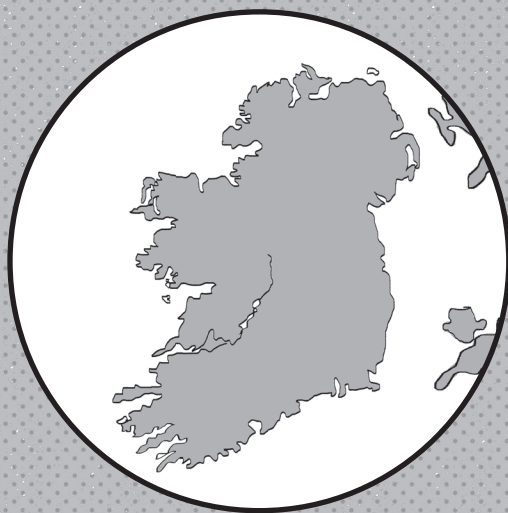


CHAPTER I

The Pirate Queen,
c.1530–c.1603



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In the twenty-first century it doesn't take long to get from London to Dublin in Ireland: by plane it's a journey of just one hour and twenty minutes. Before the invention of air travel, however, it would take quite a lot longer; a steamship and train in the 1900s would make the journey ten to twelve hours long. Before this, in the 1600s, when people had to travel by sailing ships, and when Ireland was the site of England's first 'colony', it could take an enormous amount of time, between five and fourteen days. And you'd have a lot more to worry about than simply losing your passport, or not being able to recharge your iPad or running out of M&Ms on the plane.

The Irish Sea had a reputation for storms and rough waters. 'As unquiet as the Irish sea' was a common English saying. This was more serious than a touch of seasickness. Ships could get caught in storms; in 1606 Sir Thomas Ridgeway spent two days stranded at sea, as his ship was tossed around by the waves during a perilous storm. Or crew and passengers could even be shipwrecked, with their boat shattering to pieces against rocks, and the people falling overboard.

And then there was the risk of pirates storming the ship, robbing it and perhaps leaving their victims for dead. English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish pirates operated

in the Irish Sea, using boats called galleys, which descended from Viking longboats. These boats had both a sail and oars, with two or three men on each oar. Sometimes they captured fishermen and forced them to become pirates themselves.

Now, when I mention pirates, you probably have an image in your mind. After all, they're everywhere, in films like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, in books like *Treasure Island*, in video games like *Assassin's Creed IV*. There's Captain Jack Sparrow. Captain Hook. Long John Silver. Blackbeard. And then there's the infamous pirate who reportedly buried a lot of fabulous treasure that has never been found, and who was hanged and his body left rotting over the River Thames as a warning to others not to follow his path. His name was Captain Kidd.

What these pirates have in common – whether they are real or from books and films – is that they are typically seen as rebels and crooks. And, of course, they are all men. The fact is, though, that not all pirates who attacked and robbed ships at sea were rebels. So-called 'privateers' did the same kind of thieving but with the permission of the authorities. Often the only difference between a privateer and a pirate was a piece of paper, a letter from a king, for example, giving them permission

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to rob the ships of enemy nations, as long as they gave some of their profits to the authorities.

Also, not all pirates were men. A surprising number of women roamed the seas, and I want to tell you about one in particular, who is perhaps the bravest and most impressive of the lot, and who was active at an early stage of the British Empire. Gráinne O'Malley, also known as Grace O'Malley, was born around 1530 and, as you might guess from her name, was Irish. Gráinne was born into a wealthy family in the part of the country known as County Mayo (in case you were wondering, no, there is no County Ketchup). Her family, or 'clan', owned several castles, and were also big into seafaring. Their motto was 'Powerful by land and by sea'. What would your family motto be? I think ours would be 'No, YOU'RE sitting on the remote control!'

Gráinne learned about life on the high seas from a young age. And by that I mean around your age. Imagine! Rather than going to school, she was learning about tying knots and swashbuckling. I don't know what swashbuckling involves, but it sounds more interesting than PSHE. However, even then there were some journeys that were seen as unsuitable for girls. Legend has it that when her father refused to take her on one such trip, saying he could only take her brother, Gráinne dressed

as a boy and cut off all her hair. Because of this, her brother gave her the nickname ‘Gráinne Mhaoul’, which means ‘Bald Grace’ in Irish, and over time this led to her becoming known as ‘Granuaile’.

There are lots of stories about Gráinne like this, which may or may not be true. She was the kind of extraordinary person who inspired legends and myths. I’m sure you know someone (indeed, it might be you!) who is always getting up to exciting things. Their friends are always saying, ‘Have you heard what so-and-so has done now?’ Well, that was Gráinne.

I just want to take you back for a moment at this point, to fill you in on the background to Gráinne’s story. Some *historical context* if you will. That sounds dull, I know, but it’s important, and I’ll make it as interesting as I can. When Gráinne was born, Ireland had been ruled by the English for about 360 years, after it was invaded by the Anglo-Normans who made up the ruling class of England. (The Normans were a group of people who descended from Vikings and settled in Normandy, France, in the 900s. The Normans invaded England in the year 1066.)

Ireland has been called ‘the first colony’ of England. But the English were only really interested in the city of Dublin and a few other towns. For most people in the

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rest of the country life went on as it always had done, following old Irish traditions.

Then Henry VIII became the king of England. When he wasn't busy getting married, getting divorced or chopping people's heads off (including those of his wives), he worried about the threats that England faced. Because there had recently been a rebellion in Ireland against English rule, he decided Ireland was one of those threats. So in 1542 he made himself king of Ireland too, and demanded that the clans there pledged themselves to him. When Henry died, his son, Edward VI, and then his daughter, Elizabeth I, continued with this mission. If clans resisted, they risked their property being attacked or stolen by the English.

You may know that during Henry VIII's reign the official religion of England became a huge hot topic. *Very* simply put, England went from being mostly Catholic to being mostly Protestant. And both sides got extremely upset about it. It was *possibly* a bit like how angry both sides get when Wolverhampton Wanderers (the best team in the world) play West Bromwich (the worst team in the world). But with bells on, because those who were on the 'wrong' side of the argument had a fairly high risk of being beheaded or burned at the stake.

Ireland was very firmly Catholic, which made the

Irish even more reluctant to show loyalty to the English. And adding to the tension was the fact that Spain and France (who were also firmly Catholic) wanted to use Ireland as a base to invade England.

Now let's go back to where we left Gráinne. At the age of sixteen she married the son of another powerful clan leader and the pair had children together. (They married young in those days.) But her life was about to take a turn for the unusual. First, her husband was killed by a rival clan. The Irish tradition was that a dead man's family should give his widow a portion of his wealth, but her husband's family refused. So, in order to support herself and her family, Gráinne decided to turn to piracy.

As I mentioned above, in Gráinne's time, people didn't view pirates in the same way we do today. Modern-day pirates can now face a life in prison in places like the USA, and even the death penalty in other countries. To say that piracy was a respectable job in Gráinne's day is perhaps going a bit far, but it was quite common and the authorities would sometimes tolerate it – especially if they were getting a cut of the loot!

Gráinne lived in a castle and ran a kind of pirate business empire. Over her long career, she commanded many ships, and an army of 200 fighting men. She traded things like barrels of salted fish and cattle hides

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with Spain in return for things such as iron, weapons and wine. She took hired soldiers (called mercenaries) from Scotland to Ireland, and carried out cattle raids (stealing animals in large numbers) on nearby areas. She and her team also patrolled the sea and attacked passing ships, taking money or other valuables from them, as well as defending the coast against enemy ships.

Gráinne's toughness and cleverness can be illustrated by another of the 'did you hear what Gráinne did?' stories. One of her castles, which was on a small island, was attacked by English soldiers. In response, Gráinne ordered her men to remove the lead from the castle roof, melt it down and pour the molten metal on to the soldiers below. She then sent a messenger through a secret passage from the island to the mainland to summon her fleet to come and save her.

She married again in 1566, and had a son called Tibbot in 1567. Another legend says that she gave birth to little baby Tibbot while she was at sea, and when he was less than an hour old, Algerian pirates boarded the ship. Gráinne calmly wrapped her newborn son in a blanket, went up on deck and rallied her crew to capture the attacking vessel. In short, she was a total badass, and, as an English lord wrote at the time, 'a notorious woman in all the coasts of Ireland'.



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But it wasn't an easy life. In 1577, she was arrested and sent to prison in Dublin Castle. She was only allowed out once she had promised to give up being a pirate. But she couldn't stop!

Then, when a stern new English governor was appointed and he and Gráinne did not see eye to eye, she was, at the age of fifty-six, imprisoned again and was *almost* executed. Of course there's another one of those 'did you hear ...?' stories about her near-death experience. Apparently, *just* before she was sent to her death, she was freed. We don't know for sure what happened. One biographer, Anne Chambers, suggests that her husband rebelled and that Gráinne was released to keep the peace. Another rumour suggests that Queen Elizabeth ordered her release, and that she was saved by the sound of galloping hooves and a messenger. Very dramatic!

Tragically, though she had been spared death, things then went downhill for Gráinne. The English governor of Connacht, Sir Richard Bingham, was determined to crush her. In 1586, Bingham's brother, Captain John Bingham, seized the lands of Gráinne's son Owen, captured him and eighteen of his followers, and killed them all. Then he arrested her brother and Tibbot. Next he took Gráinne's cattle and seized her ships.

These terrible events left her very short of money. In the end, she had to write to Elizabeth I, begging for help in getting her property back. The two women, queen and pirate, met at Greenwich Palace in 1593. Gráinne promised to give up her piracy and pledged allegiance to Queen Elizabeth if she helped her get her property back and secure the release of Tibbot and her brother. Queen Elizabeth agreed to her terms, and Gráinne promised to ‘invade with sword and fire all Your Highness’s enemies’. For some years she worked with the colonizers with whom she had fought in the past, and continued to defend Ireland at the same time. Gráinne died a decade later, in about 1603.

There’s a social media website and app called Facebook, which you might not have heard of as it’s now pretty much only used by old people. The reason I’m telling you about this is because on Facebook there’s a feature that lets you tell your friends what your relationship status is. You can say if you’re single, married, divorced, or if it’s complicated. If Facebook had been around in the sixteenth century, I think Gráinne would definitely have chosen this last option for her relationship with the English.

The fact that she fought the English colonizers of Ireland but also worked with them has made her a tricky

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subject for some in the years since. Some people would prefer to see her purely as a hero who fought for Irish independence against the English. But there's more to her story than this. I think Gráinne's story is a reminder that we should not be too quick to judge people from history from where we sit today. Rather, we should view her actions in *context* (that word again!). The English were a larger, stronger force than the Irish, and so she may have come to believe that fighting them was a battle she could never win. Or maybe, by working with both, she was trying to help the two sides find common ground.

Gráinne also had her children and the rest of her clan to think about. She needed to look after them. And, at a time when women weren't given many options in life, Gráinne was extremely brave, independent, fierce and resourceful. And, most important of all, she was a PIRATE! She wouldn't let ANYBODY tell her what to do!

From sailing the seas, defending the coast and fighting the queen's enemies, I think what we *can* all agree on is that her life was packed with dangerous journeys and exciting adventures. I mean, did you *hear* what Gráinne did . . . ?

THE USA

America and Britain can seem like very different places. America's national foods are things like hamburgers and hot dogs, and Britain's are fish and chips, and curry. Americans are usually quite direct in the way they speak, whereas British people are so polite that they will say 'sorry' to someone who has stood on *their* foot on the bus. The USA is the largest economy in the world, and Britain is not.

Indeed, I think most proud Americans do not like to think of their homeland as a legacy of the British Empire. After all, they famously kicked out the British colonizers in the late eighteenth century, during the War of Independence. You might notice that in a fair number of Hollywood films, the baddie is often played by a British actor. How about Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*, the sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Scar in the 1994 film of *The Lion King*, or Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book*? I'm convinced

this is because Americans associate the British accent with bad things they want to get rid of.

But the truth is, there's a lot that can be explained about the USA by the fact it was once under British control. Firstly, and most obviously, the national language is English. There are also certain legal, political and economic systems that were taken from the British - I don't think you'd thank me for going into lots of detail on these, so just trust me that they're kind of important, and they came with the Puritans.

You may have heard of Puritans before but not know exactly who or what they were. They were English and strict Protestants who were disappointed with the Church of England, which they saw as weak and corrupt. So, when the opportunity arose to start again in the New World (the area we now call South, Central and North America), they grabbed it. In 1630, a shipload of Puritans reached Massachusetts, and established the town of Boston.

THE PIRATE QUEEN, c.1530–c.1603



Over the following years, 21,000 Puritans settled in the place they named New England. But before this there were many Indigenous Americans who had been living on this land for ages. ('Indigenous' is the name given to the people who were originally living there before colonists arrived.) So you may be thinking, how was there room for everyone?

Well, not long after the first settlers arrived, the area around Massachusetts was destroyed by a series of devastating diseases, which were almost certainly brought in by the settlers who were arriving from foreign lands. These diseases killed many people in the Indigenous American

community. As much as ninety per cent of the population died. It was this tragic event that made it possible for the Puritans to settle so successfully in New England.

The Puritans saw North America as a promised land where they could flourish. The destruction of the Indigenous American population was taken as a sign from God that they were on the right path. And, indeed, they got to work repopulating the land with their own people. By the end of the twentieth century, there were 16 million descendants of these 'chosen people'. And, at the same time, millions of Irish people relocated to the USA as well, because famine, which had been made worse by the British, made life at home impossible.

So if the British Empire hadn't happened, both the population and the culture of the USA would be very different. The idea that the USA is completely free of British influence is simply not

THE PIRATE QUEEN, c.1530–c.1603

true! There, I said it. Now maybe I should watch out for a new Hollywood film featuring an English baddie called Satan Sanghera!