

Uncle James - theologian and linguist

Written by Robert Perceval Graves*
introduced and annotated by Anne van Weerden

1 Introduction

In August 1805, William Rowan Hamilton was born in Dublin, in what is now Lower Dominick Street. In 1808, almost three years old, he was sent by his parents to his uncle James (1776-1847) and aunt Sydney (1779-1814) to be educated.¹ James Hamilton was a linguist and graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, and Sydney Hamilton mastered Latin and Hebrew.² In those days every graduate of Trinity College was also a clergyman, and uncle James had become curate of Trim and headmaster of the Diocesan School. In *Catherine Disney : a biographical sketch* I have argued³ why sending the young prodigy to Trim was a very wise decision and hardly had anything to do with the family circumstances, as has often been claimed; and in *Illnesses and Astronomy*⁴ that next to his intellect it may also have been connected to his weak health.⁵

Hamilton's extraordinary intellect was recognized very early; already a month after his birth his mother Sarah noticed that he was uncommon.⁶ There does not

* [Graves 1882, 24]. In the 1880s Graves wrote a three volumed biography about Sir William Rowan Hamilton, [Graves 1882], [Graves 1885], [Graves 1889].

¹ James and Sydney Hamilton were [siblings](#) of Hamilton's father Archibald Hamilton (1778-1819). On 10 February 1814, when Hamilton was eight years old, [uncle James](#), as Hamilton called him, married Elizabeth Boyle.

² [Graves 1882, 26]. Why their brother Archibald Hamilton, Hamilton's father, did not attend college, although he doubtlessly could have, see [Archibald Hamilton and education](#).

³ See section 2.3.2 of *Catherine Disney : a biographical sketch*.

⁴ *Illnesses and Astronomy*, about how Hamilton's health prevented him, at least partially, from becoming a practical astronomer.

⁵ On 17 October 1808 [aunt Sydney wrote](#) to Sarah Hamilton that her son was looking better than she "ever saw him;" it can be supposed that the air in Dublin was not always very healthy then. It must have been difficult for Sarah Hamilton; aunt Sydney continued, "and though it certainly must be trying to you to be so long without seeing him, yet I hope the improvement he has made will, when you see him, make some amends."

⁶ [Graves 1882, 29].

seem to be a record of Hamilton's first years,⁷ but something can be inferred from a remark in the first dated letter written by aunt Sydney to Hamilton's mother about how her son was doing; this letter was written on 18 September 1808, when Hamilton was three years and two weeks old. "When the boys [in school] are reading the Bible, James calls him in to read,⁸ principally to shame some boys who are double his age, who do not read near so well, and you would really laugh to hear the consequential manner with which he reads. He is laying by the small books for Eliza, who he supposes is spelling by this." To which Graves remarks in a footnote that at that time Eliza was "but eighteen months old."

Because for a young child it would be completely normal to assume that what he could do another child could also do, and aunt Sydney apparently did not comment further on that, it seems plausible that Hamilton indeed learned to spell when he was that old. Knowing how well he could read when he was three, and how his progress was thereafter, it is very unlikely that before he went to Trim his development had been like that of an average child, and that it was uncle James who discovered Hamilton's extraordinary talents. It can safely be assumed that people who knew the Hamiltons also knew what a remarkable child William Hamilton was.

This idea is further corroborated by a letter, written by Sarah Hamilton to her sister Mary in 1810, when Hamilton was four or five years old, in which she described how amazed everyone was about her son. "His reciting is astonishing, and his clear and accurate knowledge of geography is beyond belief; he even draws the countries with a pencil on paper, and will cut them out, though not perfectly accurate, yet so well that anybody knowing the countries could not mistake them; but you will think this nothing when I tell you that he reads Latin, Greek, and Hebrew!! It is truly funny to see the faces some of the Wise Heads put on after examining him: they first look incredulous; then they look as if he said it as a parrot would; but after an examination of various books and various parts of the same book, and when sometimes, to correct those who from long neglect to read these dead languages have forgotten some letters, he puts them in, – if they say no, he says, "well but it is so," and when they must agree with him, he says, "now see the advantage of attending to what you read" – they stare; then say that it is wrong to let his mind be so overstocked. They cannot suppose that all this is learned by him as play, and that he could no more speak or play as children in general do, than he could fly."

But even if uncle James was not the first person to recognize Hamilton's amazing abilities, he certainly was very influential in Hamilton's rapid progress. In 2017, at the IHoM4, Miguel DeArce gave a presentation⁹ in which he called James Hamilton a genius. It was a trigger for me to look again at uncle James himself. And while

⁷ When Hamilton's father or mother were not in Dublin they corresponded; Hamilton's uncommonness was described in a letter by his mother when she was with the children in Trim. [Graves 1882, 29]. Unfortunately, I did not see such early letters in the catalogues to the Hamilton collections at Trinity College Library.

⁸ It will have been easy for uncle James to call the young Hamilton to the classroom; the [Diocesan School](#) was in St. Mary's Abbey, or Talbot's Castle, which was also the Hamilton's family home.

⁹ Miguel DeArce, [Hamilton's School Days in Trim 1808-1823](#).

searching for information about James Hamilton’s college time I was lead to the unsurpassed website of David Wilkins, who transcribed all Hamilton’s articles.¹⁰ He also transcribed Graves’ article about Hamilton, which was published in 1842 in the *Dublin University Magazine* as a part of ‘Our Portrait Gallery’.¹¹ Only in Wilkins’ transcription I really noticed the remarkable first footnote, which is quite vague in the scans,¹² and I became curious. Scrolling through uncle James’ article I (think I) started to see why Miguel DeArce called uncle James a genius, and I decided to give Graves’ description about him, showing some of uncle James’ remarkable talents.

2 Graves’ description of uncle James

“Hamilton’s uncle and educator, James Hamilton of Trim, was a man of great natural capacity and strength of mind. And the capacity of his mind was filled and its strength confirmed by thorough University training.¹³ His private tutor before entrance¹⁴ was an eminent scholar, Mr. Miller, at that time Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, afterwards Head Master of Armagh School, and author of a well-known work on the Philosophy of History.¹⁵

“The career of James Hamilton at the University was distinguished. By inspection of the collegiate records of the terminal examinations, I have verified this statement. To the end of his undergraduate course his judgments were generally of the highest, and he obtained both premiums and certificates, the honours of that day, thus taking rank among the leading men of his class.¹⁶

“He appears to have been ordained at the earliest allowable age, for in 1802 his mother, then living with him,¹⁷ writes of him as Curate of Trim, and keeping school

¹⁰ David R. Wilkins, *Sir William Rowan Hamilton (1805-1865)*.

¹¹ On Wilkins’ site, ‘Our Portrait Gallery’ - No. XXVI. Sir William R. Hamilton, President of the Royal Irish Academy, &c. &c. Robert Perceval Graves, *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 19 (1842), pp. 94-110.

¹² The scans of the original article.

¹³ [Graves 1882, 24]

¹⁴ Uncle James entered college when he was only fourteen; most students entered being sixteen.

¹⁵ In 1832, George Miller published *History, philosophically illustrated, from the fall of the Roman Empire, to the French Revolution*, in four volumes.

¹⁶ Describing Hamilton’s time at college, in the first volume of his biography Graves explains the meaning of ‘premiums’ and ‘certificates’. A student earned a premium for having been “the best answerer” at one of the “terminal examinations,” which were “held four times in each year,” and the premium meant that he received “books to a certain value to be obtained from the University Bookseller.” But any student “could obtain only one premium [...] in each year: if after having obtained a premium he came out at a succeeding examination as the best answerer in his division, he was given a Certificate stating the fact.” Uncle James had received for one of his premiums Reid’s *Essays*; Hamilton wrote in 1864, “I had lately been reading [them] with interest, in a well-bound two-volume octavo edition (Dublin, 1786) [vol 1, vol 2] which was given as a College prize to the deceased uncle (Rev. James Hamilton of Trim) who educated me.”

¹⁷ In 1803 Grace Hamilton still was mentioned in *Wilson’s Dublin Directory* as working as a haberdasher, selling small articles for sewing, at 30 Jervis street. It is not known how Graves knew, or supposed, that she lived in Trim; perhaps in the letter she had given her son’s address in Trim.

there.¹⁸ His character both as a scholar and a clergyman stood in the highest rank. A proof of scholarship extending to several oriental languages is extant in his [1835] paper on the Punic passage in Plautus,¹⁹ which received the honour of publication in the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy;²⁰ and as a clergyman the fact that he was called on to preach a Visitation sermon²¹ is an indication that his ability and influence were recognised by his Diocesan: and yet from his entrance into the ministry to his death in 1847, when he had reached his three score years and ten, he remained Curate of Trim.²²

“In ten years after his appointment as such there was indeed conferred upon him by the then Bishop of Meath the addition to his curacy of a small rural parish in the neighbourhood, of which the net annual value was £140, the parish of Almoritia.²³ Notwithstanding that his high character was maintained to the end, and that ten children were born to him,²⁴ this was the extent of professional provision which fell to his lot. The fact cannot, I think, but be considered to involve a serious reproach upon the authorities with whom at that time lay the distribution of Church patronage.²⁵

¹⁸ According to Miguel DeArce, see footnote 9, James Hamilton graduated in 1796, and was ordained on 10 April 1800.

¹⁹ ‘The Punic Passage in Plautus, collated with parallel Passages of the Hebrew Scriptures.’ By the Rev. James Hamilton, A.M. of Trinity College, Dublin. [The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy](#). Vol. XVIII, Polite Literature, 3-64. [Titus Maccius Plautus](#) (c.254-184 BC) was a Roman playwright whose “comedies are the earliest Latin literary works to have survived in their entirety.” The term ‘Punic’ in the title of James Hamilton’s article comes from the Latin word ‘[Punicus](#)’, meaning ‘Carthaginian’; they “traced their origins to the Phoenicians.” The word ‘Poenulus’, in James Hamilton’s article found on page 6, is the title of [the play](#) by Plautus containing the ‘Punic Passage’. It consist of [ten Punic lines](#) which were spoken by the character [Hanno](#) in the fifth act.

²⁰ Graves mentions that the paper [was chosen](#), “On the 13th of July [1835], Hamilton was gratified by an act of the Royal Irish Academy relating not to himself but to the Uncle to whom he was so deeply indebted and so gratefully attached. As the result of a ballot, the Paper of the Rev. J. Hamilton of Trim, *On the Punic Passage in Plautus collated with Parallel Passages of the Hebrew Scriptures*, was ordered for publication in the *Transactions* of the Academy. It is a learned treatise, showing much knowledge of oriental languages.”

²¹ The [Oxford Dictionary](#) gives as one of the meanings of ‘visitation’, “An official visit of inspection, especially one by a bishop to a church in his diocese.”

²² The [Glossary of Anglican Clergy Titles](#) defines as ‘Curate’ as “a deacon or a priest who functions as an assistant or subordinate to the Incumbent of a parish. [...] In the Anglican Church, a curate is always an assistant.” Indeed, when uncle James came to Trim, William Elliott (.-1818) had been vicar of Trim, and from 1819 Richard Butler was vicar. His wife, Harriet Butler Edgeworth, [wrote about uncle James](#), “Mr. Elliot’s curate, the Rev. James Hamilton, was many years older than his new vicar, which might well have caused a jealousy in his feelings that would have made their mutual relations unpleasant; but, on the contrary, he from the very first made him his friend.”

²³ Uncle James was rector there, as can be seen in the [1821 Irish census record](#). Almoritia is also called [Almorita](#). It is about 60 km from Trim, a long distance in those days; it is not known how often uncle James could visit Almoritia.

²⁴ Uncle James had in fact [thirteen children](#), but three of them, little [Kate](#) and two unknown brothers, had died very young.

²⁵ Graves often quite clearly expressed his opinions. That could strengthen the reputation of someone he defended, but also severely harm that of someone he looked down on.

“The reproach, I am happy to say, does not extend to the nephew who had received his paternal care and invaluable instruction. Repeatedly, after Sir William Rowan Hamilton had obtained a position of eminence, did he make application on behalf of his uncle²⁶ to Archbishops and Bishops of the Church, and to successive Viceroys. The merits of the claim were often acknowledged in words, but beyond the offer of another school, at a stage of his life when such a change was scarcely to be contemplated, disappointment was the invariable result. A tardy reparation of this neglect was made in 1854, by the good feeling of Earl St. Germans, who, upon the application of Sir William Rowan Hamilton, presented to the Crown living of Loughcrew the only surviving son of James Hamilton [James Alexander Hamilton].²⁷

“The gratitude and affection of Hamilton towards his uncle were manifested continuously up to the time of his death, by letters seeking advice, imparting confidences, communicating progress in study, and scientific discoveries – letters eagerly craved and warmly acknowledged by him to whom they were addressed;²⁸ but I grieve to add that I have not been able to enrich this biography with what would have been such peculiarly interesting records. The Rector of Loughcrew [James Alexander Hamilton] has informed me that no such letters are now to be found. The fact is truly to be deplored. Scarcely indeed is it possible to imagine that they were not treasured up by one who was so attached to the writer, and so capable of appreciating their value; but Mr. Hamilton adds: ‘my dear father ... who was indeed a man of great ability and learning, and of most charming versatility, as well as power and originality of mind, was not systematic, or careful of his papers: and I have often grieved to think that there remain the merest scraps and remnants of them, sufficient to indicate in the vaguest way the learning, research, refined and critical taste, poetry, philosophy, wit, pathos and sentiment, of which he was full, and which I seem to remember more distinctly, and value more fully in my old age, than in former years.’

“The letters of James Hamilton to his nephew were preserved by the latter, and enable me to bear witness, as I have done above, to their contents, and to what his son truly calls his power and originality of mind. He retained an interest in scientific investigations as well as in theology and classics: one of his letters starts a theory connected with the distinction of musical sounds; another discusses the application of astronomical phenomena to a particular point in history; and his comments on his nephew’s communications of mathematical discoveries show his power of entering into their nature and estimating their importance.²⁹ His nephew, too, for many

²⁶ See for instance [Graves 1885, 405-407].

²⁷ [Graves 1889, 6]

²⁸ In 1845 Hamilton made a note of a letter to uncle James, “My letter related to a certain synthesis of the Notions of Time and Space, or, in their greatest abstraction, of Uno-dimensional and Tri-dimensional Progression; the result being a Quaternio-dimensional Progression, or what I call a Quaternion.” From the biography it can be deduced that Hamilton always held into account the interests of the people he was writing to. He clearly was not hesitant to write to uncle James about his mathematics.

²⁹ Perhaps not solely, but also money problems withheld uncle James from executing his

years after entering upon manhood, sought for his advice in the critical moments of his life, and that advice was given with the careful consideration and warm sympathy of a wise paternal friend.

“James Hamilton married early in life³⁰ [in 1814] Miss Elizabeth Boyle, a niece of Mrs. Peter La Touche, of Belle Vue,³¹ in the county of Wicklow, and left surviving him, besides the son above mentioned, four daughters, two of whom, as missionaries in the East, have since manifested their possession of hereditary energy.³²

projects; in 1834 [Hamilton wrote](#) to his friend and former pupil Lord Adare, “I think that if he were more comfortably situated in other respects, he would carry into effect some of his literary projects, for which no one is more competent than he. If you have seen his old Visitation Sermon (which otherwise I can send you) you will be able to judge that my estimate of his powers and merits is not altogether partial.” In 1843 Hamilton received a pension of £200 for “scientific services.” He then [devoted](#) “a portion of his pension to an annual subvention to his uncle’s income.”

³⁰ This is a strange remark because uncle James married later in life than Graves himself; uncle James was almost thirty-eight when he married, Graves married Helen Hutchins Bellasis (1809-1888), on 31 May 1842, when he was thirty-one or thirty-two. If he had understood that Hamilton grew up in uncle James’ family, he may have assumed that uncle James thus was already married before 1808, when Hamilton came to Trim. For Graves’ marriage see the [Kendal Mercury](#), Saturday 04 June 1842, p. 3.

³¹ Aunt Elizabeth’s mother was [Grace](#) Vicars, who married Alexander Boyle. Grace Vicars was a [sister](#) of [Elizabeth](#) (1756-1842) Vicars, who married Peter La Touche around 1790. Graves’ wife, Helen Bellasis, was a daughter of Charlotte Maude, who was a descendant of [Christopher Maude and Grace Mawhaut](#), of Holling Hall and Woodhouse. Peter La Touche and Elizabeth Vicars did not have children, and they [adopted](#) their nephew, Peter La Touche. This nephew married a Charlotte Maude who also was a descendant of Christopher and Grace. Graves may have been proud of this connection between him and Hamilton, leading him to make this remark.

³² Graves wrote the first volume of Hamilton’s biography in 1882, which means that of [uncle James’ family](#) the daughters still alive were Sydney (.. -1892), Margaret Octavia (.. -1913), and Anna Sophia (.. -1913), who married in 1877. Graves mentions a fourth daughter, but around 1880, when he was writing the first volume of the biography, only three daughters were still alive. It is possible that Graves alluded to Catharine Frances, who had lived in India. She had died in 1864, but indeed had survived her father, uncle James, who died in 1847. On the other hand, also the eldest daughter Elizabeth, who died in 1857, had survived her father. Therefore, either there was another, unknown daughter, or Graves did not know that Catharine had died. Gathering so much information as Graves did for Hamilton’s biography was no easy task; it took him twenty-four years, even though he was assisted by an [amanuensis](#).