Hamilton’s second given name, Rowan

by Anne van Weerden

In the first volume of his biography about Hamilton, Graves describes the searches after Hamilton’s parentage. Working with for instance Sir Bernard Burke, writer of the famous family tree books such as that of the Landed Gentry, they found that the Hamiltons did not come from the North of Ireland as Hamilton had claimed in 1841, nor from Scotland as Peter Guthrie Tait had claimed in 1866.\(^1\)

Nowadays it is well-known that Hamilton’s grandfather William Hamilton (.. -1783) was from Dublin where he was an apothecary, and that his grandmother Grace Mac Ferrand (.. - ..) came from Galloway, Scotland. She was adopted by Gawen Hamilton and Jane Hamilton Rowan of Killileagh Castle because of the poorness of her widowed mother; she thus became a sister of Archibald Hamilton Rowan (1750/1751-1834), one of the founding members of the United Irishmen who added his mother’s maiden name Rowan to his birth name, Archibald Hamilton. Archibald Hamilton Rowan apparently played a role in the naming of three boys of the Dublin Hamilton family.\(^2\)

The eldest son of Hamilton’s grandparents William and Grace was called Arthur Rowan Hamilton, and his baptism record is online: he was baptised on the 5th of July 1775.\(^3\) It was

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1This hitherto by me overlooked fact proves that Graves indeed read Tait’s 1866 article as we suggested in our article ‘A most gossiped about genius: Sir William Rowan Hamilton’.

2Perhaps not generally known is Graves’ remark that Gawen Hamilton “had visited his son with life-long displeasure.” Graves did not explain this sentence.

3William and Grace Hamilton had five sons and a daughter, one of them being Archibald, Hamilton’s father. His brother James, called by Hamilton ‘uncle James’ and sister Jane Sydney, called ‘aunt Sydney’, also played important roles in Hamilton’s life. According to Graves the other three sons, Arthur, Robert and William, died early. Two of them died in infancy, one of them died in a French prison. At this moment there is no online church record of Robert, but something can be inferred. William’s baptism record shows that he was a twin brother of uncle James; they were baptized on the 24th of May 1776. Graves further mentions that Archibald, Hamilton’s father, spoke of himself as the fourth son, and that he was born in March 1778 (see for details footnote 4), which means that Robert must have been younger than Archibald. Sydney was born in 1779, a year after Archibald, and unless three children were born between May 1778 and 1780, which is unlikely, Robert must have been the youngest child. The children thus were, from oldest to youngest, Arthur, James & William, Archibald, Sydney. Robert is not known which brother “died in a French prison.” There are two burial records of Hamilton children from Jervis street: one of 28 February 1778, “Wm Hamilton’s Child, Jervis Street, and one of 8 May 1784, “Mrs Hamilton’s Child Jervis Street.” The difference, “Wm” and “Mrs Hamilton” is in accord with the death of William Hamilton on 23 May 1783. Robert was born after 1779, and there is reason to assume that the 1778 burial must have been William. Graves writes about the twins, “It has been thought by some members of the family that James and Archibald were twins. The foregoing facts [Archibald’s birth in 1778] disprove this supposition, but lead to the conclusion that James had a twin brother, or that two born between him and Archibald were twins, and hence the incorrect supposition probably arose.” Because the second child died in 1784, and William then would have been almost eight then, uncle James would doubtlessly have remembered him and talked about him, and also the other family members would have remembered him. It therefore seems likely that it was William who died in 1778; he then would have been almost two, but Archibald and Sydney would not have been born yet and thus not have known him. Likewise, if Arthur or William would have died in 1784, they would have been almost nine and eight respectively, and would hardly have been described as “Mrs Hamilton’s child.” Of Robert it is only known that he was born later than Sydney in 1779, and less than nine months after the death of his father on 23 May 1783. He may have died as a baby, and at the most four years old. Consequently, it will have been Arthur who “died in a French prison;” perhaps he went into the army, as many boys then did. Graves remarks that in the TCD Entrance book [p. 105], Jacobus (James) Hamilton is registered as having entered TCD on 2 May 1791, 15 years old. His entry further mentions that he was the son of Gulielmus (William), Pharmacopolo difunci (deceased pharmacist), see also p. 363 of the Alumni Dublinenses. James’ age is not entirely correct; he was born late in May 1776, and thus still was 14. The Arthurus Hamilton who entered on 7 Nov 1791 was James’ cousin, son of Franciscus Hamilton, see p. 113 of the Entrance book. Hamilton called him ‘Cousin Arthur’, and next to Hamilton’s father, uncle James, and aunt Sydney, he was the fourth of the Hamiltons who played an important role in Hamilton’s life.
surprising to see his full name; it could mean that either the name Rowan was in the Hamilton family already or, which seems more logical, they named Arthur after Archibald Hamilton Rowan, who was in fact his adoptive uncle.

That is certainly a possibility; according to Graves, Hamilton’s father Archibald claimed that his given name came from Archibald Hamilton Rowan, making it plausible that also Arthur had been named after him. It does seem to show in any case that William and Grace Hamilton regarded Archibald Hamilton Rowan as close family, although only from Grace’s side; on the same page Graves mentions to have found a ‘narrative’ written by Hamilton’s father, Archibald Hamilton, showing that they, as Hamiltons, were not related.4

Graves also mentions that Archibald Hamilton Rowan was Hamilton’s godfather, which explains Hamilton’s Rowan name, and that he wrote a letter to his godson just after Hamilton was knighted, and that is a problem. Hamilton was knighted in 1835, and Archibald Hamilton Rowan died in 1834. But Graves is so clear about the contents of the letter, in which Archibald Hamilton Rowan ‘claimed Hamilton as his godson, exhorted him to bow his intellect to religion, and to keep the Sabbath,’ that it would be interesting to further investigate this problem. Hankins mentions in his 1980 biography that Archibald Hamilton Rowan’s letter is kept in the Trinity College Library.

The Hamilton family having been so closely connected to Archibald Hamilton Rowan for such a long time, it can easily be imagined that the dispute over money between the two Archibalds must have been very hard for both of them. The disagreement led to Archibald Hamilton’s bankruptcy and was, after a trial, settled by a payment of £1500, in those days a very large amount of money, which Archibald Hamilton Rowan had to pay to Archibald Hamilton but which ended their friendship.5

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4There is some doubt about when Hamilton’s father Archibald was born. According to the church records he was baptized in 1779, but Graves sounds very certain that he was born in 1778, adding “according to the authority of a transcript from the Family Bible, and of another family document.” Graves may be right; of all the four sons whose birth records were found, their entries were inserted later. Yet the handwriting of Archibald’s record differs from the inserted entries of his brothers, and the name of his father is not written down. It is therefore possible that the person who inserted Archibald’s name made an error.

5Graves’ passage about Archibald Hamilton Rowan’s letter to Hamilton, in which Archibald Hamilton Rowan ‘claimed’ to be his godfather, can be read starting with the last sentence on page 13. That sentence contains Graves’ opinion about Archibald Hamilton Rowan; he wrote: “the son of the man whom he helped to ruin,” in which ‘the son’ was William Rowan Hamilton, ‘the man’ Archibald Hamilton, and ‘he’ Archibald Hamilton Rowan. This sentence, together with the aforementioned sentence about Rowan’s father’s life-long displeasure about him, and Rowan’s ‘claim’ to godfathership, paints a very negative picture about Rowan as a person. This is one of the examples of how much disdain Graves could show in only a few subordinate clauses without further explaining himself, something which later would ruin Lady Hamilton’s reputation and became basic to Hamilton’s alcoholic reputation. Only when reading very carefully his clearly felt negative opinions can be placed in context.