

# The Hamiltons of Jervis Street, and the name Rowan

Anne van Weerden,  
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In the [first volume](#) of his biography about Hamilton, Robert Perceval Graves (1810-1893) describes the searches after Hamilton's parentage. Working with for instance Sir Bernard Burke, writer of the famous family tree books such as for instance that of the [Landed Gentry](#), they found that most likely Hamilton was right when he wrote that his branch of the Hamilton family had come over to Ireand [in the time of James I](#). Neither Hamilton's grandfather, not his father had been born in Scotland as Peter Guthrie Tait had [claimed](#) in 1866.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays it is well-known that Hamilton's grandfather William Hamilton (.. - 23 May 1783) was from Dublin where he was an apothecary at [30 Jervis street](#), and that Hamilton's grandmother [Grace McFerrand](#) (1743-1808) came from Kirkmaiden, Scotland. In 1763, when she was twenty years old, her father died, and thereupon she was 'adopted' by Gawen and Jane Hamilton of Killileagh Castle; she thus became an adoptive sister of [Archibald Hamilton Rowan](#) (1752-1834),<sup>2</sup> one of the founding members of the United Irishmen who added his mother's maiden name Rowan to his last name; Archibald Hamilton Rowan. These names played a role in the naming of three boys of the Dublin Hamilton family.

William Hamilton was [no direct family](#) of the Hamiltons of Killyleagh Castle but they were acquainted, and Grace McFerrand was introduced to William Hamilton by Mrs. Jane Hamilton. It was an apparently happy introduction, and at their wedding, most likely in 1774, Mrs. Hamilton gave her adoptive

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<sup>1</sup>This 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'. Note added 2021: Tait may have been right about the relationship of the Huttons with 'Dr. Hutton', but instead of Charles Hutton the mathematician, he will have alluded to James Hutton, the geologist from Edinburgh; see [Hamilton's descent and Dr. James Hutton](#).

<sup>2</sup>If Rowan's parents married [May 1750](#) he will probably not have been 84 when he died in 1834 as the record states.

daughter a large dowry. William and Grace had five sons and a daughter, one of them being Archibald, Hamilton's father. His brother James, in Graves' biography called '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, William and Robert, [died early](#); two of them died in infancy, one of them [died](#) in a French prison. There is no online church record of Robert, but something can be inferred about who died in prison, and who was the youngest child.

### **An overview of the Hamilton children from Jervis Street**

William and Grace will have married in 1774, or perhaps somewhat earlier if Arthur Rowan was not the first child, but the first living child. In the list all birth dates are baptism dates, and because only of Archibald a death date is known the others are burial dates. The death year of Arthur, and the birth - and death years of Robert have been inferred from other data, as is discussed hereafter. For now it is not known how correct this is.

Arthur Rowan (5 July 1775-ca 1794?), this death date is a very crude guess  
James (24 May 1776 - 3 July 1847), 'uncle James' of Trim <sup>3</sup>  
William (24 May 1776 - 28 Feb 1779), twin brother of James  
Archibald (15 March 1778 - 10 Dec 1819), father of WR Hamilton  
Jane Sydney (bef. 28 Oct 1779 - 28 Oct 1814), 'aunt Sydney' of Trim  
Robert (after 1779 - 8 May 1784)

The eldest son was called Arthur Rowan, and his [baptism record](#) is online. It was surprising to see his full name; it could mean that either the name Rowan was in the Hamilton family already, or they named Arthur after Archibald Hamilton Rowan, after whom also his younger brother Archibald [would be named](#), or even more likely, they gave him his adoptive grandmother's maiden name as his second given name, as was common then. <sup>4</sup>

Uncle James and William were [twins](#); they were baptized on the 24th of May 1776. Graves [related](#) that some members of the family thought that James and Archibald were twins, and wondering whom he was alluding to, it must be realised that Graves will have made his inquiries after Hamilton's death in 1865, while preparing the biography, which means that uncle James had died already. The 'family members' therefore will have been the four [children](#) of uncle James who were still alive when Hamilton died. It can be doubted that Hamilton's sister Sydney Margaret (1810-1889) thought her father and her uncle had

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<sup>3</sup> In Graves' [family tree](#) the death date of uncle James is given as June but he was buried on [3 July](#); he will have died in the last days of June.

<sup>4</sup> As can be seen in Graves' family tree, he did not know when Arthur had been born, or when he died. He lists Arthur as the eldest of the three boys who "died early," but he calls uncle James the [eldest son](#). That may have had to do with the custom that early deceased brothers were not counted.

been twins; she was fourteen years older than her then eldest surviving cousin, and Graves most likely would have mentioned her as a source, as he more often did.

Archibald, Hamilton's father, was born in March 1778. There seems to have been some doubt about when he 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 will be right; of all the four sons whose birth records were found, the 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 entirely possible that the person who inserted Archibald's name made an error.

Jane Sydney was born in 1779. She was 35 when she was buried on 28 October 1814, and she may have been named after her adoptive grandmother, Jane Rowan; Grace will have been very thankful that she had made this life possible for her.

Of Robert there are no church records mentioning his name, and Graves does not mention him in his biography. His birth and death year, and therewith his place in the family composition, is unknown, but will be inferred hereafter.

### **Arthur, William and Robert**

In this part reasons will be given why Arthur will have been the son who died in prison, William died in 1779, and Robert in 1784. The reasons in themselves are not convincing; it is the combination which seems to give the most plausible family composition.

As Graves remarked, two of the sons died young, and one son died in a [French prison](#). There are indeed two burial records of Hamilton children from Jervis street: one of 28 [February 1779](#), "Mr Hamilton's Child, Jervis Street," and one of 8 [May 1784](#), "Mrs Hamilton's child Jervis street." Searching the records of those years, names of children were not given; entries almost invariably start with Mr or Mrs. Yet the difference, "Mr" and "Mrs," is in accord with the death of William Hamilton on 23 May 1783; they thus can safely be assumed to have been sons of William and Grace.

For Robert having been the youngest child the first, practical, reason is that having been born between James & William (May 1776) and Archibald (March 1778), thus around April 1777, is possible but unlikely; James & William were born less than eleven months after Arthur yet that hardly will have happened three times in a row, and after twins. The second is that Archibald called himself the [fourth son](#); it would signify that Robert had been younger than Archibald. He then was also born after Sydney, at the earliest in 1780, and cannot have been the son who was buried in 1779. He therefore either died in 1784, or was the son who died in prison.

It can be assumed though that William was the child who was buried in 1779; that he died before his third birthday. If he had been the son who died in

1784 he would have been eight already, and if he was the son who died in prison he would have been even older. Both possibilities would mean that uncle James remembered him well, and in turn that most likely also the next generation would have known who their father's twin brother had been.<sup>5</sup> This leaves Arthur Rowan and Robert as the son who died in 1784. That question can only be solved if it is known when the other son died in prison.

Suppose that the son who died in a French prison died in the 1790s. Arthur would have been between fifteen and twenty-five; Robert would have been between ten and twenty. Yet there do not seem to have been battles then after which Irish boys ended up in French prisons, unless it had something to do with the escape of Archibald Hamilton Rowan, their 'adoptive' uncle, and a member of the [United Irishmen](#).

In his 'Peeps', William Edwin Hamilton, eldest son of Hamilton, remarks in his 1890s 'new world' journalistic crude writing style<sup>6</sup> about his grandfather Archibald, that he "hid Hamilton Rowan in the cellar of his house in Dominick street while the soldiers were searching for him, and till the rebel could escape by a fishing smack to the Continent, with a head still joined to his shoulders." This [escape](#) appeared in 1794, and Rowan fled to France. William Edwin's version cannot have been literally true; Archibald was only sixteen then. But Rowan lived in Dominick street, the same street where in 1805 Hamilton would be born, perhaps accounting for William Edwin's erroneous remark.

Yet Archibald will have had something to do with the escape in 1794, and to end up in a French prison might suggest that one of Archibald's brothers went with Rowan; the family was after all very close to him. Robert would have been fourteen then, perhaps too young to do that, but Arthur would have been nineteen. If this is true, and it certainly seems possible, Arthur died in a French prison, and Robert was the son who died in 1784.

## **The end of the friendship between the Hamilton families**

The close ties between the family of Grace McFerrand and the Hamiltons of Killyleagh Castle had been very strong indeed. Having called several of their children after the Hamiltons of the Castle does seem to show in any case that William and Grace Hamilton regarded the Hamiltons as close friends or family, even though they were [not related](#).

The first problems seem to have appeared when Grace [refused](#) her adoptive mother to take upon her the charges of the university career of her son Archibald, "thereby [losing the favour](#) of Mrs. Hamilton." This must have been around 1794, when Archibald turned sixteen and would have entered College. Grace's husband then had died already and life was not easy for her; she had become a haberdasher, and will have earned much less than her husband had done.

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<sup>5</sup> One of the brothers having died in a French prison was also not a family secret because they obviously told Graves.

<sup>6</sup> William Edwin became a journalist in Canada.

Graves does not give any explanation for why Grace, having been adopted into the family, having received a dowry, having named children after the family, and having [allowed](#) her adoptive mother to have Archibald “constantly in her house,” control his “school education and use his services as an amanuensis,” suddenly became so “independent” that she declined the offer and apprenticed her son to an attorney; she must have had a grave reason. And the suggestion that her son did die in a French prison, and that Archibald Hamilton Rowan was connected to it, could certainly be such an explanation. There is a caveat though; also around this time Mrs Hamilton, Jane Rowan, died, but it is not certain when that happened. Her death years are usually given as ca 1793 and ca 1794. If she died in 1793, the suggestions here become problematic, because taking Graves’ remark that Grace lost the “favour of Mrs. Hamilton” as true, Arthur would have gone to France after her refusal.

In any case, Rowan had been [in a French prison](#); “In 1794 Rowan landed on the French coast in the run-up to the naval slaughter that became known to history as the ‘Glorious First of June’. Such was the tense disposition of the French forces at this time that he was immediately imprisoned as a suspected English spy. From his cell window he watched many men with their hands pinioned carted to the guillotine. At the height of the Terror he was fortunate to escape the guillotine himself. Within days of his release his boots were stained with the blood of revolutionaries guillotined by their erstwhile comrades.”

If Arthur Hamilton had indeed joined him, he may have been in prison with him, but then somehow Arthur died, while Rowan stayed alive. Whether or not Rowan was to blame, Grace as a mother and his adoptive sister may have felt he could have done more. This idea would explain the coincidence that Grace’s refusal happened around the same time as Rowan’s escape.

But Archibald must have judged it differently; until his bankruptcy in 1807 he worked very hard for Rowan. Perhaps throughout his childhood, and in any case in his early teens, having been much at the Castle or at Mrs. Hamilton’s Dublin house, he may have bonded strongly with the family, perhaps even more so than his mother who came to the Castle when she was twenty. If in 1794 Archibald, who then was only sixteen, judged for himself that Rowan was not to blame for the death of his brother, and did not agree with his mother’s decision to refuse the offer from her adoptive mother to send him to College, his whole view on society may have differed from hers.

That would shed further light on the political differences in the family which Hamilton much later [alluded to](#); his father having been a “[liberal](#), almost a rebel,” and uncle James having been a “[Tory to the back-bone](#).” The family may have worried about how strongly Archibald felt for the Hamiltons of the Castle, and may have felt that he was too impressed by his revolutionary uncle. And Archibald did go too far; his bankruptcy was for a large part due to private loans in his own name, but used to ensure Rowan a return to Ireland and the Castle. He may have hoped that therewith also his own familiar and happy place there would be regained, but his adoptive grandparents had died already, and Rowan looked at his place in the family very differently.

After a trial the dispute was settled through a payment by Archibald Hamilton Rowan to Archibald Hamilton of about £1500, in those days a very large amount of money, but it [ended their friendship](#). It did not influence Archibald's political views, he remained to be [liberal](#),<sup>7</sup> and wrote a plea for [free education](#) for everyone.

Because he apparently did suffer from his lack of education, [writing](#) about his son to a friend in 1819, only a few months before his death, "William is all I could wish or desire. He has been with me ever since. I am trying to brush him up, so as to unite a little of the gentleman and man of the world with the accomplished scholar.[...] He has had, what I never had, the advantage of a father's care, advice as of a companion, and exhortation without austerity. He has had the advantage of the free communication of a father's experience in every changing scene of life, from youth upwards; he has had every sunk rock, upon which the youthful mariner may make shipwreck, accurately traced on the chart of his voyage; and what an advantage that is can be conceived by those only who recollect the bulges their own vessel sustained for want of such a chart, or for want of looking to it with attention. [...] I need not urge on you to attend to your son. I am sure you and Mrs. Hoare will unite in every step that is proper for securing to him the best education and the best advantages; still recollect, you cannot do so too soon or too early; William is a proof of the great advantage of early attention; but for that, and that incessantly kept up without the appearance of task work, what might he not have been in opposition to what he is? No property in money is equal to such advantages, or can compensate for their neglect."

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<sup>7</sup> Graves' 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. Perhaps not generally known is [Graves' remark](#) that according to Graves Gawen Hamilton "had visited his son with life-long displeasure," a sentence Graves did not explain. This sentence, together with what Graves called the 'claim' to godfathership, paints a very negative picture about Rowan as a person. It 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.