

Hidden Treasure-Historical Truth
Scandalous Women, Pirates with Attitude
By Katherine Bone

A flag with black skull and crossbones, the devilish 'Old Roger', flaps in the wind. Untamed seas roll beneath a darkened hull. Danger sails with the tide and knees of the innocent buckle with fear. The alarm bell sounds. "Pirates! Surrender or die!"

If all goes according to plan, a pirate's enemies never discover a captain's Achilles heel. Secrecy, stealth and ruthlessness were vital in warding off 'the hempen jig'. Forced to disguise themselves, going against pirate code # VI, 'no boy or woman will be allow'd amongst them'; women pirates lived with greater risk. They fought against superstitions that a woman on board ship brought bad luck to the crew and only a naked woman could calm a storm. Scandalously, a lady pirate was a chameleon, a seafaring rebel willing to compromise security and safety in order to leave stifling conventions, pre-arranged marriages and financial dependency behind. Free to love whomever she chose, free to come and go whenever she pleased, she had the uncanny ability to convince men to follow her into battle and beyond. She was a fearsome sight to behold and while maintaining order, could be the cruelest captain of them all.

Some scandalous women who called themselves pirates were successful in keeping their identities secret. History has forgotten them. Yet history has provided numerous other examples of their ilk. It is these women who personify our wildest imaginings. Their stories instill pity, fascination and awe.

Alfhild lived in the 9th Century. She was the daughter of Seward, a Scandinavian king and member of the Goth tribe. Her legendary beauty was kept hidden behind a veil. For her protection, her father kept a pair of vipers outside her bedroom door, letting it be known that any suitor capable of getting past the poisonous beasts would earn Alfhild's hand in marriage. To fail meant death. To Alfhild's dismay, Alf, son of Danish king Sygarus, succeeded. Determined not to be owned by any man, Alfhild ran away. Long before the Vikings, she formed an all female crew and amassed a large fleet of ships in order to pillage the Danish coast. Unfazed, Alf vowed to reclaim his love. He set out to capture Alfhild by engaging her ships in a Finnish harbor. Not long after the battle began, and outnumbered, Alfhild found herself standing in front of the man she'd spurned. A man demanding his conjugal rights, one who then forced to her wear dresses and bear his children.

Grace O'Malley, Grania ny Maille, was the daughter of Owen "Dubhdara" Black Oak O'Malley, member of the renowned O'Malley's who charged tolls for ships passing through Irish waters. She earned the nickname Granuaile, which means bald, because she cut off her hair as a child in order to be accepted by the boys who took her sailing. At sixteen, she married Donal O'Flaherty and moved to his castle on Bunowen. Donal's neighbors called him An Cullagh, the cock, because he was proud. This earned his castle the new name Cock's Castle. Through the years, Grace gave birth to a daughter and two sons while continuing to *protect* her shores. When Donal was killed, Grace took command repelling an attack and going so far as to melt down the castle roof and pour liquid metal onto the heads of English soldiers. She kidnapped the Lord of Howth's grandson after he wouldn't offer her hospitality and made him swear to keep an empty seat at his table for a needy stranger as a condition for his grandson's release, a seat

which is still left open today. After Donal was killed, his leadership passed to a cousin and Grace returned to Clare Island. She met and fell in love with Hugh de Lacy who was murdered by the MacMahons of Donna Castle. Grace retaliated before giving birth to a third son, Theobald, on board her ship. Shortly after childbirth, her ship was attacked and she rose to the defense of her crew. She married Richard Bourke, Richard-an-Iarainn, a well propertied man with political ties and a home named Rockfleet (Carraigahowley) Castle. Then, captured and imprisoned for a year and a half at Dublin castle, Grace barely escaped execution. When she was finally freed, she boldly approached Queen Elizabeth barefoot and dressed in Irish clothing, humbling herself before the English sovereign she'd battled in order to obtain a pardon for her son. Theobald's lands were then restored and his pardon granted. Afterward, she became bored and returned to the sea until she died in 1603. Her body is said to rest in Cistercian Abbey on Claire Island.

Lady Mary Killigrew was born into piracy in the 16th Century. Her father was Phillip Wolverston, the "Gentleman Pirate of Suffolk". Her brother Peter roved Ireland's coastline. Cousins John Mitchell and John Penrose were pirates and she married Sir John Killigrew who had an expensive house at Arwennack, near Pendennis Castle, along the secluded Cornish coast. Together, they pillaged and stashed their loot in a warehouse until one stormy night when Mary sent a boarding party onto a doomed Spanish vessel, collecting everything of value, including Holland cloth and leather furniture. As a result, the Spanish crew was murdered. With blood on her hands, Mary couldn't abide looking at the booty and had it buried. Juan de Chavis and Capt. Phillip de Oryo complained about the Spanish crew's massacre. The Cornwall Commission of Piracy was alerted. Mary's son John, head of the Cornwall Commission, misdirected the information to protect her. The Earl of Bedford in London was then contacted. As head of the Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council, Bedford sought the dissolution of Mary's piracy ring. Witnesses were called, yet influential friends came forward in Mary's defense. Later, when Mary tried to pillage a German ship, once again she came under local scrutiny. As before, John came to her rescue offering bribes for her release. Nothing is known of Mary after this time but history has shown that John continued his marauding ways.

Rachel Wall looked at piracy as a means of escaping a life of privilege. Born to devoutly religious parents, she longed to be free of their twice daily prayer vigils. She ran away from home twice, eloping with Boston fisherman and Revolutionary War privateer George Wall who deserted her in Boston. Rachel became a servant on Beacon Hill until George returned with his pockets lined with plunder, successfully wooing her back. When the ship they were to set sail on left without them, they 'borrowed' a sloop and roved the Isles of Shoals in Essex harbor, luring ships to their doom. Murdering the ship's crew, they stole everything of value before sinking the ships. In two years, they disabled 12 ships, killing 24 men. Ironically during a storm, George and a crewman were swept overboard. Rachel was rescued and returned to Boston where she worked as a maid. Addicted to her old way of life, she crept onto idle ships and stole booty beneath the Captain's nose. Somewhat unjustly, she was accused of robbing a Boston woman and denied the charges vehemently. She was sentenced to dangle from the gallows. There she proclaimed her innocence, yet admitted to what she and George had done. With her last breath, she forgave George for leading her into a pirate's life and warned other women to stay away from wicked company. Rachel Wall was the last woman to be hung for piracy in Massachusetts when she did the hempen jig on October 8th, 1789.

Was she invented by a 19th Century author? Charlotte de Berry was also born into affluence in 1636. Hanging out on the docks, she disguised herself as a man to experience the freedom she craved. One night, she met Jack Jib, Jack Melees, who thought her a boy until Charlotte revealed her true identity. Impressed by her bravado, and perhaps her feminine curves, Jack married her instantly. After a month together, he was called back to the sea by the Navy. Charlotte would not be parted from him. She dressed as a man, pretending to be Jack's brother, Dick. They did everything together, to include fighting side by side until Lieutenant House learned Charlotte's secret. At last, obsession got the best of House. His jealousy mounted and he attempted to lure Jack to his death by placing him in dangerous situations during the heat of battle. To his consternation, 'Dick' fought by Jack's side. His plan having backfired, House accused Jack of mutiny, sentencing him to the most severe punishment of all, to be flogged by the entire fleet, one ship at a time, until he died from his wounds. After Jack's death, Charlotte's hatred of House intensified. She stabbed him, jumped ship and made her way to an English port where she worked as an 'entertainer' along the waterfront. There she met Captain Wilmington of the Guinea merchantman Normandy. Wilmington kidnapped her and took her aboard his ship forcing her to marry him. When Charlotte found out the crew hated their Captain she convinced the crew to mutiny and killed him by cutting off his head with a sharp dagger. Renaming Wilmington's ship, Trader, Charlotte resumed her 'Dick' persona and led the crew as 'Captain Rudolph'. She was a cruel and ruthless leader, known to sew a captive's mouth shut. One day, while her ship was getting repairs, she met Jose Sandano, a wealthy planter. They fell in love and quickly married. With Jose's fortune at her disposal and her ship repaired, they returned to the sea but a fateful storm sank the Trader. Only eight of the crew remained afloat in a makeshift raft. Charlotte and Jose were in the group. Adrift without food or water for eight days, a difficult decision was made and straws were pulled. The loser was to be shot and eaten, and sadly, Jose had pulled the short straw. A bullet instantly silenced his protests and almost instantly, a ship appeared on the horizon providing rescue. When that ship was attacked by pirates, 'Captain Rudolph' rallied the crew and saved the day but without Jose, her triumph was meaningless. Proclaiming "Jose!", Charlotte jumped into Davy Jones locker never to be seen again.

Pirate vixens lived like their male counterparts, savoring the day and living large off the spoils. They loved hard, often outliving their mates. Theirs was a story of fortitude, brilliance, amazing intelligence, strategic skill, fierce maternal guardianship, and often a lack of good judgment. The tales these women left behind are lessons that have outlasted the centuries and from which we can learn from today. A woman has the right to choose her own path, be it right or wrong. She can outlive hardship, love with all her heart, and fight with the best especially when she believes in a cause. Destiny does the rest.