

Grace McFerrand

Sir William Rowan Hamilton's paternal grandmother

by Robert Perceval Graves

Introduced and annotated by Anne van Weerden
Utrecht 2019, updated 2021

1 Introduction

Grace McFerrand (May 1743 - April 1808) was the paternal grandmother of the Irish mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton (1805-1865), who 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](#). Her parents' marriage record is no 23, "The Reverend Mr. James McFerrand [(ca 1711-1763)] – Minister of The Gospel in Kirkmaiden and [Elizabeth McEwan](#) [(.. -1800)] lawful daughter to Mr. Archibald McEwan in Edinburgh were married upon the 23rd day of October 1739 years – Kirkmaiden by Drummore." Her birth record is no 114, 'Grace lawful daughter to Mr. James McFerrand Minister of The Gospel in Kirkmaiden Parish and Elizabeth McEwen was Born on the 8th and Baptised on the 9th of May 1743 years.' To the record is added, '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.'

2 Graves' description of Grace McFerrand

Hamilton's biographer, Robert Perceval Graves (1810-1893), wrote in the [first volume](#) of his three volumned 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](#)² a vessel was wrecked on its passage from the north of Ireland, the crew and passengers of which were saved mainly by his exertions.³ 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

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. 206

² On this map Kirkmaiden is next to Drumore Bay, which is itself to the left of the word Bay in Luce Bay.

³ 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.

county of Down.⁴ 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.⁵



Figure 1: [Kirkmaiden Old Parish Church](#). This church, formerly known as 'Kirk Covenant', was built in 1638. It used to hold a '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 when Grace left Kirkmaiden she was twenty already.

“This request, favoured by the mother, was decisively negated 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,⁶ leaving his widow and eight children unprovided for.⁷ 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,⁸ and afterwards was taken by her maternal friend as her companion in a continental tour.

⁴ These Hamiltons were the parents of [Archibald Hamilton Rowan](#), one of the founding members of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen.

⁵ Grace was not the eldest child or daughter; the records show she was the third child, having two elder sisters. See footnote 7. 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 6. 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.

⁶ From the [Wigtownshire records](#) it is clear that Grace was twenty when in 1763 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.

⁷ The [Wigtownshire Register](#) gives the records, written by James McFerrand himself: Isabel b. 6 Oct '40, Jean b. 20 Sept '41, Grace b. 8 May '43, John b. 14 May '45, James b. 11 March '47, Patrick b. 14 Dec '48, Robert b. 16 Dec '50, Elizabeth b. 12 Nov '53. Jean had married in 1761; they may have supported her mother and siblings.

⁸ 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

“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 £500.⁹ From this marriage sprung Archibald the father of Sir W.R. Hamilton, James his uncle and educator, and Jane Sydney his aunt. [...]

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],¹⁰ 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](#) 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,¹¹ 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,¹² and here in all probability she

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.” 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, causing much confusion.

⁹ 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. £500 in 1774 was an enormous amount of money; according to the website [MeasuringWorth](#), if it would be seen as wealth, in 2019 the “real wage or real wealth value of that income or wealth is £63,380.00; labour earnings of that income or wealth is £867,700.00; relative income value of that income or wealth is £1,038,000.00; relative output value of that income or wealth is £7,832,000.00. This might be one of the reasons why Grace later refused to accept from her adoptive mother tuition fees for her son Archibald.

¹⁰ Yet also his maternal great-grandfather was called Archibald, see the Introduction.

¹¹ 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.” With only limited access to [Wilson’s Dublin Directory](#) and the [Treble Almanack](#), what was 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 given 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 needles, buttons and ribbons.

¹² Grace McFerrand died in 1808, but if Hamilton’s parents indeed made the decision to send him to Trim when he was [a year old](#), therefore in 1806, she was still alive when they made their decision. It may have been an extra consolation that next to Archibald’s brother and sister also his mother was living there. And because

died.¹³ 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;¹⁴ 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."

Grace McFerrand was buried on [18 April 1808](#) in Dublin, as 'Mrs Grace Hamilton from Trim.' She thus will indeed have lived in Trim until her last days, and perhaps moved to Dublin to search for "[the best medical advice](#)." She may have been in a hospital, or cared for by Hamilton's parents; six years later they would also care for her daughter Sydney until she died.

Archibald's maternal grandmother, Graces McFerrand's mother Elizabeth McEwan who died in 1800 had reached a high age (having married in 1739 she will have been in any case about 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. Unfortunately, she died in April 1808, only some months before Hamilton moved to Trim.

¹³ She died in 1808. Graves will not have seen the 1808 burial record, but he was close.

¹⁴ 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 8, 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," which led to later unnuanced assumptions that he had been [less intelligent](#). It must be said that for Hamilton's mother Sarah Hutton 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 more often have valued the choices Hamilton made for himself.