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Judith Cook. *Pirate Queen: The Life of Grace O'Malley, 1530-1603.* East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2004. xii + 195 pp. ÂÂ£9.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86232-247-9.

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Painting the Portrait of a Pirate Queen

Pirate Queen: The Life of Grace O'Malley, 1530-1603 is a swashbuckling tale of an exceptional woman who made herself a force in Irish and English politics. This is no mean feat for the daughter of an Irish chieftain from County Mayo. Both her husbands were important personages in their own right, but it was Grace (also known as "Grainne," "Grainemhaoil," or "Grania") who was *de facto* chief of her sept and the admiral of her own fleet. She was almost an exact contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I: they met at least once–probably recognizing they were kindred sisters in the almost exclusively male world of sixteenth-century power politics.

Judith Cook's purpose is to bring O'Malley to the attention of a wider audience: "Renowned now in legend, ballad, poetry and even music in her own country, Grace O'Malley remains surprisingly unknown outside of it" (p. xii). Without question, O'Malley's story is one worth telling and reading. Her life has all the elements of an adventure tale: murdered lovers, wayward children, and villainous enemies. The backdrop is Ireland's internal conflicts and its David and Goliath struggle against English domination.

The assembling of O'Malley's life history is hardly a straightforward matter. The paper trail is far from abundant. Cook relies on a mix of legend, archaeology, and reasonable supposition to fill in the considerable blanks. Of particular interest is the book's second appendix, namely a court deposition which provides a rare opportunity to "hear" O'Malley's voice.

Cook also wrestles with O'Malley's radically different reputations. In some circles, she is a Celtic heroine and, in others, she is a traitor for having consorted with the English when it furthered her ambitions. O'Malley was in many ways indicative of the shifting factions and alliances of Anglo Irish politics at the time.

O'Malley's dominance within her own territories and nearby waters flew in the face of English encroachment. She asserted her own form of justice, exacted protection money and plundered at will. As in most things, O'Malley paid little heed to conventions of the day and made a number of English and Irish enemies. When it suited her purposes, she was a dutiful subject of the Crown: she appealed (successfully!) to England's sovereign, Elizabeth I, and English law, as it entitled her to a greater portion of her dead husbands' estates than Irish custom.

While we can appreciate that O'Malley courted the "powers that be" as a means of advancing her own and her family's interests, her involvement with the English Crown seems to have gone beyond this. Cook raises the intriguing matter of O'Malley's narrow escape from the scaffold in 1586. Her arch nemesis, Sir Richard Bingham, the English Governor of Connaught, intended to hang her as a "notable traitress and the nurse of all rebellions in the province for forty years" (p. ix). Yet, she received a last minute royal reprieve from the Queen herself. Certainly she must have done something to warrant such miraculous intervention. Cook suggests that the Pirate Queen was providing intelligence for the English government. O'Malley's ships may have noted the movement

of Spanish vessels for Elizabeth's spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham.

Cook is an evocative writer and an amateur historian. To her credit, she does not try to simplify this multifaceted character: "what started out as an attempt to tell the story of the life and times of a highly romantic figure has turned into something altogether more complex" (p. xii). Given the lack of notes, we may assume that the book is aimed at a popular audience. For the most part, Cook handles the shoals of early modern European history well, but there are a number of points where her lack of expertise is apparent. For instance, she blames Philip II of Spain for spurring Mary Tudor towards burning heretics in England. The burnings of Protestant martyrs (which would earn her the sobriquet "Bloody Mary") was very much the Queen's idea. There are other mistakes as well. It was outspoken Christina of Milan who made the famous quip that if she had two heads she would marry Henry VIII, which Cook attributes to Mary of Guise. Cook assumes that the inability to write one's name was an indicator of illiteracy. This is not necessarily the case: sixteenth-century students learned to read before they could write. Despite her assertions, I doubt that the murder of Mary, Queen of Scot's consort, Darnley, was considered a "terrorist outrage" (p. 52). Darnley was cruel and ambitious as well as being a personal and political liability for Mary Stewart: he even assisted in the fatal stabbing of her secretary, Rizzio, before the eyes of the pregnant Queen. Mary and Scotland wept few tears for him. Mary probably suffered more politically for her marriage to the suspected assassin. Nor is it clear why the Queen of Scots deserves any space in this examination of Grace O'Malley at all. Most of Cook's discussion of the Scots focuses on the Irish employment of Scottish soldiers. Cook's chapter on the Armada is also shaky. She asserts that "the English navy was fully prepared" (p. 124) in 1588. Extant sources from the period (including the State Papers Domestic which are listed in her bibliography) reveal a different picture: very high shipboard morbidity and mortality and "great need" of provisions, wages, clothes, and ammunition. Few books are without factual errors or misinterpretations but, in spots, Cook's knowledge of early modern history is not always sufficient.

Having said that, I applaud Cook's final product. We are always entertained by a good pirate yarn, more so when it is based in truth and the protagonist is a hardscrabble, seafaring woman. Clearly she had more than her share of personal tragedies and even managed to drag herself back from ruin when she lost her entire fleet at age sixty. The fact that she could obtain and retain command of a fleet of ships and men as well as considerable power on land is astounding. Doubtless Cook will get her wish: this intriguing tale of tragedy and triumph will spread the Pirate Queen's fame (or infamy) well beyond the borders of Ireland.

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