

How Gaelic Irish Women Exercised Agency in Early Modern Ireland, 1400-1700

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With the increasing presence of the English government in Ireland during the Early Modern Period, the history of Gaelic Irish women is often left untold. These women were a part of everyday life and yet their narratives have often been framed to contextualize the stories of men, if they are indeed mentioned at all. This paper explores how Gaelic Irish women were able to exert agency in various aspects of their lives including marriage, labour, and leadership. From dowries and property rights to brief mentions of women stepping into leadership roles outside traditional gender norms, this paper aims to examine important junctures of Gaelic Irish women's lives and whether or not it can be said that they were true agents of their situations, or simply conforming to the patriarchal societal expectations. As many saw the Gaelic Irish culture vanishing, these women left their mark on history with deeds not documented yet crucial to the fabric of society.

Ireland's history from 1400-1700 has long been of interest to historians because of the country's fraught relationship with England and how the Gaelic Irish Lords attempted to resist the colonization of their island. What is missing from these studies and narratives during this period is the lives and roles of the women who were undoubtedly just as affected by the larger political events as the men. Within traditional Gaelic Irish culture, men and women both fulfilled their necessary roles to ensure their society functioned. While most women followed these traditional societal expectations, a few were able to demonstrate capabilities outside of long-established gender assumptions through exercising agency.

Agency can be defined as the "ability or capacity to act or exert power."⁸⁷ In this period of Irish history, when Gaelic Irish Lords tried to exert agency over each other and the English, women were able to do the same within the smaller contexts of their own lives. Traditionally, Gaelic Irish women's main roles in society were connected to the circumstances of their families, either under their father's roof or later under their husbands'. Their upbringings were designed to prepare them for the labour and duties that were expected of a wife. Certain aspects of this custom, such as dowries, landholding, and children, could be used by women as a means for increased influence in society. Female labour was important as it ensured society's survival. Women were

⁸⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, third edition. (December 2021).
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3851?redirectedFrom=agency#eid>

responsible for cooking and childbearing without much opportunity to exert power or influence over their own families. Few women were respected in leadership positions, as this occurrence was rare rather than the standard. Gaelic Irish women did exercise agency in many aspects of their lives including in their families and politics. While it was not universal for all women throughout the period under certain circumstances select women were able to assert their independence.

Gaelic Ireland was a patriarchal society. Women's lives and their importance in society, in regards to marriage and family, were secondary to their male counterparts. This is not to say they were inferior to men, rather they had separate roles within the family structure. For the upper ranks of society, marriages were conducted with strategic alliances in mind. When the political purpose of the union no longer served the husband, his wife returned to her father's family with the dowry she had brought into the marriage. Within this rigid cultural structure, it was difficult overall for women to exercise agency, but it was possible to a certain degree in certain parts of their lives in the family framework.

The names of Gaelic Irish girls are not often recorded in written records, usually only appearing in documentation when they married, which was commonly around the age of 16.⁸⁸ In regards to raising their children, the Gaelic Irish tradition of fostering was not exclusively for boys. Prior to marriage, it was common for girls of wealthy Gaelic families to be raised in a foster household.⁸⁹ The extent of women's formal education is not known, but presumably it was only available to the women of higher ranks, if at all. There is evidence that some Gaelic Irish women were literate in either Gaelic, Latin, or both. Gráinne Ní Mhallie, a Connaught chieftain in the sixteenth century, presumably received some formal education as she wrote letters and petitions to the English court and, on her visit to England in 1593, spoke to Queen Elizabeth I in Latin.⁹⁰

Most Gaelic Irish women married. Higher ranking women, such as daughters of chieftains, married those equal to their rank for political advantages. Some English families intermarried with Gaelic Irish ones and became gaelicized. More commonly it was noble English women who married Gaelic Irish Lords. However, Gaelic Irish women also married into Anglo-Norman families who had become gaelicized. By the seventeenth century, religion became more important in a marriage partner than ethnic origin. Therefore, marriages between the Anglo-Normans and Gaelic Irish were more common, as both groups were Catholic.⁹¹ In regards to the choice of a marriage partner, this was done by the girl's father which left her no opportunity to exercise free choice.⁹²

⁸⁸ Mary O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), 254.

⁸⁹ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 76.

⁹⁰ Anne Chambers, *Granuaile: Ireland's Pirate Queen, c. 1530-1603* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2003), 36.

⁹¹ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 16.

⁹² O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 252.

One of the main aspects of Gaelic Irish society that separated men and women from positions of power was landholdings. In Gaelic Ireland, married women could manage their own property independently of their families or husbands.⁹³ This land would be from a life-interest of her family's or husband's estates.⁹⁴ However, despite administering this property separately, it did not give women the means to receive the same level of economic or military control as men.⁹⁵ Although the wife of a chieftain could be granted the right to collect rents from a certain portion of her husband's land, she would not have been able to use the funds to gain any political advantage. For example, in 1633 Dermot McOwen Carthy lent his new wife, Syly, land for the duration of her lifetime in exchange for animals, cattle, and horses from her dowry.⁹⁶ There is no record of what Syly did with the land, which points to the fact that she most likely did nothing out of the ordinary. Another way in which Gaelic Irish women received land was through a dowry. This was privately owned land known as *solathar* and was independent from the clan lands ruled by the chief. There was no restriction on how much private property a woman could own. Gaelic law dictated that women could not inherit family land until the sixteenth century when a new law determined women were only eligible to inherit property if there were no male heirs.⁹⁷ Otherwise, the only way to have independent land was through a dowry which became common in Ireland around 1400.⁹⁸ Dowries in Gaelic Ireland not only included land, but also cattle because of its source of wealth, and were negotiated between the bride's father and her new family, either her father-in-law or husband.⁹⁹ Property in women's dowries accounted for a sizable portion of the wealth of the country and could be passed through the female line.¹⁰⁰ Women were in possession of gold, silver, sheep, and cattle independently from their husbands and had authority over decisions which concerned this property. If the wife and husband divorced she could take her land and property with her. Customarily, women did not instigate divorce from their husbands themselves, rather the end of their marriage was the consequence for when their husbands no longer needed a political alliance. Although women were independently able to hold land and property, they were able to exercise a small form of agency, but as they were still

⁹³ Kenneth Nicholls, "Irishwomen and Property in the sixteenth century," in *Women in Early Modern Ireland*, ed. Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 17.

⁹⁴ Katharine Simms, "Women in Norman Ireland," in *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*, ed. Margaret Mac Curtain and Donncha Ó Corráin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 14.

⁹⁵ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁷ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 81.

⁹⁸ Nicholls, "Irishwomen and Property," 20.

⁹⁹ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 76-77.

¹⁰⁰ Nicholls, "Irishwomen and Property," 25.

under the subjugation of their former families or their husbands, they were unable to fully exert authority over their lands, properties, and dowries.

Widows in Gaelic Ireland did not have access to an automatic third of her husband's estate, as was the English custom.¹⁰¹ Instead, they were entitled to the repayment of their dowries.¹⁰² Unlike certain European societies where widows could remain unmarried and keep their property, upon the end of the marriage of a Gaelic Irish woman, she would return to her former family and then be eligible to marry again. For Gaelic Irish women, widowhood did not offer them any additional opportunity to use their dowered lands and assets for any benefit and simply meant they were expected to follow the traditional custom of returning to their former families after their marriage was over.

Another aspect of society unique to Gaelic Ireland was that the attribution of paternity to children was under the authority of the mother.¹⁰³ She could claim her child belonged to any member of society, including more powerful chiefs. For example, Alison Kelly claimed that her son Matthew's father was Conn Bacach O'Neill. This act had major political consequences as O'Neill made Matthew the heir to the Earldom of Tyrone, ahead of his more "legitimate" sons. This led to conflict within the O'Neill family which had repercussions in their governance and the Tudor administration, which affected the country of Ireland overall. This example proves the paternity of a child was of great consequence and the woman's ability to declare it was a small form of agency.

Upbringings, marriage, widowhood, and divorce offered no opportunity for women to exercise agency, while dowries, landholding, and children only offered limited circumstances. Women were either raised in the households of their fathers or, for higher ranking women, in a foster house. Their opportunity for formal education was limited because their upbringing intended to prepare them for marriage. Women did not have free will to choose a marriage partner, nor determine if that union would end as it was their husbands who chose to divorce them or, they were left as widows. Once a marriage ended they were expected to go back to their former families where their fathers or the highest ranking male members of their family would decide what they would do next in reference to marriage.¹⁰⁴ In regard to their dowries, women could leave their marriages with all the holdings they had brought into it, which they held independently. However, this license did not offer them opportunities to do anything with these assets. Similarly, although they were able to proclaim the paternity of their children, the child's upbringing would have followed traditional conventions. Within the context of the family, women were only able to act independently in extremely restrictive circumstances and did not abandon their cultural standards.

¹⁰¹ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 99.

¹⁰² Nicholls, "Irishwomen and Property," 22.

¹⁰³ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 252.

In the fifteenth century the landscape of Ireland was almost entirely rural. Women's labour was largely confined to the home for both higher and lower ranking women. Aristocratic women's duties would have largely focused on raising children, hospitality to guests, and running their households.¹⁰⁵ Lower ranking women's duties included tasks such as care of the animals, childcare, textile and dairy production, beer brewing, and food preparation.¹⁰⁶ In the absence of market towns in Ireland, homes were self-sufficient. It was understood that women would be responsible for these homemaking tasks and therefore they brought household items, such as pans, iron griddles, and utensils for cooking and beer brewing, with them as part of their dowries.¹⁰⁷ In regards to dairy production, women were responsible for making milk and butter.¹⁰⁸ Food preparation included grinding corn and growing crops such as oats and barley.¹⁰⁹ Women spun linen and woollen yarn for household use. Some women in the south and east were able to export their spinning to England or Flanders because of the established textile trade in the region.¹¹⁰ Employment for unmarried women was scarce. As tower houses were military fortifications as well as a lord's household, most of the operations were done by men where the only task single women did was the low-status job of carrying water.¹¹¹ This lack of opportunity points to the overall fact that remaining single in this culture was extremely uncommon. Although women's labour was vital to the continuation of Gaelic Irish society, as they were responsible for making food and having children, it continues to remain overlooked and understudied. In this aspect of their lives, labour was not an opportunity for women to act independently as it was undoubtedly essential to Gaelic Irish society as a whole.

The patriarchal Gaelic Irish society made it difficult for women to assume positions of power and influence. Good clan leaders were characterized by strength and competence in order to be chieftains, attributes not often used to describe women. Since the introduction of Christianity to Ireland, female leaders had become an idea of the past. The military structure of Gaelic Irish society and the role of women within the culture made it hard, though not impossible, for women to exert political influence.¹¹² There were no established political roles for women and therefore no need for them to be involved except to make allies through marriage and produce heirs through childbirth.¹¹³ A woman's

¹⁰⁵ Chambers, *Granuaile: Ireland's Pirate Queen*, 35.

¹⁰⁶ Mary O'Dowd, "Women and paid work in rural Ireland, c. 1500-1800", in *Women and paid work in Ireland 1500-1930*, ed. Bernadette Whelan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 14.

¹⁰⁷ O'Dowd, "Women and paid work in rural Ireland," 14.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 86-87.

¹¹² O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 22.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

“ability to exercise direct political authority usually depended on her access to resources to make that power effective.”¹¹⁴ Only a few Gaelic Irish women in early modern Ireland were able to act independently of traditional expectations and become respected leaders in their communities. The only example of a female chieftain in Gaelic Ireland comparable to the men of the period is Gráinne Ní Mhallie whose authority was legitimized by her military strength.¹¹⁵ The fact that only one woman was in a leadership position is not to say that Gaelic Irish women had no political influence at all. Aristocratic women in particular influenced, helped, and consulted with their husbands to exercise agency within the means that were available to them.

Ní Mhallie (c.1530-1603) was the daughter of Eoghan Ó Máille, the chief of the Mayo clan, and his wife Margaret.¹¹⁶ Located along the west coast of Ireland, the Ó Máilles used their ships for fishing, trading, and piracy.¹¹⁷ Nothing about Ní Mhallie’s childhood is recorded, although we can assume based on later events that it was in this period where she learned to sail and operate the boats of her family’s clan.¹¹⁸ When she was around fifteen or sixteen years old Ní Mhallie married her first husband Dónal an Chogaidh, the *tánaiste* to Dónal Crone Ó Flaithbheartaigh, and had three children, Maidread, Murrugh na Maor, and Eoghan.¹¹⁹ After her husband died, she returned to her home territory with some men from her late husband’s clan and gathered both *gallóglaigh* and men from other clans. She then formed her own rebellious army to gain more power in the area, which she referenced in her petition to Queen Elizabeth I.¹²⁰ After her father’s death she was made chieftain of the Ó Máille clan.¹²¹ Ní Mhallie had a brother, most likely half-brother, Dónal, and for reasons that are unclear, he himself was not chosen as the leader of the clan. In Gaelic Irish tradition, selection of the most competent leader over birthright was more important. Records are not clear as to why Dónal did not succeed as chieftain. In any case, quite unusually, the clan chose Ní Mhallie as their chieftain. She continued to lead her men and accumulated wealth by raiding the coast.¹²² She married her second husband, Risteard-an-Iarain Bourke, the *tánaiste* to the MacWilliams, in 1566 and had a son, Tiobóid na Long, the following year.¹²³ All the while, Ní Mhallie had continued to operate her ships off the coast of Ireland, raiding and rebelling against the English. From

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 21; Chambers, *Granuaile: Ireland’s Pirate Queen*, 20.

¹¹⁷ Chambers, *Granuaile: Ireland’s Pirate Queen*, 7.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹⁹ Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 214.

¹²⁰ Chambers, *Granuaile: Ireland’s Pirate Queen*, 52.

¹²¹ Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 215.

¹²² Chambers, *Granuaile: Ireland’s Pirate Queen*, 54.

¹²³ Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 215.

1577-1579 she was imprisoned by Gerald Fitzgerald, the 14th Earl of Desmond.¹²⁴ Afterwards, Ní Mhallie returned to Connacht and when her husband died in 1583 she went to claim his property, including his castle Carraig an Cabhlaigh.¹²⁵ She became involved in an insurrection against England to which the new Governor of Connacht, Sir Richard Bingham, responded by continuously attacking her lands, and on one occasion even took her son Tiobóid as a hostage.¹²⁶ It was under this backdrop that Ní Mhallie appealed directly to Queen Elizabeth I requesting Bingham to stop his harassment. After Bingham took her son and brother into custody, Ní Mhallie travelled to England in 1593 to petition the Queen for her son and brother's release for which she was successful.¹²⁷ The English presence in Ireland continued for the rest of Ní Mhallie's life. She returned to Connacht around 1600, but stayed out of any action until her death in 1603.¹²⁸ Ní Mhallie undoubtedly is an example of a Gaelic Irish woman who successfully exercised agency in a time and period where the role of women was not to lead clans, but to simply work within their system. Her leadership capabilities, judgement on how to handle enemies, and strength on the sea proves that independent leadership of women in Gaelic Ireland was possible.

Not all women were as visible as Gráinne Ní Mhallie in regards to how they were able to exercise agency. Women such as Finola Ó Domhnaill, Máire Ní Ciaragáin, Mór Ní Cearbhaill, and Máire Rua Ní Mhathúna, are all examples of women who exercised agency in the political sphere and operated within the confines of the acceptable nature of women in the culture. As Katharine Simms wrote,

The wife of the chieftain is sometimes found actively engaged in negotiations for the release of hostages, and even sitting in council with her husband's leading vassals to decide on questions of war and peace, or to determine succession to the throne.¹²⁹

The example she provides is of Finola Ó Domhnaill, also known as Iníon Dubh, who was the wife of the chieftain Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill.¹³⁰ In his biography on the life of her son, Hugh Roe O'Donnell, historian Lughaidh O'Clery explains how Ó Domhnaill was invited to a gathering that Hugh had called as "the head of advice and counsel of the Cinel Conaill."¹³¹ Although she was a woman and possessed 'womanly qualities,' her

¹²⁴ Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 216.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹²⁹ Simms, "Women in Norman Ireland," 14.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.; Lughaidh O'Clery, *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Ui Dhomhnaill: Life of Hugh Roe O'Donnell* (Ireland, 1895), 39.

¹³¹ O'Clery, *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Ui Dhomhnaill*, 39.

advice and counsel was respected amongst the attendees as she also had “the heart of a hero and the soul of a soldier.”¹³² O’Clery further explains that she was well connected and able to command *gallóglaigh* from Scotland as well as hire and pay Irish soldiers, “especially during the time that her son (the Roe) was in prison and confined by the English.”¹³³ Ó Domhnaill’s position as the wife of a chieftain and mother of the family member with the strongest claim to the chieftaincy gave her access to resources which allowed her to assert political will in a clear and direct way. She knew people who could help her and used these connections to advocate for the chieftaincy on behalf of her son. Ó Domhnaill was able to put herself into an important position through strategically asserting agency which made her respected among her peers.

Two examples of women leading troops into battle are Máire Ní Ciaragáin and Mór Ní Cearbhaill. Ní Ciaragáin was the leader of a sept in Fermanagh during the fifteenth century.¹³⁴ She was known to lead her clan into battle against the English without taking any prisoners.¹³⁵ Unfortunately, nothing else is known about her life or what led her to these circumstances. Ní Cearbhaill (d.1548) from Muster married James Fitzgerald, the 13th Earl of Desmond.¹³⁶ When her husband succeeded to Earldom, Ní Cearbhaill was kept informed of plans of conflict against the Butler family and led a sept of the clan into battle where she herself died.¹³⁷ Similarly in the seventeenth century, Máire Rua Ní Mhathúna is remembered for her resistance during the Cromwellian Wars in Ireland where she tried to save her family’s estate and Leamaneh Castle. Her second husband was Conchobhar Ó Briáin of Leamaneh Castle with whom she had five children.¹³⁸ When he was mortally wounded in 1651 she took over the defense of the castle to protect it, which ultimately fell to the Cromwellians.¹³⁹ Commanding forces in situations as Ní Ciaragáin, Ní Cearbhaill, and Ní Mhathúna all did is not only a demonstration of exercising agency, but also a show of bravery. These women took charge of the difficult situations they found themselves in and created their own arrangements to better themselves and their families’ positions.

Ní Mhallie, a chieftain, Ó Domhnaill who had influence and respect in her clan, Ní Ciaragáin led her clan into battle, and Ní Cearbhaill raised troops to protect her home. These are all examples of women who exerted influence over their own situations with effective results. Their abilities to assert their independence in a culture where men and women’s cultural roles were extremely distinct is a testament to their capabilities.

Gaelic Irish women’s lives changed considerably from 1400-1700. As the politics of the island changed their culture dramatically, women adapted as best they could.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 213.

¹³⁵ Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 213.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

In certain instances, a few women were able to exercise agency. Overall the family structure of Gaelic culture stayed constant with their upbringing, marriage, widowhood, and divorce, thus not allowing many opportunities for independence. On the other hand, their dowries, landholding, and children only offered limited means to operate outside of the control of the patriarchal system of their society. Labour was provided by women as a necessary pillar of their society and therefore did not allow women freedom outside of its structure. Politics was an area in society where women could find more of an opportunity to assert their independence and prove their capability as leaders, Ní Mhallie being the prime example, although this was rare. Gaelic Irish women did exercise agency in many aspects of their lives, specifically within their families and in the politics of Ireland. Although not a possibility for all women, the documented examples prove negative stereotypes of submissive women that exist today to explain historical women are not rooted in complete historical fact.

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