

# The 'sponsor' at the baptism of Sir William Rowan Hamilton, Sydney Hamilton Rowan (1789-1847)

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## Abstract

It is generally assumed that Archibald Hamilton Rowan was a godfather of William Rowan Hamilton. This connection was made by Robert Graves in the first volume of his biography about Hamilton, because of a letter to Hamilton he assumed had been written by Rowan in 1835. In the letter Hamilton was gratulated with his knight-hood, which means that it cannot have been written by Rowan because he had died in 1834. The most likely member of the Hamilton Rowan family who may have 'stood as a sponsor' at Hamilton's baptism is Rowan's second son, Sydney Hamilton Rowan.

## Introduction

In 1882 Robert Perceval Graves (1810-1893) published the [first volume](#) of his biography of the Irish mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton (1805-1865). While describing the influence Hamilton's father Archibald Hamilton (1778-1819) had had on his young son, Graves [wrote indignantly](#) about [Archibald Hamilton Rowan](#) (1751-1834), one of the founding members of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen. Rowan was an adoptive brother of Hamilton's grandmother [Grace McFerrand](#) (1743-1808) who was born in Kirkmaiden, Scotland; in 1763 she had been 'adopted' by the Hamiltons of Killyleagh Castle.<sup>1</sup> She was introduced by Mrs. Hamilton to the Dublin apothecary William Hamilton (not related), whom she married around 1774.

Yet Rowan had become the direct cause of the 1807 [bankruptcy](#) of her son, Hamilton's father Archibald, who had taken care of Rowan's business [since 1800](#). Graves [wrote](#),

In the year 1835, when the son of the man whom [Archibald Hamilton Rowan] had helped to ruin <sup>2</sup> had become celebrated for his abilities, had been appointed to the

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<sup>1</sup> Grace McFerrand was 20 already when she moved to Ireland; calling it 'adoption' is therefore slightly overdone.

<sup>2</sup> This is one of the examples of how critical Graves could be when he judged that someone did not adhere to his moral standards.

post of Astronomer Royal, and had just received the honour of knighthood under circumstances of remarkable distinction, Mr. Rowan remembered the sponsorial relation which he had conferred as a favour (easier to grant than the discharge of pecuniary obligations), and he wrote a letter to the Professor claiming him as his godson, and exhorting him to bow his intellect to religion, and to keep the Sabbath.

Graves' passage seems to be the only source leading to the contemporary notion that Archibald Hamilton Rowan was Hamilton's godfather. Yet his attribution to Rowan was an enigma, because the letter was written after Hamilton was knighted in [August 1835](#), and Rowan had [died](#) in November 1834.

### **The 1835 letter to Hamilton**

The letter Graves alluded to is kept at Trinity College Dublin Library, in the Hamilton - O'Regan Papers, MSS 7762-7772/501. It consists of one sheet, folded in half to form four pages. One half of the sheet has, on one side, a mourning-edge; that part of the sheet does not contain text by the writer. The half next to it is the first page of the letter. Page two is written on the back side of page one, page three is written on the back side of the part with the dark edge. The two halves are closed, folded one time, then three times. Corners of pages are torn off; only the upper half of the half sheet with the dark edges and the upper half of page three are complete.

The letter does not contain Hamilton's address, just "Sir Wm. Hamilton" is written below the writer's signature, and in his handwriting. On the empty half with the dark edge it is written in pencil, "W.H. Rowan, 6 November 1835." It is not known who wrote it or how the date was known; it may have been written on the first page which is now missing an edge.

In the transcription below missing parts are indicated by parentheses, illegible words are indicated by question marks.

[p1]  
Downpat[...]

Dear Sir

You will not I tru[...]  
this communication an intrusion, w[...]  
tion that my acquaintance with you [...]  
longer standing than you may suppose. [...]  
menced in the year 1806. I think about the mon[...]  
July or August, at which time I made an engage[-]  
ment, the importance of which has since often  
recurred to my mind, though little understood  
at the time. I stood as one of the sponsors at  
your baptism. After the lapse of so many  
years, & having since become the father of ten

children, I now desire, as far as in me lies, to fulfill that engagement, more especially as it has pleased an all wise God, to remove your natural parents.

I was glad to know that in your Uncle, the Revd Js Hamilton, you had one who feels the vast importance of Eternity, over the things of Time. & from hi[...] some years since, I had favourable [...] of you, so far as he could judge. Th[...] Campile(?) also gave me pleasing [...] your character and disposition. The [...] is now attached to your name, on [...] heartily congratulate you, abat[...] my anxiety, that the most wonderf[...] the Almighty, the Redemption of a [...] through the atonement of the Son [...]

[p2]

[...] should by his Grace be revealed to  
[...] I believe the natural man, however  
[...]ments, receiveth not the things of the  
[...] . Theoretically indeed, he may comprehend  
[...] the plan of salvation, as the art of  
[...] may be understood by the man who never  
[...] into the water - but so(?) to rest on the pen(?).  
[...] salvation, as an expert swimmer (sic) rests  
[...] the bosom of the wave, not only without fear,  
but with comfort & delight, this is Gods to give.  
Besides the written Word of God, & the promise of his  
spirit to lead us into the knowledge of it, God  
has in infinite wisdom appointed one day in seven  
for his more peculiar service & worship, and  
thither I desire particularly to draw your attention.  
God who knows what we have need of, Commands  
us to Remember to keep the Sabbath very Holy - Few  
who retain a proper view of the Sanctity of that  
day will be permitted to wander far from the ??  
[...] path that leads to Eternal Life. I want thus(?)  
[...] by hoping that the Sabbath is enjoyed by  
[...] day on which your soul can, & does as  
[...] than the wonders of the Heavenly ??  
[...] to hold communion the ?? of them(?),  
[...] Father in Christ. Rob not God  
[...] nor give it to him grudgingly. Let the  
[...] of your mind, with which he has  
[...] be dedicated to his service at all  
[...] especially on that Sacred day.

[p3]

I say no more, but pray that in that day when the  
Elements shall melt with fervent heat, and the  
Earth shall be burned up, you may be found at [the]  
Right hand of God, Redeemed through the precious  
blood of the Son of God. - -

I take the opportunity of sending this by a  
friend who has charge of three of my sons &  
who is now about to enter College. I believe  
a young man of talent, & and (sic) anxious to be  
introduced to you - When you see or write  
to your Uncle pray remember me  
to him. accept my best wishes & Believe

very sincerely

yours

(?)HamiltonRowan

### The writer of the letter

What can be deduced from the letter about its writer is that he was present at Hamilton's [baptism](#) in 1805, which took place in Bethesda Chapel, Dorset street in Dublin, a Church of Ireland congregation. He probably was still young, 'little' having 'understood' the importance of being a sponsor. In the Anglican Church a sponsor is the equivalent of a godparent but [not the same](#); in case of baptism of a child

they have the spiritual role of supporting the child's growth in faith, without the responsibility of the social role which is usually associated with godparents.

There is no minimum age for becoming a godparent, but candidates are expected to be baptised and confirmed. Therefore safely assuming that the writer was sixteen<sup>3</sup> or older when Hamilton was born, he was born in 1789 or earlier. He was alive in 1835, lived in Downpatrick, and had ten children of whom three sons were still rather young, perhaps in their teens because a 'young talented man' had charge of them. He sounds like a reverend, and had met Uncle James of Trim, where Hamilton grew up. The signature in the letter seems to start with W but it coincides with the H of Hamilton. That of course is possible in a signature, yet it looks more like a V. Comparing the signature with the handwriting in the letter, it could also be a small f, a C, an S or even a Y.

In 1767 Archibald Rowan Hamilton had [added](#) his grandfather's surname, Rowan, to his father's surname, Hamilton, and the only persons at the time of Hamilton's baptism, 1805, who also carried the name 'Hamilton Rowan' were Archibald's wife and children. Rowan's eldest son Gawen died in 1834, therefore before the writing of the 1835 letter to Hamilton,

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<sup>3</sup> Sixteen is the minimum age for the Roman Catholic Church to become a sponsor.

which leaves Sydney Hamilton Rowan who was [born in 1789](#), and died 14 November 1847 as is known from the death announcement in the *Northern Whig* of [18 November 1847](#),

Death. Sydney Hamilton Rowan, Esq., of Downpatrick. [...] Descended from a line of distinguished ancestors, and connected with some of the first families in Ulster, he still remained a steady adherent of the Presbyterian Church, and thus threw into the scale of her influence the weight of his hereditary rank, as well as of his Christian integrity.

In accordance with the letter Sydney Hamilton Rowan was of Downpatrick, he had [ten children](#), and he was an influential member of the [Presbyterian church](#).

From various sources it appears that [as a young man](#) he obtained a commission in the North Down Militia, and in 1831 he became the [first governor](#) of the new Downpatrick gaol. He was [very influential](#) in the Presbyterian church, a respected minister and [elder](#), and described as [very pious](#). Perhaps explaining the tone in the letter, he [believed](#) that "members [needed] the doctrines of their religion truly preached and explained to them." In the same vein he wrote [The Assembly's Shorter Catechism](#). Quite some exhortations in the letter also appear in this book; the letter thus seems to have been written in the style he just was completely used to.

A further possible reason that this son of Rowan was indeed asked by Hamilton's parents as a sponsor is that Hamilton's father Archibald, who was born in 1778, had [in his youth](#) been 'constantly in Mrs. Hamilton's house.' Sydney was born in 1789, and with an age difference of only eleven years Archibald Hamilton may have known the little boy very well, perhaps even better than Rowan, who was twenty-seven years older than he was, and was in exile [from 1794 until 1806](#).

Also the fact that Rowan and his family were Presbyterian may have been a factor; the [Britannica writes](#), "Reformed and Presbyterian churches [are the] various Protestant churches that share a common origin in the Reformation in 16th-century Switzerland. Reformed is the term identifying churches regarded as essentially Calvinistic in doctrine." Hamilton's parents were members of the Church of Ireland but they belonged to the Bethesda congregation, which [according to Graves](#) "then [1805] and long afterwards was noted for Calvinistic tenets of an extreme character."<sup>4</sup> Hamilton was baptised in Bethesda Chapel by Benjamin Williams Mathias, who was one of the [most popular](#) evangelical ministers in Dublin, and the shared Calvinistic views will have created a bond between the families.

## Conclusions

From the information which is indirectly given in the 1853 letter it can be concluded that Sydney Hamilton Rowan is the most likely, or even the only possible, member of the Hamilton Rowan family to have been present at Hamilton's baptism.

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<sup>4</sup> Bethesda's Rev. Benjamin Mathias will not have agreed with this view, [Memorials of Rev. B.W. Mathias](#).

There is nothing which suggests that Rowan was asked as a godfather as Graves assumes, and that therefore perhaps his son stood as a proxy; the letter to Hamilton shows that the writer took it as it was, that he "stood as one of the sponsors at your baptism," and later acknowledged his responsibility. The notion that Rowan had been godfather was clearly an error made by Graves, who will not have realised that because of his exile Rowan was not in Ireland at the time of the baptism, and had died already when the letter was written.

A subsequent conclusion is that there is no reason to suggest that Hamilton was named after Rowan. William Hamilton and Grace McFerrand did [name](#) Hamilton's father Archibald after Rowan, who was after all Grace's 'adoptive' younger brother. But also Archibald himself had a very strong bond with the Hamiltons, and in his youth especially with Mrs. Hamilton, Jane Rowan, who, [according to her son](#), was "endowed with every amiable quality." It was common then to give a son the maiden name of a mother or grandmother as a second given name, and it is more logical to assume that William was named after his 'adoptive' great-grandmother Jane Rowan.

But there are even more likely possibilities. One of them is that William Rowan Hamilton received the surname of his sponsor, Sydney Hamilton Rowan. Yet usually the Christian name of a sponsor or godfather was given, rather than his surname. Therefore the most likely option is that William was given the second Christian name of Archibald's eldest brother [Arthur Rowan](#). Arthur had been William and Grace Hamilton's [eldest son](#), and giving him the maiden name of his 'adoptive' grandmother was, as remarked, a very common thing to do. Having been adopted into the Hamilton family, having been introduced by her adoptive mother to William Hamilton, and having received a large dowry from her, she will have been very thankful.

But Arthur Rowan had died, most likely [in his late teens](#), and Archibald may have missed him terribly, already having [lost his father](#) when he was very young. It was customary to give sons the maiden name of women in the family, but not to give surnames of male family members. Therefore, instead of giving his son the surname of the man he was himself named after, far more likely is that Archibald and Sarah named their son after Archibald's lost eldest brother Arthur Rowan Hamilton.

Summarizing: taking the customs of naming children then into account the most likely option is that Arthur Rowan Hamilton, eldest son of William and Grace and brother of Archibald Hamilton, was named after Mrs Jane Hamilton, née Rowan; it is known that Archibald Hamilton was named after Archibald Hamilton Rowan; and again most likely is that William Rowan Hamilton was named after his uncle Arthur Rowan Hamilton.