

Archibald Hamilton and education

Why he did not attend college, and his view on education for everyone

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1 Introduction

It has regularly been claimed that Hamilton's intellect came from his mother, Sarah Hutton, and one of the reasons given for that is that his father Archibald Hamilton did not go to college, therewith suggesting that he was less intelligent than his older brother James. Yet, as will be seen hereafter, the immediate cause was a lack of money, and having seemed less intelligent than his brother is due to the writing style of Hamilton's biographer, Robert Perceval Graves. Limited by the time he wrote the biography in, the 1880s, deep in the socially very strict Victorian era, he gave his extremely clear opinion about everyone he wrote about, whether he knew them personally or not, but he could hardly explain it because of the many Victorian concealments about marriage, and perhaps even more important, about humiliation.

Apparently not having realized that his biography would be read far outside Dublin and many years after their deaths, Graves' opinions lard the biography. He had the tendency to either praise people extremely highly, burn them to the ground, or even wrap his harsh opinions in blankets of warmth, thereby giving them, doubtlessly unintendedly, even more emphasis. Social status and education seem to have been his most important standards and apparently, someone not having been to college meant that he allowed himself to mention that that person had a more crude writing style, or even was [less intelligent](#).

Also about Archibald Hamilton Graves expressed his opinion clearly, and although reading it again after having 'learned to know' who these people were it does sound more descriptive than judgmental, I vividly remember how I read it the first time, never having been in Ireland, knowing nothing about the Victorian era, just reading a biography about the man whose work led to Vector Analysis. Reading about his father I saw a very unkind remark about a pruning knife between overly positive compliments. I now think I understand what Graves aimed to convey, knowing who these people were and generally knowing what happened. But Graves clearly did not realize that his remarks would be read by 'aliens' in place and time, and by people of much lower social status than the people he thought he wrote the biography for.

What Graves had written about Archibald Hamilton was, "He had not had the advantage, which his elder brother had enjoyed, of a University education, and therefore his style, as exhibited in his letters and other writings left by him, will not always abide the criticism of a grammarian or logician; and its conventional verbiage and rhetorical amplification cry out often for the pruning-knife: yet all that comes from his pen stirs one with its vigour, its brightness, and its geniality." Many years after the deaths of the subjects and the biographer, this was easily explained by the 'aliens' as not having been sent to College because he was less intelligent than his brother James who did go to college.

2 Money problems and Victorian concealments

Archibald Hamilton was born in 1778, and in 1783 his father William Hamilton died. He had been an apothecary at 30 Jervis street, Dublin, and after his death his apothecary was taken over by his brother Roger Hamilton. But at some time before 1791 Roger stopped being an apothecary; he may have died but it is not known when exactly, a death notice was not found. According to the section ‘Merchants and Traders’ in *Wilson’s Dublin Directory* of 1791 Grace Hamilton then was a haberdasher at 30 Jervis street, selling small articles for sewing, such as needles, buttons and ribbons. But the intermediate editions apparently not having been digitized yet, it is not easy to find when she took over from Roger.

In 1791 her son James entered Trinity College,¹ but because life was very difficult for widowed women then, and Grace will have earned much less money than her husband and brother-in-law had done, that may have depleted her finances, making it impossible to also send Archibald to University. In the first volume of his three volumed biography, published in 1882, Graves does make a remark about Grace Hamilton’s financial troubles, but doubtlessly required by the standards of the time about humiliation, he does not reveal when it happened or what it was about.

“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, but finally she became involved in pecuniary embarrassments, from which her son Archibald had the privilege of extricating her by dutiful exertions and sacrifices.” This is one of the ways Graves wrote about humiliations, seemingly expecting here that the happy sacrifices of the son would distract the reader from the shame of the mother, but therewith leaving very much room for wild speculation.²

There is one short piece in which Graves lifted a tip of the veil. Referring to family letters he writes, “The earliest notice we have of [Archibald Hamilton] connects him with Mrs. Gawen Hamilton, the patroness of his mother. She took a special interest in this child of her young friend, had him constantly in her house, controlled his school education, used his services as an amanuensis, and finally offered to bear the charge of his passing through the University in preparation for the Bar, and to secure his future position by a provision for him in her will. With an independent spirit, honourable to his mother and to the boy himself, they declined this offer, thereby losing the favour of Mrs. Hamilton, and earning expressions of gratitude from her son and other members of her family. Archibald Hamilton was then apprenticed to an attorney.”

This is a far more loaded quote than it seems to be at first sight. Graves loathed Archibald Hamilton Rowan, making various short very negative remarks about him. One is when speaking of his father, Gawen Hamilton, Graves adds in a subordinate clause, “who had visited his son with life-long displeasure.” Another, when writing about Archibald Hamilton’s bankruptcy, caused by Hamilton Rowan. When Hamilton Rowan was in exile, Archibald Hamilton had lent money for him under his own name, against high interest rates, but afterwards Hamilton Rowan had pleaded that “those labours had been acts of friendship, and no more than a grateful return for early favours received, not from Archibald Hamilton Rowan himself, but from members of his family,” which doubtlessly alluded to the ‘adoption’ of Grace McFerrand. Writing about Hamilton’s knighthood in 1835 and alluding to Hamilton Rowan having been godfather to Hamilton, Graves remarks, “Mr. Rowan remembered the sponsorial relation which he had conferred as a favour (easier to grant than the discharge of pecuniary obligations).” Even if Graves had been right,³ these expressions of his own feelings go quite far for a biography.

In this light also the remark must be seen, that Graves wrote that Grace Hamilton and her son lost the “favour of Mrs. Hamilton,” “earning expressions of gratitude from her son and other members of her family;” obviously a sarcastic remark. But it can be understood that Graves felt indignant; first Archibald did not attend college and did not enter Mrs. Hamilton’s will, and then he almost voluntarily ruined himself in trying to help Hamilton Rowan without being compensated for that.

¹ The eldest son was Arthur Rowan Hamilton, who seems to have died in a French prison. But it is not known when that happened.

² This is similar to how Graves described the event at the Geological Society where Hamilton had allegedly become drunk; not only did Graves not use Hamilton’s own arguments to show that he had not been drunk, he also mentioned that Hamilton had to be restrained without revealing why, leaving generations to speculate what in the world happened that evening.

³ Hamilton Rowan died in 1834, a year before Hamilton was knighted; it is not known who wrote that letter.

3 Archibald Hamilton's view on education

It is not known what Archibald Hamilton thought about not having received a university education, because Graves does not elaborate on the motives of Grace Hamilton to reject Mrs. Hamilton's offer nor on the effect her decision had on her son. Yet it must have been an important issue to him because in a later letter, partly given by Graves, he emphasises the problem that the people in general were [not able to receive](#) a thorough education.

Graves writes that in [that letter](#), written in 1816 to a friend in London, Archibald Hamilton "gives an historical sketch and survey of the schools then existing in Ireland. He writes with a knowledge of his subject both comprehensive and particular, and evinces a far-seeing and statesmanlike confidence in the beneficial effects which would follow from the universal spread of education. He severely condemns the landed aristocracy for neglect of their obligations in this respect, and for their contempt of their poorer fellow-countrymen, and claims for himself the right to feel strongly and indignantly on these points, as an Irishman born and living in the country. The following extract is taken from the conclusion of the letter: -

"Thus amidst the din of conflicting jealousies on the score of religion, amidst the yell of "no popery" and the cries of "Church and State for ever," notwithstanding the insubordination of her population on the score of politics and local grievances, and labouring under the depression of bad times and the want of a resident gentry, Ireland is keeping her way on at a steady pace to the attainment of that knowledge which I trust will lay the sure foundation of her future greatness and prosperity. I rejoice that the Government are at length roused to alter their system of rule in Ireland, and encourage exertions for informing the peasantry; and I look forward to the day when the people of Ireland, enlightened and educated, will know how to wield those other gifts with which Providence has so eminently favoured them, for the honour of their country and the good of the British empire and the world. You may be ready to accuse me of being too partial in my representation of this island. It is true I feel as an Irishman, not only by birth, but by being there domiciliated. I may have my prejudices, but in this state of imperfection I do not know that it is culpable to feel sanguine for the intellectual improvement of the population of one's country; and if Englishmen feel interested for Ireland, an Irishman may be excused for possessing similar feelings. Ireland has too long been kept back by the vile spirit of abuse and detestation on the part of Irishmen towards the lower orders of their own countrymen; and I rejoice to find Englishmen forcing them into respect and exertion for their degraded fellow-countrymen."