

## PRESERVING THE ARMADA STORY

***Eddie O’Gorman***

THE ARMADA STORY is a complicated affair, of Kings and Queens, empires and nation states, armies and navies, pirates and treasures, galleons and cannons. It has connections that link all the nations of 16th century Europe. And it has particular resonance for Streedagh, Grange and the North West region.

More ships of the Armada were lost to weather than were lost in naval action. At least 25 ships were lost off the West Coast of Ireland and one of the greatest maritime disasters occurred at Streedagh where three ships were wrecked on 21st September 1588 with the loss of 1,100 souls.

Captain Francisco De Cuellar’s account of his survival of ship wreck, and his subsequent adventures in the North West, is a vivid record of an Ireland in the midst of massive upheaval and change. It is an invaluable record of our place and people.

Grange and Armada Development Association’s (GADA) mission is to establish Grange as the Armada Centre for Ireland through: the protection and conservation of the Armada Wreck site at Streedagh; the development of an Armada Interpretive and Visitor Centre at the Courthouse in Grange and other ancillary facilities; an annual series of events commemorating the Armada story.

The story of the Spanish Armada and the wreck site at Streedagh has been kept alive in folklore by the people of the North West for over 400 years. The site has been protected by the local population from



looters and treasure seekers. A tourist offering centred on the Armada and De Cuellar stories set in the iconic landscape of the North West has the potential to attract visitors in huge numbers to our area.

The success of the Wild Atlantic Way is self evident, now we need to ensure increased footfall to local businesses and service providers.

We are on the start of a journey that will provide employment and opportunities for all our people. With the support of the state authorities and our local and national representatives we can build an infrastructure that will sustain our area and people into the future.

### **De Cuéllar**

*Francis Kelly*

Francisco De Cuéllar was a captain of the galleon San Pedro of the squadron of Castille, one of the front line squadrons of the Spanish Armada. Following the battles with

the English fleet in the Channel, de Cuéllar was accused and convicted of breaking fleet sailing orders.

Condemned to death, he argued his case sufficiently well, to obtain a reprieve. Conditional to reprieve, was that he remain on board the Levanter La Lavia under the supervision of the Judge Advocate, Martin de Aranda.

This then was how he came to be aboard La Lavia, when she in company with La Juliana and Santa Maria de Visón also from the squadron of Levant, became trapped off the Sligo coast near Streedagh. These three ships remained stormbound here for four days. On the fifth day the weather worsened. As the storm increased, all three ships were driven ashore foundering on Streedagh Strand.

Francisco de Cuéllar survived this disaster and set out to reach safety, first here in Ireland, travelling from Sligo to the Causeway Coast of North Antrim, from there to Scotland, and from Scotland to Spanish held Antwerp.

From Antwerp he wrote a long letter detailing his adventures in Connaught and Ulster, which led to his subsequent escape.

This is the full text of Captain Francisco de Cuéllar’s memoirs of his harrowing experiences in Ireland following the shipwreck of the Spanish Armada, his trek through Sligo and Leitrim; his dealings with the local Gaelic chieftains O’Rourke and McClancy; before finding safe passage to mainland Europe, ahead of his safe return to Spain.

This letter was discovered in Spanish archives in the 19th century and is reproduced alongside.

*A letter detailing his adventures was discovered in Spanish archives in the 19th century and can be read over-leaf. [www.grangeandarmada.com](http://www.grangeandarmada.com)*

I BELIEVE that you will be astonished at seeing this letter on account of the slight certainty that could have existed as to my being alive. That you may be quite sure of this I write it the letter, and at some length, for which there is sufficient reason in the great hardships and misfortunes I have passed through since the Armada sailed from Lisbon for England, from which our Lord, in His infinite good pleasure, delivered me. As I have not had an opportunity to write to you for more than a year, I have not done so until now that God has brought me to these States of Flanders, where I arrived twelve days ago with the Spaniards who escaped from the ships that were lost in Ireland, Scotland, and Shetland, which were more than twenty of the largest in the Armada. In them came a great force of picked infantry, many captains, ensigns, commanders, and other war officials, besides several gentlemen and scions of nobility, out of all of whom, being more than two hundred, not five survived; because some of them were drowned, and those who reached the shore by swimming were cut in pieces by the English, whom the Queen keeps quartered in the Kingdom of Ireland.

I escaped from the sea and from these enemies by having commended myself very earnestly to our Lord, and to the Most Holy Virgin, His Mother; and with me three hundred and odd soldiers, who also knew how to save themselves and to swim to shore. With them I experienced great misfortunes: naked and shoeless all the winter: passing more than seven months among mountains and woods with savages, which they all are in those parts of Ireland where we were shipwrecked. I think it is not right to omit to narrate to you, or to keep back, the injuries and the great insults that it was sought to inflict upon me, so wrongfully, and without my having committed the fault of neglecting to do my duty, from which our Lord delivered me.

Having been condemned to death, as you will have known, and so ignominiously, and seeing the severity with which the order for execution was given, I demanded, with much spirit and anger, why they inflicted upon me so great an insult and dishonour, I having served the King as a good soldier and loyal subject of his on all occasions and in the encounters which we had with the fleet of the enemy, from which the galleon I commanded always came out of action very badly injured, and with many people killed and wounded. In it (my demand) I requested that a copy of the order should be given me, and that a judicial inquiry should be made of the three hundred and fifty men who were on board the galleon, and if any one of them considered me to blame they might quarter me. They did not wish to listen to me, nor to many gentlemen who interceded on my behalf, replying that the Duke was then in retirement, and very morose, and unwilling that any one should speak with him; because, in addition to the miserable success which he always had with the enemy, on the day of my trouble he was informed that the two galleons San Mateo and San Felipe of those from Portugal, in which were the two commanders, Don Francisco de Toledo, brother of the Count of Orgaz, and Don Diego Pimentel, brother of the Marquis de Tavera, were lost in the sea, and most of those they carried were cut to pieces and dead. On this account the Duke kept to his cabin, and the councillors, to make up for his perversity, did wrongs, right and left, on the lives and reputations of blameless persons; and this is so public that every one knows it.

The galleon San Pedro, in which I sailed, received much injury from many heavy cannon balls, which the enemy lodged in her in various parts; and although they were repaired as well as possible at the time, there were still some hidden shot-holes through which much water entered. After the fierce engagement we had off Calais on the 8th of August, continuing from morning till seven o'clock in the evening, which was the last of all our Armada being in the act of retiring oh! I don't know how I can say it the fleet of our enemy followed behind to drive us from their country; and when it was accomplished, and everything was safe, which was on the 10th of the same month, seeing that the enemy had stopped ceased to follow, some of the ships of our Armada trimmed up and repaired their damages. On this day, for my great sins, I was resting for a little, as for ten days I had not slept nor ceased to assist at whatever was necessary for me, a pilot mate, a bad man whom I had, without saying anything to me, made sail and passed out in advance of the admiral's ship for about two miles, as other ships had done, in order to effect repairs.