

Grace McFerrand

Sir William Rowan Hamilton's paternal grandmother

by Robert Perceval Graves

Introduced and annotated by Anne van Weerden

1 Introduction

Grace McFerrand (8 May 1743- ca 1808) was the paternal grandmother of the famous Irish mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton (1805-1865), and from his biography it is known that she came from Kirkmaiden in Scotland.

Her family is recorded on the [The Wigtownshire Pages](#), “Wigtownshire Old Parish Register of Births and Baptisms; Register of Births in Kirkmaiden Parish 1739-1747. The Reverend [Mr. James McFerrand](#) (ca 1711- 1 Sept 1763) – Minister of The Gospel in Kirkmaiden and [Elizabeth McEwan](#) (.. - 22 Jan 1800) lawful daughter to Mr. Archibald McEwan in Edinburgh were married upon the 23rd day of October 1739 years – Kirkmaiden by Drummore.” “Grace lawful daughter to Mr. James McFerrand Minister of The Gospel in Kirkmaiden Parish and Elizabeth McEwan was Born on the 8th and Baptised? on the 9th of May 1743 years – Upon the Death of The Reverend Mr. James McFerrand in 1763 his Daughter Grace McFerrand was sent from Scotland to Ireland and adopted by Mrs. Gawen (Gavin) Hamilton? of Killileagh Castle.”



Figure 1: [Kirkmaiden Old Parish Church](#). This church, formerly known as ‘Kirk Covenant’, was [built in 1638](#). It used to hold the ‘[Treacle](#)’ Bible, which dated from 1574. The church and its bible will have been a familiar sight for Grace when growing up, her father was minister there, and Grace only left Kirkmaiden when she was twenty already.

2 Graves' description of Grace M'Ferrand

Hamilton's biographer, Robert Perceval Graves (1810-1893), wrote in the [first volume](#) of his three volumed biography, published in 1882, that Grace McFerrand entered the Hamilton family through a "[romantic incident](#)."

"It must have been soon after the middle of the last century that an event took place on the coast of Scotland which enters as a romantic incident into the family history. At the extremest south-western angle of that country lies the parish of [Kirkmaiden](#) in [Galloway](#), of which at this time the Rev. James M'Ferrand was Minister; ¹ and close below his [residence](#) a vessel was wrecked on its passage from the north of Ireland, the crew and passengers of which were saved mainly by his exertions. ² His kindness did not end with these exertions, but the hospitality of the manse was extended to as many of the shipwrecked folk as it could contain. Among these were Mr. and Mrs. Gawen Hamilton of [Killileagh Castle](#) in the county of Down. ³ They remained three weeks with their kind hosts, and having before their departure become much attached to Mr. and Mrs. M'Ferrand, to both of whom a very high character is given, and having become, moreover, specially interested in their eldest girl, they prayed her parents to allow them to take the child home with them to be their adopted daughter. ⁴

"This request, favoured by the mother, was decisively negatived by the father, partly from a delicate feeling of independence, partly because he desired himself to educate a child of great promise. This duty he very successfully performed; but when she had reached the age of fifteen, he was removed from her by death, ⁵ leaving his widow and eight children unprovided for. Mrs. M'Ferrand then obeyed the injunction laid upon her at parting by Mrs. Gawen Hamilton, to appeal to her friendship if ever overtaken by misfortune; and the result was that Grace M'Ferrand was resigned by her mother to Mrs. Hamilton. Under her care she added to the charm of a sweet natural disposition and to literary acquirements already considerable the graces of manner belonging to a higher rank in life, ⁶ and afterwards was taken by her maternal friend as her companion in a continental tour.

"On her return with Mrs. G. Hamilton to Dublin from this tour, she received the addresses of William Hamilton, then, according to [...] his son Archibald, "a very eminent apothecary in Dublin." He was introduced to her acquaintance by Mrs. Gawen Hamilton, who showed her approval of the marriage which ensued by giving her protégée a dower of £500. ⁷ From this marriage sprung Archibald the father of Sir W.R. Hamilton, James his uncle and educator, and Jane Sydney his aunt. [...]

¹ The family name was also written [Macferrand](#). James came from [Greenock](#), west of Glasgow, and settled in Kirkmaiden in 1738, see [Parish of Kirkmaiden](#), p. 8.

² This shipwreck must, as Graves assumes, indeed have happened in the 1750s; Grace was born in 1743 yet she was old enough for the Hamiltons to become interested in her, and Grace's father died in 1763.

³ These Hamiltons were the parents of [Archibald Hamilton Rowan](#), one of the founding members of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen.

⁴ The term 'adopted' must be regarded within the context of their time; at the time of the shipwreck Grace may have been fifteen already, see footnote 5. Her father died when she was twenty, and she thus will have gone to Ireland when she was twenty or twenty-one. It therefore was not a child adoption, but taking over the care of a young woman before her marriage; in those times women were generally highly dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands.

⁵ From the Wigtownshire records it is clear that Grace was twenty when her father died. Perhaps Graves did not have direct access to these records, and he therefore may have had to follow family stories. Mentioning the age of fifteen may signify that the shipwreck took place when she was fifteen, therefore in or around 1758.

⁶ For Graves, as perhaps for most members of the higher classes then, this was an important subject. But in Hamilton's case it led to one of the misconceptions arising from the biography. When in 1840 Lady Hamilton had fallen ill and had left the Observatory, after some time Hamilton's sister Sydney had taken over the household; apparently the staff and servants had done that for some time. Graves then wrote that Hamilton's "children came under that regulation as to the minor points of outward appearance and observances which became their birth and dispositions." Yet that of course did not mean that the children had been running around dirty, just as Grace already had a "charm of a sweet natural disposition" and "literary acquirements already considerable." Still, in Graves' eyes it was not good enough, and he apparently judged he could mention that in his biography. But the way he wrote about it became a problem which trickled throughout it. Graves does not seem to have been conscious of the possibility that the biography would be read far outside Dublin and long after their death; he wrote it for his Dublin contemporaries. And indeed, it was doubtlessly perfectly understood in Dublin then, but in other parts of the world, and in other times, it was taken literally; it was assumed that before Sydney came the Hamilton household had been in a derailed state.

⁷ This sounds as if Grace McFerrand was only a very short time at Killileagh Castle. Yet her father died in 1763; she thus may have come to Ireland in 1763 or 1764, and she married in 1774, her eldest son Arthur Rowan having been born in 1775. Note: I [had assumed](#) that Arthur had also been named after Archibald Hamilton Rowan, but he may have been named after Mrs. Hamilton, whose own surname was Rowan.

Searching for information about Grace’s husband William Hamilton, Hamilton’s grandfather, Graves found “a narrative from the pen of Archibald Hamilton, in which he records some facts connected with his own and his father’s history. [...] Recording the marriage of his mother (Grace M’Ferrand) he says: “as fate would have it, her husband bore the same surname as Mr. Gawen Hamilton, though in no way whatever related to him. “ And again, speaking of himself, he says, that “he was called by his Christian-name after the son of Mr. Gawen Hamilton [namely, Archibald Hamilton Rowan],⁸ from which trifling circumstance, added to his personal attachment to the latter, many supposed an affinity existed where no intermixture of blood ever circulated.” [...]

“A few words more must be given to William Hamilton and his wife Grace M’Ferrand. A draft inscription composed by his son Archibald, and intended for a tablet to be erected in [St. Mary’s Church](#),⁹ informs us, that “they” (regarded, I suppose, as a body corporate, for W. Hamilton did not live to complete the term) “were for forty years resident in St. Mary’s parish,” their house being in Jervis-street. [...] I learn from the narrative of his son already quoted, that his death resulted from a severe cold caught while attending his duty as one of the old [Volunteers of Ireland](#) in the latter part of the [memorable year 1782](#), and that it took place on the 23rd of May, 1783.

“His widow continued to reside in Jervis-street, where she made industrious and not unsuccessful endeavours to gain an independent livelihood and to bring up her family,¹⁰ but finally she became involved in pecuniary embarrassments, from which her son Archibald had the privilege of extricating her by dutiful exertions and sacrifices. In the years 1802-8 she is referred to as living with her eldest son James at Trim,¹¹ and here in all probability she died. Two remaining letters from her pen, which afford indications of the refinement of feeling attributed to her, do not, it appears to me, convey a corresponding impression of intellectual ability;¹² but the struggle for independence which she maintained after her husband’s death, and the respect and affection entertained for her by her children, prove her to have possessed sterling elements of character.

⁸ Yet also his maternal great-grandfather was called Archibald, see the Introduction.

⁹ Remarkably, Archibald Hamilton Rowan is buried in [Saint Mary’s, or in the adjoining churchyard](#).

¹⁰ In the 1783 edition of [Wilson’s Dublin Directory](#), from 1787 incorporated in the [Treble Almanack](#), William Hamilton is listed as an apothecary, living at [30 Jervis street](#). He died in 1783, when uncle James had just turned seven, and Archibald was four or five years old. In those times families without fathers often had difficulties to earn enough money, which may have been the reason that William’s brother Roger took over the apothecary. In an 1891 [Addendum](#) to his 1880s biography Graves writes, “In ‘Wilson’s Dublin Directory’ of 1785, in the list of merchants and traders of the city, is the name of Roger Hamilton, apothecary, with the address, 30, Jervis-street, which was the residence of his deceased eldest brother, William.” Having only limited access to [Wilson’s Dublin Directory](#) and the [Treble Almanack](#), what I found was this: In the 1783 edition, in the section ‘Merchants and Traders,’ William Hamilton is given as apothecary at 30 Jervis street. In the 1785 edition Roger is mentioned as apothecary there, as Graves mentioned, and likewise in 1786. The volumes from 1787 until 1790 do not seem to have been digitalized, then in 1791 Grace Hamilton is given as being a haberdasher at 30 Jervis street, likewise in 1794, 1797, 1798, [1801](#) and [1803](#); yet she is not mentioned any more in the [1804](#) edition. A death year of Roger was not found, but he will have died before 1791, when Grace started her haberdashery, selling [small articles for sewing](#), such as buttons, ribbons and zippers.

¹¹ Graves assumes that Grace McFerrand died in 1808, and it is of course possible that she was still alive when Hamilton’s parents decided in 1808 to send Hamilton to Trim. It may even have been an extra consolation that next to Archibald’s brother and sister also his mother was living there. And because Archibald’s maternal grandmother, Graces McFerrand’s mother Elizabeth McEwan, had reached a high age, dying in 1800 (having married in 1739 she will have been in any case eighty), and his paternal grandmother Margaret Blood even was still alive then (she died in 1811), they may have expected, or hoped, that also Grace Hamilton McFerrand would live for many more years. Having been born in 1743, if she indeed died in 1808 she died with sixty-five.

¹² This is a remarkable comment, because Graves also mentioned that her father wanted to educate her himself because she was a “child of great promise,” see p. 2. Similar to the remark in footnote 6, Graves’ own impression about Grace McFerrand’s “intellectual ability” is again a remark he apparently felt that he could make, perhaps because he wrapped it up in positive sentences. But the way he openly and strongly judged and praised later led to many very unnuanced statements. In his eyes Catherine Disney and Ellen de Vere were perfect, but Lady Hamilton was not. Hamilton’s acquaintances of high rank were extensively described and very highly praised, but Hamilton’s local friends were only mentioned if absolutely necessary. Uncle James was praised because he had been educated at Trinity College, but Hamilton’s father’s letters had needed “the pruning knife.” It must be said that for Hamilton’s mother Graves had nothing but praise, yet the ‘but’ in her case was that “having had to part” with her son at so young an age she had not had “the opportunity of exerting upon him that influence which in the case of so many eminent men has been gratefully recorded.” Hamilton’s reputation would have looked very different now had Graves not been so outspoken in his judgements, but would have valued more often the choices Hamilton made for himself.