne had earned from the O'Malley family and their followers became vividly clear when everyone supported her as her father successor. She was the first woman to become R of the O'Malley Clan.

Under the reign of Gráinne, the O'Malley's became even more powerful. Galway City was controlled by English soldiers and merchants, as was most of Ireland at the time, but no English army or navy officer dared risk a battle against the sea-queen, Gráinne and her band of ruthless pirates. Her reputation spread all over Ireland and it wasn't long before Elizabeth I, The Queen of England had heard of her.

One day a messenger arrived at the O'Malley fortress on Achill Island with a sealed parchment for Gráinne. It was an invitation for her to meet with Elizabeth in London, Many of her closest friends were certain it was a trap, but Gráinne insisted on going. "After all" she commented, "It's not often I get to meet someone with blood as royal as my own"

She continued to make preparations for the journey, but again her friends warned her. It was well known that the authorities in Galway City would do anything to get rid of the sea-queen. Yet again, Gráinne only laughed at them. "A queen would not harm another queen unless war had been declared, and I ask you, which queen is a better shot with a pistol?"

So Gráinne accepted the invitation and went to London. When she was announced in Elizabeth's palace the two queens shook hands and sat down to tea. They chatted for a while. Elizabeth was worried that the Irish pirates were growing too powerful and would soon threaten the English stronghold in Galway City. Gráinne assured her that the O'Malley's would use their power only to protect their own kingdom of Connemara and the islands from harm.



## **Fiannaíocht – Gráinne, The Pirate Queen of Ireland**

---

Relieved by this, Elizabeth offered Gráinne the title of Countess of Connemara. “Why would I want that?” retorted Gráinne, “I am the queen of Connemara as it is. And I will ensure to my dying day if I can thereafter, that an O’Malley king or queen will always rule and protect the kingdom of Connemara”

A stunned silence smothered the court. No one had ever spoken to Elizabeth like that and survived. Elizabeth believed she was the queen of all of Ireland including Connemara. Surely it was certain death for Gráinne. A nod from Elizabeth and the Irish sea-queen would be carted off to the Tower before she’d have half a chance to grab the pistol beneath her skirts. Very few people left the Tower alive, in fact, most left minus their heads.

Everybody watched and waited. What would Elizabeth do? What would she say? Well, before she said anything, she drank a drop of tea and then politely asked if she might visit Gráinne in her kingdom. A smile of relief and surprise was passed silently among the gathered courtiers. Gráinne and Elizabeth had become friends.

Gráinne missed being at sea and so she soon left London and returned home. Unfortunately Elizabeth never got to see Connemara. Gráinne lived by her word and did control and protect her kingdom until her dying day.

Even today evidence of the O’Malley clan and of Gráinne, its bravest and most famous Rí can still be seen. If you take a trip to Co. Galway, you will see the many lookout posts and fortresses they built. And if you’re brave enough, look out to sea on a stormy night and you might just catch a glimpse of The Grey Wolf’s phantom. At the helm stands the ghostly captain, her long flowing robes as purple as the seas. Still patrolling the seas of her Connemara kingdom is the pirate queen of Ireland, Gráinne Ní Mháille