

The Pirate Queen – A Timewalker Journey
By Christina Bauer
Windstorm Creative Publishers – Blue Works Imprint
ISBN# 1590922247
\$14.95 USD retail
www.Timewalks.com



Author Q&A

The Pirate Queen is inspired by Grace O'Malley, a real-life pirate leader from the 16th century. Why did you decide to write about her?

I became interested in women like Grace O'Malley after I founded my own software company. I wanted to learn everything I could about other women leaders through history. It took a lot of research, but every so often I'd find a footnote here or a side reference there. Over time, I collected information on dozens of women who had accomplished simply astounding things. Grace O'Malley was one of the first who inspired me. I call this group my "Hidden Heroines."

Tell us about Grace. What was she like?

I believe Grace was daring, charming, and intelligent, but in surprising ways. For example, Grace's pirates used galley ships, oar-driven boats common in ancient Rome. In Grace's time though, sail-driven ships – the kind one might typically picture with pirates – were the norm. So Grace was using old technology, but turned it to her advantage. Her galleys would hide, biding their time until a sailing vessel got trapped without any wind. Then those old-fashioned boats became a real advantage – they could power in and raid at will. This is the kind of cunning that gave Grace a long career: she started raiding ships as a teenager and was still active in her seventies.

In the book you have Grace meeting – and defeating – Queen Elizabeth I. Did this really happen?

Absolutely! The meeting is included in English records from the time. Here's the situation: Grace leads a relatively small group with a long list of complaints about Sir Bingham, England's appointed governor of Ireland. You wouldn't think she'd even get a meeting with the Queen, much less win any concessions.

But she did meet with Queen Elizabeth and walked away with Bingham disgraced, her son released from prison, and an agreement that she could raid the ships of enemies of England as a privateer, or a "legal" pirate. Now keep in mind that Elizabeth was notorious for favoring the beautiful, charismatic and well-dressed. She even dismissed courtiers from her presence for wearing unfashionable clothes! So Grace must have been a knock out personality for this savvy queen to agree to so many concessions. Oh yes, and did I mention how old Grace was when the meeting happened? She was 63 years old, pretty old by 16th century thinking.

What were some of the challenges you faced in writing about a real, historical figure?

I faced one serious challenge early on: we don't have a lot of source documents on Grace, and the ones we have were written by the English, so they aren't necessarily flattering. In writing this book, I didn't see my role as that of historian. It would be a very short book if I did that, and it would be one that focused on a skewed vision of Grace. Instead I wanted to write about things we don't have historical documents for, such as the intricacies of her sea battles. So in these cases I would find a well-documented parallel. For example, I patterned a key sea-battle in the book on the Battle of Actium, a famous Roman sea-battle that used oar-driven galleys. You may know it as the battle in which Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by Julius Caesar.

What surprised you the most in writing and researching Grace O'Malley?

I am still amazed by the many accomplishments of Grace and many other women pirate leaders. For example, in France you have ladies like The Lioness of Brittany, whose fleet struck fear into the hearts of other ships with ominous black sails. In China, there's Lady Ching Shih who was arguably the most feared and effective pirate of all time. Some sources say she had tens of thousands of pirates serving under her. And Canada is home to one of my personal favorite pirate leaders, Gunpower Gertie, the Pirate

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Queen of the Kootenays. One day I hope all of these hidden heroines find someone to tell their stories to the world as well.