

The Pirate Queen: In Search of Grace O'Malley and Other Legendary Women of the Sea

Barbara Sjöholm

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Hours after watching her husband set out to sea on the Icelandic coast, Guðríd Símonardóttir and her son were kidnapped by an attacking horde of Algerian pirates. The young mother and child were then shipped as cargo to the Barbary Coast to be sold as slaves. Guðríd's tale of seventeenth-century courage is just one of dozens of seafaring women's adventures recounted in this unique volume that is a riveting combination of history, legendry, travel narrative, and personal memoir.

On Barbara Sjöholm's odyssey to the North Atlantic islands and coastal cities of northern Europe, she investigates the stories of mythological women—the sea goddesses, giantesses, sea witches, mermaids, and selkies of yore—as well as the adventures of historic and modern women who courageously lived on or by the sea. Starting with her encounter with the pirate Grace O'Malley's castle in Clew Bay, Ireland, Sjöholm travels north to the Orkney and Shetland Islands of Scotland, and from there to the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and the Norwegian coastline. As she uncovers the experiences of herring lassies, female cabin boys, and women sailors from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, she discovers that her journey is also stimulating a personal transformation. In brief vignettes from her childhood and the lives of her parents, she probes her identity and ultimately claims a permanent change in her life.

Sjöholm's quest for the true history of Freyðís Eiríksdóttir, daughter of Eirík the Red and sister of Leif Eiríkson, takes the author to the starkly beautiful Icelandic city of Reykjavík. There she probes the mystery of the enigmatic Freyðís, who, according to several Norse sagas, was a bloodthirsty axe murderer. The implausibility of the story's particulars leads Sjöholm to ponder why the deeds of so many notorious women of history are rarely investigated by modern scholars, who are in a position to question, verify, or dismiss ancient accounts.

Author of the PEN-award nominated memoir *Blue Windows* and editor of *Steady as She Goes: Women's Adventures at Sea*, travel writer and essayist Sjöholm (formerly Barbara Wilson) is also a co-founder of the book's publisher, the feminist publishing house Seal Press.

Among the surprises in this volume are the exquisite painterly descriptions of the fog-enshrouded islands and rugged coastal villages. Startlingly vivid images of a wild North Atlantic region ("the rain began to spill like shards of stained glass from the gilt-lined maroon and indigo storm clouds.") tumble across the page, allowing the reader to experience the harsh beauty of ocean, sky, and rock.

The *Pirate Queen* belongs on the same shelf with the growing list of titles devoted to a flourishing genre, women's adventure travel, and will appeal to a broad range of readers, particularly those who are interested in reclaiming the lost history of women's contributions.

JUDITH E. HARPER (September / October 2004)

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