

## Transcript

Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 39

Grace O'Malley

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women both overlooked and iconic, who achieved amazing things against the odds. And we do it through live history storytelling in Berlin and beyond, and at the moment, relatively virtually. Here with me — and still so far away — is socially distant Dead Ladies Show co-founder, Katy Derbyshire. Hi, Katy! Nice to see you, and welcome to our first podcast of 2021!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi, Susan! It's nice to see you, too.

SUSAN STONE: Katy, as we go back in time, all the way to 2018 for our talk, who will we be hearing from today?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We're hearing from Laura Radosh, who's a translator in Berlin. She's a good friend of the Dead Ladies Show, and in fact, she has made repeat appearances presenting on our stage at ACUD.

SUSAN STONE: She has! And she is, to my knowledge, the only one who has dressed up as her Dead Lady, or in direct homage to her Dead Lady while presenting.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Right! I mean, I have to admit, a lot of us do enjoy dressing up to go on the stage, but —

SUSAN STONE: You get fancy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I get fancy. Laura got piratical.

SUSAN STONE: She did! Because...Laura's Dead Lady is the Irish pirate queen Gráinne Mhaol, also known as Grace O'Malley, who lived an adventurous and not-that-well-documented life, likely between the dates 1530 and 1603. Here's Laura — from the stage, dressed as a pirate, in Berlin's ACUD — with the rollicking tale:

LAURA RADOSH: All right! Gráinne Mhaol, or Grainne-na-gCearbhach (that's "Grainne the Gambler"), Gráinne Ni Mháille, just Grace O'Malley (no one knows where the "Grace" came from). Those dates, you'll notice they don't have one of those little squiggles in front of them — that it's "about" — because everything I'm going to tell you has a little squiggle in front of it tonight. Those dates are, completely coincidentally, the birth and death of Queen Elizabeth I. [AUDIENCE

LAUGHS]

I learned about Grace from this book, "Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls." It's like a Dead Ladies Show for the elementary school set? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And then, so, you know, one-page biographies of inspiring ladies, and this one says (spoilers): "A rebel pirate, whose son is abducted. To get him back, she goes to Queen Elizabeth, not only gets an audience, but also then goes to work for Queen Elizabeth."

So I'm like, "Amazing story – Flo and Katy, you gotta let me do her." And then when they say, "Okay," ...Well, let me see if there's anything out there about her.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Anyone want to hazard a guess — what is this? What do these places have in common? No? [AUDIENCE MURMURS] They all have either a Grace O'Malley or Gráinne Mhaol pub. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] She has her own craft beer festival. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And this here is a bunch of drunken white ladies in pirate costumes. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Just, you know... Cheers. And the pirate parade is Ye Loyal Krewe of Grace O'Malley at some Floridian pirate festival. So she's basically ubiquitous.

So, any Irish people out here? You don't want to hear me mangling your language and telling you something you already know? You can, you know, grab the Elizabethan scholar next to you, go have a whiskey, come back in 20 minutes.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Clew Bay. Gráinne Mhaol is the pirate queen of Clew Bay, looking very Caribbean here. It's in County Mayo in the west of Ireland. [SHOWS PHOTO OF O'MALLEY TOWER HOUSE] She was born into a chieftain's daughter, and apparently, these were nice. And they had tapestries inside [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and not a lot of light, but they had people, you know, playing the lute and singing ballads to them as they ate, and it was a good life.

But it was a very bad time to be born into Irish nobility. It's Henry the VIII, who's known for his wives, but he has also, in — do we know? — 1542, declared himself the King of Ireland because the English aren't doing well. You know, the Portuguese and the Spanish, they're bringing slaves to the New World and bringing spices back and making lots of money. They have lots of ships, and the English have kind of nothing. They're like, "Well, we can colonize Ireland." So that's what they try to do. They, after the Norman invasion — this part here [POINTS ON MAP], the pale around Dublin — that's English, and the rest is all just the wilds. But that's going to change, and it's going to change in Gráinne's lifetime, much to her dismay.

Her father is a sea captain. He is a merchant. He trades with Spain. In the summer, you go out to the booley and bring your cattle. [SHOWS SLIDE] (Here's, you know, 19th century Ireland looking 15th century.) And Gráinne didn't want to do that. She didn't want to have the "home and booley" life. She wanted to go out to sea. And her father said, "I'm sorry, long hair would get caught in the ropes." So, she goes

and she cuts her hair and doesn't show herself until it's too late. That's the story. [SHOWS SLIDE] (As you can see, we have a comic in Gaelic about her.) And her father says, "Okay," which is very unusual. Especially since she also has an older half-brother, Donal of the Pipes, which maybe means he played the bagpipe [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], but it also maybe means he liked the pipes that his father brought home from Spain a bit too much and wasn't really sea captain material. So...

[SHOWS SLIDE] Clew Bay was — this is a modern nautical map and you can see there's lots of lighthouses and tons of eddies. It's a very dangerous place. And pirating didn't mean — they didn't, you know, go into other ships and enter them like that nice movie we saw. Basically, all they had to do — any ship that wanted to come up in the area, they went and said, "Would you like safe passage for a little bit of what's on board?" And whoever said, "No," they just waited until they got thrown against some cliff and went and got the rest of the booty out. Gráinne would later call this "maintenance by sea." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] That was her name for this.

And, you know, it's a pirate time, but she is nobility, and she has to do what all noble girls have to do. And that's marry to shore up the power of the clan. So she's married to Donal of the Battle O'Flaherty. The O'Flahertys have the southern part of Clew Bay, so they're extending their power. And, as his name suggests, he was just always fighting. So they have three kids: Owen, Murrough, and Margaret. So, at the beginning of their marriage and then no more, which might say something about their marriage. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And 14 years later — the other thing is, she becomes one of the chieftains because he's not doing anything. And all of his clients — it's a very hierarchical structure, Irish clans — and everyone sort of under him would come to her for protection and food, and she would help them.

And so 14 years — it's 1560 now (she was 16 when she was married), he gets into a fight with the Joyce's next door, and they kill him. They almost take his castle. She's having none of that, throws them out. And this castle, which up until then had been known as Cock's Castle, gets renamed Hen's Castle. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] That's the name it has to this day. And according to Gaelic law, she would have to go back then. You went in with your dowry, and you could take your dowry out when the marriage was over. But she tried to stay. Didn't really work, I don't know, maybe her son was old enough; her mother died, left her something back on Clare Island. So she goes back to Clare Island, and with her go 200 O'Flaherty men. So, you know, they must have really liked her.

She also has three galleys. No one really knows exactly what the galleys she had looked like, but basically it's sort of a Viking ship thing. Maybe it had 30 oars, maybe it had 100 oars — we have different reports of the few reports there are. So she went back to "maintenance by land and sea." She also would take these galleys every year in "fighting season," [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] which started in Easter and went into Michaelmas. She would go on Easter to Scotland, pick up a whole bunch

of galloglass, which are Scottish mercenaries, and bring them back and rent them out for fighting season. She'd bring them back with some cattle, back to Scotland.

So, one day she hears that on Achill Island, there's been a shipwreck. She goes to get the treasure — someone else got there before her, but there is still a 16-year-old boy on board. So she takes him as her lover. His name — [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How old is she?

LAURA RADOSH: Her oldest son is 16, so she's 30-something. His name is Hugh, nationality unknown. But she did like him, and it was known that she liked him, and one day he's hunting on a neighboring clan's land and they killed him. That was... not a good idea? She waited until that family was going on a pilgrimage, slaughtered them all in the church [AUDIENCE LAUGHS UNEASILY], and then went back and took their castle for her own.

But it wasn't — you know, this was not a really good state of affairs to stay with. And the next part of the story, I'm going to let Xena the Warrior Princess tell it to you here. Lucy Lawless:

[PLAYS CLIP FROM DOCUMENTARY FILM, "GRACE O'MALLEY: THE PIRATE QUEEN"]

LUCY LAWLESS: Grace knew that in order to hang on to their independence and resist the encroachment of the English, the O'Malleys and the other clans in Mayo would have to stick together.

The next move was to shore up her little empire by marrying her second husband, Richard an Iarainn, the chieftain of the Bourke clan. Evidently Grace had one eye on a man and the other on his castle. Rockfleet lies in this small inlet, overlooking the inner islands of Clew Bay. Its shallow harbor means it's accessible only at high tide, making a sneak attack by sea virtually impossible.

It was a perfect stronghold for Grace, away from the prying eyes of the English. Grace decided to marry Richard, but only if Rockfleet was part of the deal. She had a prenuptial contract drawn up. In it, she insisted on a one-year trial period, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] after which she would decide whether to keep him or to cast him adrift. [FLUTE PLAYS]

True to her word, a year later, Richard found he was no longer welcome in his own castle. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Grace locked him out of Rockfleet. And with the words, "I dismiss thee," she divorced him and kept his prized fortress.

ANNE CHAMBERS: The laws of Gaelic Ireland were very progressive in terms of women's rights. Here there was a streak of independence that, I think myself, came from the Celtic times that had been absorbed into Gaelic law, and women were

quite well looked after by the law. And there are many, many instances of chieftains, as they say, "putting away one wife for another," but also there's many instances of women putting away one husband for another.

[VIDEO CLIP ENDS]

LAURA RADOSH: That was Anne Chambers. She basically has, single-handedly, made Gráinne Mhaol known again. For the last 40 years, she has done nothing but write books about her, make movies about her. But, you know, she's an Irish historian and she likes a good story.

There was this handfasting thing, but a year after this divorce, they have a child. His name is Tibbot of the Ships, because he was born on a ship, of course. And the story is: he was born on the ship, she's nursing, a couple of days later and their ship is attacked by corsairs, by Algerian pirates, and they're losing the battle. So they have to go down and get her into the hold. So she comes up, you know, cursing, "May you be seven times worse off in a twelfth month, you can't do without me for one day!" But she shoots them all, and they're scared to death, and they leave. And I really like that you don't know her birth and death, but you know what she said that day on the ship. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] Times are getting worse. This is Sir Henry Sidney. For the first time ever, Queen Elizabeth is now in power, and she's decided to re-bring up her father's Irish colonization. Something called "surrender and regrant" is what they did, which meant that if the chieftains would surrender their lands to the Crown, they would then give the lands back and, in turn, get taxes. There was, of course, violence involved, but it was also attractive for the chieftains because, under Gaelic law, it wasn't actually their land. The land was owned in common. So, they were sort of getting something back that they'd never had. But there had never been anyone in the West, and none of the chieftains in the West had done this.

And Gráinne is very concerned about this because she has finally, after a long time, gotten Richard to become *táiniste*, which is sort of second-in-line for chieftain.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So, you know, here's the Bourkes, here's the O'Malleys (they're actually up here), here's the O'Flahertys. This is all sort of Gráinne's territory. And they're the only ones with ships actually, out there. Funnily enough. Theirs is the only family that has these galleys. So they're a very powerful family.

But there's Sidney going in. Her — the Mac William of Connacht (the Mac William is like the top chieftain. It's not a name, it's a position.) The Mac William actually decides to make a deal with Sidney. That means that then suddenly, under the English law, it's his son who becomes the next Mac William and not Richard who was in line to become the next Mac William. Gráinne goes to Sir Henry Sidney and offers her services. She offers three ships and 200 men. He says, "No," but he writes about it. It's one of the only things we have written about her in this — ever.

Make a long story short: there's a lot of fighting. Right now there's uprisings in Munster, the Desmond Rebellions; they're put down. There's some talk of uprisings in Ulster. Gráinne is arrested. She's thrown into the Dublin Castle, or she's kept in her own castle, but she's kept somewhere. She's arrested and released a couple of times. There's a huge rebellion at some point. She actually goes to Dublin, makes a deal that they will stop rebelling if Richard can become Mac William. And the Queen writes a letter saying, "Okay, Richard's the Mac William" — which is amazing because the English are trying to get rid of this Mac William thing. So Richard actually becomes Mac William for a while.

And, on the way back from Dublin on one of these trips, there's bad weather. She can't sail home. So she goes to Houth Castle and asks for a meal, you know, for herself and her 50 men she's got on board the ship. And they say, "No." And she's like, "This is Irish hospitality" — this is against everything she believes in. So she sees some kid walking around in front of the castle and she takes him back with her to Clew Bay, because, you know, he belonged to the castle! And her ransom is that Houth Castle will always have the doors open at dinner time and always have an extra plate at the table. And to this day, Houth Castle sets an extra place at the table.

Yes, it's a nice story, but things are getting worse. So Richard Bingham makes — we didn't read this, but Sidney wrote home at some point, "I've killed so many of the Irish varlets I can't keep track of them." Richard Bingham makes this guy look good. Richard Bingham is kind of like the Nazis in Yugoslavia. He's just slaughtering everybody; it's a scorched earth policy. He's going to do anything to get Ireland back, and he's really got it in for Gráinne. He gets his brother to kill her oldest son. He's fighting with them all the time. He actually gets her middle son to work with him. That was a very bad idea. Gráinne finds out, goes, kills all his cattle, burns his village. He never does that again. He also arrests her, she's also released again. One of her biographers thinks maybe she was actually a British spy, that she was spying on the Spanish. We have the Spanish Armada (1588) in this time, you know, where the Irish really thought this was it — they were going to fight with the Spanish and get rid of the British — and it didn't work that way. This is kind of the time where "the luck of the Irish" became a saying. Everything goes wrong.

Gráinne writes to Queen Elizabeth 'cause she's got to get rid of Bingham. She's also got like 50 soldiers in her castle who she has to feed right now, and it's not a good situation. And she writes and says, "He's killed my son. He's done this, he's done this, he's done this, and he wasn't supposed to," — [READS] "And further, for the pity to be had of this aged woman, having not, by the custom of the Irish, any title to livelihood or position or portion of her late two husbands' lands, now being a widow, and yet her sons' enjoying their fathers' lands." So, she's destitute. She may have gambled the money away, but no matter what, she is not in a good way. Doesn't get an answer from Elizabeth, and then her youngest son, Tibbot, is arrested and charged with treason, which is, you know, basically almost a death

sentence.

So she decides she's not waiting for the Queen's answer. She's just going to sail to Greenwich Castle. So she gets on a boat and she sails to the Queen to wait for her answer there. You have to go past gibbets. This is what was done with pirates. Pirates were put into gibbets — I think before they were dead, actually — and then left there after, for quite a while. She passed the London Bridge with, you know, the people who were luckier and got beheaded, their heads were displayed at the beginning. It's like a town in and of itself, the London Bridge. People had lifetime leases, if you had a store there. The plague is raging in London at this time, which is why the Queen is in Greenwich. And she has to stay there for a while. She has a list of 18 questions that she gets that she has to answer, and most of them are about, you know, "Whose land does your son have? Whose land does this have? Which land..." — they're trying to find out what kind of titles, what they can get from her. And she spends a long time explaining how she's a poor widow and doesn't have anything. And all the questions about the counties that maybe belonged to her sons, the English spelled them wrong. And she says, "I know of no county by that name." But she gets her audience with the Queen!

[SHOWS SLIDE] Here she is in the flop Broadway musical, "The Pirate Queen," by the makers of Riverdance. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And this is kind of how I imagined this meeting from "Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls" — you know, here they are in their thirties and this poor little child has been abducted. But actually they're in their sixties. And the poor child is — well, she was older when she had him — so he's in his late thirties. But Queen Elizabeth was also full of makeup, her teeth are falling out.

But I think this is, you know, the story is really — it's incredible. Here's this Irish pirate, gets an audience with the Queen, and the Queen listens to her. And so the big question has always been, "Why?" And there's a lot of, "Oh, you know, they were two queens meeting one another," but that's kind of ridiculous. [SHOWS SLIDE] (This is the contemporary picture that's always used because it's only 200 years after the meeting that this picture was made.) [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] You know, that's ridiculous. She's very sly, Gráinne, and she knows she's not going to get anything from the Queen by being all haughty. But I think there was a sort of mutual respect of both being women in a man's position. That's one thing. And of course, Elizabeth was also a pirate queen. She builds up the British Empire on piracy. She's knighting all these pirates, and she's getting the pirates to become sailors and kill the Spanish Armada and build up her navy. So she understands pirates. Most of the stories — here we have things like, Elizabeth gave her a handkerchief, and she blows her nose and then throws the Queen's handkerchief into the fire. And she's like, "Yeah, you're meant to keep that," and she's like, "We have higher standards of hygiene." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

But I think basically the Queen took pity on her, and she does actually write to Bingham and say, "You have to let her son and her brother (her brother has also

been arrested) — you have to let them go. You have to give her one third of her ex-husband's lands. You have to make sure she gets some maintenance." But he doesn't really listen to Elizabeth right away. It's far away, the west of Ireland, but eventually she does and he even ends up in jail.

And then this man comes along. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, who leads the Nine Years' War. It's the largest Irish rebellion. And they almost win! At some point, the Spanish Armada comes to help them again and gets into a storm again and — it doesn't work out. And Gráinne and her son, who's sort of taken over the business, are most of the time fighting with the Irish, but she's a gambler and she's wanting to — at the end, she tells her son, "You know what, go fight for the English." And he does, even attacking the Bourkes, which are her relatives. It's her daughter's clan. Tibbot becomes the Earl of Connacht at some point. They want them, they're very good allies. From the English Calendar of State Papers in 1599, [READS] "Three very good galleys with Tibbot ne Longe, sone to Grany O'Malley, her brother and O'Malley will carry 300 men a piece. These, if employed by her majesty, would do much good in the north, and the O'Malleys are much feared everywhere by sea. There are no galleys in Ireland but these."

So, you know, Gráinne was an opportunist, and this is why she does not really appear either in the Irish or the British history books for a long, long time until Anne Chambers comes around. You can't say she was ever forgotten. She was always the stuff of legends. I really think for me, Gráinne epitomizes one of my favorite sayings, which is, "You can always tell an Irish girl, but you can't tell her much."

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: That was Laura Radosh on Gráinne Mhaol or Grace O'Malley. If you now have a burning desire to read a book about Grace O'Malley —

SUSAN STONE: And you should.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Oh, you should! — an easy way to do so would be to head on over to our new [bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org) or [uk.bookshop.org](https://uk.bookshop.org) affiliate stores. We've got books there about Grace and many of our Dead Ladies, as well as books from our presenters, and from our Dead Lady Book Club, which is an exclusive for our Patreon supporters. We'll have links in the show notes to our bookshop, shops where purchases support independent bookstores and us. And also we have a link to the Patreon in the show notes. But you can find them both by just going to those websites and searching for Dead Ladies Show. Also, another thing you could do is: take the list of books we've made to your favorite local indie bookstore.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, why not?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Why not? Give them a treat. We really appreciate your support for us, and for authors, and for culture in your own town.



SUSAN STONE: Yes, the culture people really need your support right now. Thanks to everyone who has already supported us on Patreon and elsewhere. You can also help us out by sharing our podcast with friends and family (that's free!), and rating and reviewing us on Apple Podcasts (also free!). And thank you to Anna Kiel in Denmark for her recent review — she says “Great Show - please make one about — G. E. M. Anscombe.” I had never heard of G. E. M. Anscombe, so I looked her up. She's a British analytical philosopher. Sounds fascinating, so we'll be reading more about her. Thanks for the tip, Anna. You can send your ideas via podcast review like Anna did, or email us at [info@deadladyshow.com](mailto:info@deadladyshow.com).

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It's time for some music (not a sea shanty) — that's our theme song, “Little Lily Swing” by Tri-Tachyon.

SUSAN STONE: And I think I will go find some sea shanties about Grace O'Malley and add them to the show notes! The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Thank you, Katy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you, Susan! And thanks to everybody out there listening. See you soon.

SUSAN STONE: Bye!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Bye-bye!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - “Little Lily Swing” by Tri-Tachyon)

FLORIAN DUIJSENS ON TAPE: Support for this episode of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Berliner Senat.

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