



Grace O'Malley: Princess and Pirate

Robert Machray

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It has now become so much a matter of custom—after that familiar human fashion which causes us to turn our faces to the rising sun—to praise and laud the King, James the Sixth of Scotland and First of England and Ireland, in the beginning of whose reign over the three kingdoms—to which he has been pleased to give the name of Great Britain—this chronicle is written, that there would appear to be some danger of a wonderful truth being forgotten.

For there can be no doubt that his Highness follows upon a most remarkable age—an age which must be known throughout all time to come as the Age of Great Women.

And when I think upon Elizabeth of England, who broke the power of Spain, of Mary of Scotland, whose beauty and whose wickedness were at once the delight and the despair of her people, and of the French queens, whose talents in statecraft have never been equalled, I make bold to deny that the period of the rule of his Highness will be in any respect as glorious as that which immediately preceded his time, and in which these great women lived.

Now, whether it was from the influence and inspiration of these high and mighty exemplars, or because it was born of the pith and marrow of decreed circumstance, and so lay at the very heart of things, that women should then lead the way, and that men should give themselves up entirely to their service, I cannot say. Yet I know that there were other women of less exalted rank than those I have mentioned, whose powers, although displayed on but a small stage, were seen to be so superior to those of men that men willingly obeyed them, and lived and died for them—and living or dying were glad indeed.

And the story which I have to tell is the story of such an one.

It was my lot, for so had Destiny cast out from her urn the shell on which my name was marked, that I, Ruari Macdonald, of the Clandonald, of the family of the Lords of the Isles, both of the Outer and the Inner Seas, having been unnaturally deprived of my home and lands in Isla, should have been saved to become the servant of that extraordinary woman called, in the tongue of the English, Grace O'Malley.

It is also not unusual for her to be spoken of by them as the “Pirate Princess,” and the “Pirate Chieftainess of Galway,” and there have been some who have described her as a “notable traitress,” and a “nursing mother of rebels.” But to us Celts, and to me in particular, her name can never be uttered in our own liquid speech without something of the same feeling being stirred within us as when we listen to the sounds of soft music—so sweet and dear a name it is.

It is true, perhaps, that its sweetness has rather grown upon me with advancing years. Be sure, however, there was a time when her name uplifted my heart and made strong my arm more than the clamour of trumpets and all the mad delight of war. But it seems far off and long ago, a thing of shadows and not more real than they. And yet I have only to sit still, and close my eyes for a space, and, lo, the door of the past swings open, and I stand once more in the Hall of Memories Unforgotten.

Now that the fingers of time fasten themselves upon me so that I shake them off but with fainting and difficulty, and then only to find them presently the more firmly fixed, I think it well before my days are done

to set forth in such manner as I can what I know of this great woman.

I say, humbly, in such manner as I can.

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