

The Pirate Queen

In Search of Grace O'Malley and Other Legendary Women of the Sea

BARBARA SJOHOLM

Seal Press, \$15.95 paper, ISBN 1-58005-109-X

On my first pilgrimage to Ireland in 1984, I wandered into the tourist office in Westport, County Mayo, and asked about “Gra-noola.” The startled young woman across the counter suppressed the urge to burst out laughing and politely inquired, “And just how would you be spelling that?” I was trying to say “Granuaile” (often pronounced GRANN-yuh-WALE), the name of the notorious Irish pirate queen ... or Grace O'Malley, as English would have it. I was directed to Westport House, the O'Malley ancestral home. I loitered on the grounds of the vacant elegant house and looked out toward Clew Bay. At the time, “Gra-noola” was a footnote in Irish history. These days, Grace O'Malley is a cottage industry within Irish tourism. In 20 years, though, much serious research has focused on this fine, fierce woman of the Irish seas, a contemporary of Elizabeth I whose credits include clan chieftain, raider, mother, and, as Captain Jack Sparrow might say, “Pirate.” Most notably, Anne Chambers has written a fine biography titled *Granuaile: The Life and Times of Grace O'Malley, 1503-1603*. Add to the list Barbara Sjöholm's pilgrim's tale in search of Grace and other women whose lives contributed to the maritime history of the North Atlantic.

Sjöholm (who changed her name from Wilson as a result of this journey; Sjöholm means “sea-island” in Swedish) set out to visit the places Grace O'Malley made famous. First stop: Clare Island and Grace's castle fortress.

But this castle had a sour, fusty smell, the mortared walls peestained and scarred with initials. The stone-stairs that led to the rooms above had broken off at head level; a ladder lay in several pieces below. ... it was hard to imagine the castle and outbuildings full of life as the O'Malley clan entertained friends, relatives, and wandering bards and feasted. ... I tried to picture young Grace running through the yard.

Undaunted, she visits with local people and historians to discover a greater sense of Grace's enduring life and legend. She travels on, mostly by boat, all the way to Iceland in search of women whose lives were determined by the sea.

She's met with stern looks when inquiring about these women in libraries, museums, and research centers—and even sterner words: “Women didn't go to the fishing.” She persists. She finds sea goddesses whose stories still hover around Scotland. Her understanding of how female deities were transformed into witches deepens in the Orkney Islands. Also in the Orkneys she documents historical traces of very human women, including Janet Forsyth, the “Storm Witch of Westray,” whose prowess at the prow earned her a trial for witchcraft. Then there's the “Herring Lassies”—young women who followed the herring migrations during the 1930s, a viable, necessary part of the fishing industry. Not an overly romantic occupation, gutting fish all day in record-breaking time, but proof of ability and independence—and a way of going to the fishing.

Since hers is a journey within a journey, that of the clearly determined pilgrim humbled before all she finds, Sjöholm generously shares the “fishing” her travels entail: navigating paths where legend and history diverge; trolling for local historians, even relatives, in bleak and cold little towns. She refuses any windy words that turn her back as she searches for the women who fished, sailed, skippered, and contributed to the maritime life along the coasts of the northern lands. Whether it's outwitting a cranky landlady or finding a great-great-grandniece willing to share the family history of the Sami (Lapp) woman captain known as “Trouser Beret,” Sjöholm tells her own sea tales in crisp and saucy prose that makes each chapter a mini-adventure. She features heroines and antiheroines alike. “Turkish Gudda” (Guðríd Símonardóttir) was kidnapped in Iceland by Corsairs from Algiers and held captive for nine years before buying her way back to freedom and home. Freyðís, the apparently frightful, ax-wielding sister of Leif Eirícksson, still sports a reputation akin to that of Lizzie Borden, to whom Sjöholm questioningly compares her. My favorite is Aud the Deep-Minded, who fled with her father from Norway to Scotland where he and her son were killed in a battle. Realizing she had no further prospects there, Aud secretly built a ship in the forest. When the time came, she loaded it with all she needed for the journey, including her surviving kinfolk, to join her brothers in Iceland. Refused by one, she was welcomed by the other, near whom she settled her large retinue. She became the ruling matriarch and passed along her lands and wealth when she died, in a generous and graceful way. But Aud is just one of the many women whose stories Sjöholm brings to the surface.

Appropriately enough, the pilgrimage ends at Westport House, currently owned by Jeremy Browne, Lord Altamont, the 11th marquess of Sligo and the 13th great-grandson of Grace O'Malley. Here, as a statue is dedicated to Grace O'Malley, Sjöholm provides an appropriate meditation upon Grace's life and a closing invocation for her own journey. A great read all around (perfect for slashingly cold and windy weather), *The Pirate Queen* is a perfectly suitable source for any undergraduate course in women's studies or women's history—and certainly of maritime history—and a rising tide of proof that women, indeed, did “go to the fishing” (to say the least!).

REVIEWER: **Kathleen Cain** is a contributing editor and Bloomsbrarian for TBR. ■