

# ‘I DESPISE YOUR OFFER’

## HOW SHEFFIELD GRACE EMBELLISHED HIS FAMILY HISTORY

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*The Graces of Courtstown near Tullaroan were a prominent Kilkenny family who lost their estates in the early 18th century following the Jacobite wars. Their history was well documented by Sheffield Grace in his Memoirs of the Family of Grace in the 1830s but scholars ever since have accused him of distortion and deception.*

The playing card the nine of diamonds is sometimes known as the ‘Curse of Scotland’ as it is alleged that the Duke of Cumberland wrote his infamous order ‘no quarter’ on it after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, thus ending the Jacobite claim to the British crown. Fifty years earlier the Irish Jacobite cause ended with the Treaty of Limerick. In Kilkenny the six of hearts is occasionally referred to as Grace’s card. This name is derived from the action of John Grace, Baron of Courtstown who, when approached by an emissary of the Duke of Schomberg in 1689 and asked to side with King William, contemptuously wrote his refusal on the card saying: ‘Go tell your master I despise his offer, tell him that honour and conscience are dearer to a gentleman than all the wealth and titles a prince can bestow’.<sup>1</sup> He then promptly raised a troop of horse and a regiment of foot of 650 men divided into 13 companies at a cost of £14,000 for the army of King James in Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

John Grace was lucky in life. As a minor he succeeded to the family estates in 1640 on the death of his grandfather Robert, his father (Oliver, *an file* [the poet]) having died in 1637. John was made a ward of his Protestant maternal grandfather, Sir Cyprian Horsfall whose own father, John, had been Protestant Bishop of Ossory.<sup>3</sup> John Grace was referred to as an Irish Protestant at this time.<sup>4</sup> After the execution of Charles I the new Commonwealth government seized John Grace’s lands and he was urged by many to accept lands in Connaught instead. However, he steadfastly refused and pursued his claim to his lands and castle at Courtstown. That he was successful in his suit is shown by a Public Ordinance issued by the Protector himself, Oliver Cromwell in 1654 in which he states:

John Grace, of Courtstowne Castel, in the Countie of Kilkenny, in Ireland, Esqr, was in the yeare 1641 (when the late horrid rebellion broke forth) in ward and under age, and in the time of the said rebellion did relieve diverse of the English, &c.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Chenevix Trench, *Grace’s Card, Irish Catholic Landlords 1690-1800* (Dublin 1997), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> John D’Alton, *Illustrations Historical and Genealogical of King James’s Irish Army List, 1689*, (Dublin, 1855), pp. 796-800.

<sup>3</sup> William Carrigan, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory* (4 vols, Litho Facsimile ed., Kilkenny, 1981), iii, p. 505.

<sup>4</sup> William Healy, *History and Antiquities of Kilkenny, County and City*, (Kilkenny, 1893), i, p. 433.

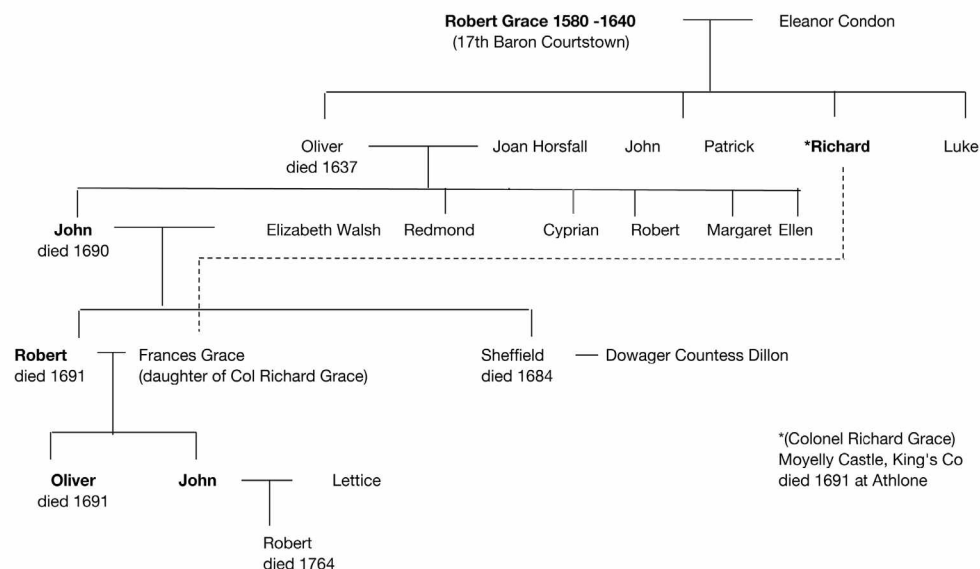


FIG 1: Family tree of the Graces of Courtstown 1580-1764

In 1656 his lands were restored to him and he was confirmed in possession of his property at the restoration of Charles II under the Act of Settlement and Explanation of 1662.<sup>5</sup>

In 1671 John Grace was a Justice of the Peace and in 1682 he was a signatory to an 'Address to the King' from the nobility, gentry and Grand Jury of County Kilkenny. In 1686 he was appointed High Sheriff and lieutenant governor of the county. In 1688 he held 7,234 Irish acres (11,717 statute acres) in the barony of Crannagh.<sup>6</sup> He represented County Kilkenny in the Irish parliament summoned by James II, the Patriot Parliament, which sat in Dublin from May to July 1689. The main acts of this parliament were: the granting of legislative independence to Ireland with the king retaining his title of King of Ireland (i.e. repeal of Poyning's Law), giving freedom of worship and civic equality to Roman Catholics and revoking the Cromwellian land settlement of 1652.<sup>7</sup> All these laws were declared null and void by the Williamite parliament that met in 1695. John Grace died in 1690 before his regiment went into action and was succeeded by his son Robert who was a lieutenant colonel in the regiment (Figure 1). John also had a second son, Sheffield, who died in 1684 and had married Elizabeth, the dowager countess Dillon, the widow of the 5<sup>th</sup> Viscount Dillon.

Robert Grace married his first cousin once removed, Frances who was the only

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 434.

<sup>6</sup> Monica Brennan, 'The changing composition of Kilkenny's landowners 1641-1700, in W. Nolan and K. Whelan (eds). *Kilkenny: History and Society*, (Dublin, 1990) pp. 161-96.

<sup>7</sup> 'Extracts from Acts of Parliament at Dublin 1689', in J. T. Gilbert (ed), *A Jacobite narrative of the war in Ireland*, (Shannon, 1971) pp. 246-50. Available at: <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/E703001-004.html>, accessed 30.9.2010.

daughter of the famous soldier, Colonel Richard Grace of Moyelly Castle in the King's County. Richard Grace supported the Stuarts all his life. He fought for the Royalists in the English civil war and against the Cromwellians in Ireland. When the Irish were defeated he went fighting in Europe but returned to England with the Stuarts in 1660. At the restoration he recovered all his lands in King's County and a pension of £100 per annum, subsequently increased to £400. In the Irish Jacobite war he successfully defended Athlone in 1690 saying: 'when my provisions fail I will defend till I eat my boots'. The following year the Williamites, having reduced the town to rubble with over 50 tons of explosives, finally captured Athlone. Colonel Grace's body was found in the ruins on the Leinster side of the town where he is buried.<sup>8</sup>

Robert Grace also supported the Jacobites. In 1687 he was appointed governor of King's County and *custos rotulorum* (keeper of the rolls) the highest civil officer of the county. He also sat in the Patriot Parliament representing Thomastown, Co Kilkenny. In the war he served in his father's regiment of foot and was wounded at the Battle of Aughrim. He died from his wounds at the end of 1691 and was buried in Grace's chapel in Tullaroan leaving two sons, Oliver and John.<sup>9</sup> Oliver, a major in the Jacobite army, was ill and in France when his father died and survived him by only nine days never knowing that he had become Baron of Courtstown. His younger brother John succeeded to the title, the castle and the lands in Co Kilkenny.

John Grace also fought in the Jacobite war and served as an *aide-de-camp* to Patrick Sarsfield, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Lucan. After the Treaty of Limerick John chose to return home to his estates in Kilkenny rather than go with the Jacobite army to France. He was named in the articles of the Treaty of Limerick along with his father and as an 'articleman' he was secure in his estates - or so he thought. His older brother, Oliver, who had inherited the estates on the death of his father, was not an articleman as he was absent in France when the Treaty was signed. Thus, his estates were forfeit because of his support for the Jacobite cause. However, Oliver only lived for nine days after inheriting and nobody knew that legally the estates were forfeit when John took them over in 1691. For ten years John Grace was a model landlord and was popular with his tenants. John married Lettice the daughter of his cousin Oliver Grace of Shanganagh in Queen's County by whom he had one son, Robert. It is said that the bells of eleven churches rang out and numerous bonfires were lit when Robert was born and all seemed well with the Graces of Courtstown. After ten years in possession of his property John must have felt safe but his aunt, Viscountess Dillon, who had been married to his uncle Sheffield had other ideas. She knew that Oliver had inherited for nine days and she was probably trying to blackmail John but the details of what she wanted are not known; it is possible she demanded £500 to stay silent. In any case like his grandfather he despised her offer and she filed a 'bill of discovery' obliging John to prove his title before the Court of Claims in Dublin. The whole story of Oliver's inheritance came out and the estates were deemed to be forfeit.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Sheffield Grace, *Memoirs of the Family of Grace*, (London, 1823), pp. 27-34.

<sup>9</sup> Healy, *History and Antiquities* i, pp. 435-6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*





PL. I: Sheffield Grace, *Memoirs of the family of Grace*, 1823

An appeal to the English House of Lords was the only way to overcome what was perceived as a very unjust decision. John was lucky in that he was related to John Sheffield (1647-1721), 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Buckingham and Normanby, then Lord Privy Seal. He went to London and was welcomed into the Duke's household. It seemed only a matter of time before his estates would be returned to him. However, John became very attached to the Duke's natural (illegitimate) daughter who was living in Buckingham House (now palace) and the admiration appeared to be mutual. It was not long before it became abundantly clear that their relationship was more than platonic. When the Duke learned of his daughter's pregnancy he refused to help John Grace any further and cut him out of his will; he was apparently heir presumptive to the Duke. Thus he failed to recover his estates, which passed to the Trustees of

Forfeited Estates at Chichester House in Dublin who sold the greater part to the Hollow Blades Sword Company, a misleadingly named bank that dealt in forfeited Irish estates. Courtstown castle was quickly stripped of its lead roof, which was sold at Clonmel and the trees and woods cut down and floated down the Nore to Waterford or burned for charcoal. It is said that John fell into a state of despondency for the ruin he had brought on his family. History records no more about him nor have we any idea what happened to the natural daughter of the Duke or her baby. John's legitimate son, Robert, went to France and became a captain in the French army. He and a cousin Michael Grace did inherit much of the Duke of Buckingham's estate but apparently Robert died unmarried in 1764.<sup>11</sup> According to Mason's *Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland* '... (the) estates thus forfeited produced at the time an annual rent exceeding £9,000, and had been in the possession of the Grace family 530 years'.<sup>12</sup>

Much ink has been spilled in writing about the Graces of Courtstown but, unfortunately, not all of what was written was true. The main culprit in misinformation was the historian and antiquarian Sheffield Grace (1788-1850) (Figure 2) who stated erroneously that the family of Grace was descended from Raymond Le Gros, one of the first Norman knights to set foot in Ireland circa 1169.<sup>13</sup> Sheffield

<sup>11</sup> Grace, *Memoirs*, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> William Shaw Mason, *A Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland*, (3 vols, Dublin 1814-19), iii, pp. 596-602.

<sup>13</sup> Grace, *Memoirs*, p. 7.

Grace was born at Boley near Abbeylaxfield the second son of Richard Grace M.P. and his wife Jane. His great grand father was the Michael who inherited the Buckingham fortune. Sheffield was educated at Winchester and Oxford and became a member of Lincoln's Inn in London. He was elected a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and created a Doctor of Civil Law (Oxford) in 1827. In 1819 he contributed to Shaw Mason's *Statistical Account*, a book published with the encouragement of the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Sir Robert Peel. In 1823, recycling much of what he had written in Shaw Mason's book, Sheffield published, in the words of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a 'fictionalised' *Memoirs of the Family of Grace*.<sup>14</sup> In this book he reproduced several portraits and sketches and numerous poems as well as inscriptions from the Grace mausoleum at Arles, which he and his siblings paid to have restored. The *Memoirs* seem to have been published in different sizes and volumes, which are not consistent in their content; several different versions exist. In all versions he reproduces a reference about himself, which was written in support of his application to become a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries:

Sheffield Grace, esq, of No 5, King's Bench Walk, in the Inner Temple, a gentleman very conversant in the history and antiquities of this kingdom, being desirous of the honour of becoming a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London; we, whose names are hereunto subscribed, do, of our personal knowledge, recommend him as highly deserving that honour, and likely to prove a useful and valuable member.

C. Bathurst,  
Clifden  
Henniker' (sic).<sup>15</sup>

The first person to say that Sheffield Grace had made a mistake was the Rev William Healy in his book *The History and Antiquities of Kilkenny* published in 1893. Sheffield Grace had stated in the *Memoirs* that John Grace, Baron of Courtstown (d. 1690) had been a member of the Supreme Committee of the Confederate Catholics in 1648. Healy looked at the lists of temporal Peers of the General Assembly of 1647 and the membership lists of the Executive of the Supreme Council (of the Confederacy) in 1648 and could not find any mention of John Grace.<sup>16</sup> This is hardly surprising as John was still fairly young in 1647/8 and had probably been brought up as a Protestant by his Horsfall grandfather. Also in 1656 we find Cromwell restoring John Grace's property to him stating that: 'he did relieve diverse of the English &c'. It is therefore very unlikely that he had anything to do with the Confederate Catholic cause as alleged by Sheffield Grace.

The next author to challenge the truth of Sheffield Grace's work was Richard

<sup>14</sup> J. T. Gilbert and M. Lloyd, 'Grace, Sheffield (1788-1850)', in Lawrence Goldman (ed) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004). Available at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.ul.ie/view/article/11182>, accessed 30 Sept 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Grace, *Memoirs*, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Healy, *History and Antiquities*, i, p. 435.

Langrishe who, as vice president of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (originally called the Kilkenny Archaeological Society), read two papers to the society in 1900<sup>17</sup> and 1902,<sup>18</sup> respectively, on the topic of the origin of the Graces. According to Langrishe the Graces were descended, not as Sheffield claimed, from the swashbuckling Raymond Le Gros, but from William Crassus or Le Gros who held lands in Sodbury (Gloucestershire) and was witness to several charters granted in Kilkenny by William Marshall, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Pembroke (1190-1231), including the charter of the City of Kilkenny (1223). In 1283 William Le Gros, grandson of William Crassus formally exchanged with the Welond family his lands in Sodbury for lands in Kilkenny ('in Tullachrothan, Rathbolgan, Gortneleen and Ballydine') although his father appears to have been in possession of lands in Kilkenny in 1247. Langrishe referring to Sheffield Grace says:

the author of the memoirs is deserving of all praise for his efforts ... it is no slur on his memory to draw attention to the new light which various ... State Papers ... have thrown on the origin of the Grace family.

In 1900 in the *English Historical Review* Mary Bateson also had a cut at Sheffield: 'He (Sheffield) supposes the family to be descended from Raymond le Gros, but if so they were illegitimate for Giraldus Cambrensis expressly states that he left no lawful issue'.<sup>19</sup> Rev. William Carrigan in his monumental *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory* published in 1905 accuses Sheffield Grace of making two 'serious mistakes' in the *Memoirs*. Firstly, he again states that Raymond Le Gros left no issue and, secondly, he accuses Sheffield of inventing a John Grace as a means of linking the Lagan-Ballylinch Graces (of which Sheffield himself was a member) to the Graces of Courtstown.<sup>20</sup>

Invention seems to have been something Sheffield Grace was particularly good at. In the *Memoirs* is reproduced a song called 'Grasagh Aboe, A War-Song Of The Graces of Courtstown'. The song is eight stanzas long and is presented in Irish and English. In an article published in *Ériu* in 1971 David Greene points out that the word abú, as in Grassagh Abú, first appeared in Edward O'Reilly's *Irish-English Dictionary* in 1821. He says 'it was no doubt from O'Donovan's *Grammar* with its mention of Grásach abó that Sheffield Grace Esq. got the idea of composing the 'ancient feudal war song' entitled Grasagh Aboe ... in a volume published privately in London in 1839'.<sup>21</sup> Greene may not be correct in this assertion, as O'Donovan's *Grammar* was not published until 1845 and the song appeared in 1823. However, it seems that Sheffield may have made up the 'ancient' war song himself or had

<sup>17</sup> Richard Langrishe, 'The origin of the Grace family of Courtstown, County Kilkenny, and their title to the Tullaroan Estate', in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, x, (1900) pp. 319-323.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Langrishe, 'The origin of the Grace family of Courtstown, County Kilkenny, (No 2)', in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, xii, (1902), pp. 64-67.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Bateson, 'The Laws of Breteuil (Continued)', in *The English Historical Review*, xv, (1900) pp. 314-5. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/548456> accessed 30.9.2010.

<sup>20</sup> Carrigan, *History and Antiquities*, iii, p. 507.

<sup>21</sup> David Greene, 'The Irish War-Cry', in *Ériu*, ii, (1971), pp. 167-73.



someone do it for him. Another ‘Grace’ poem was The Lament for Oliver Grace, *an file* (d. 1637) (Marbhna Oiliféir Grás) published in Hardiman’s *Irish Minstrelsy* in 1831.<sup>22</sup> This was reputedly composed by John MacWalter Walsh of the Walsh Mountains in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and handed down orally by local people. However, a little adroit literary detective work by Colm O’Lochlainn<sup>23</sup> and Art Pádraig Mac Gréagóir<sup>24</sup> in the 1940s showed that this poem and other ‘Grace’ poems were written for Sheffield Grace by Pádraig O’Neill, a miller from Owing, near Carrick-on-Suir in 1818-1819.

Having seen how Sheffield Grace invented history and literature to give the impression that his family was far grander than it actually was, it should come as no surprise that Sheffield Grace also inflated the architecture associated with his family. In Conleth Manning’s words Sheffield Grace simply created ‘castles in the air’.<sup>25</sup> In a wonderful paper written for a *Festschrift* in honour of Margaret Phelan in 1997, Manning showed that many of the illustrations of buildings in Sheffield Grace’s books were architecturally suspect. It would seem that Grace had commissioned artists to forge illustrations of Courtstown and Inchmore castles as well as Castle Howel. Conveniently, hardly anything remained of these castles in the early 1800s so free rein was given to imagining how they might have looked. However the results were very strange to the trained architectural eye. Grace seems to have been the banker to a literary and antiquarian group that included Shaw Mason and Hardiman. He may have provided financial support for his friends’ publications in return for including his fictitious material in their books.<sup>26</sup> Why Sheffield Grace should have gone to such lengths and expense to create this fictionalised hagiography of his family is a mystery but clearly as O’Lochlainn said ‘he had more money than judgement’.

The last piece of fiction in relation to the Graces of Courtstown appeared in *Fraser’s Magazine* in December 1835 in a story called ‘The Baron of Courtstown’ by ‘The Dominie’.<sup>27</sup> The story of the last Baron of Courtstown is retold in glorious detail. Only 50 men return from the Battle of Aughrim. The conversation between John Grace and Lady Dillon ends with her saying: ‘I tell you, you shall rue, bitterly rue, the day you defied me! Now you shall know the long and heavy reckoning of a woman’s resentment’. The family harpist, Rudagh Quinlan sings ‘Grasagh Aboe’ for the Baron as he reflects on his family. The Duke of Buckingham’s daughter is given a name, Hebe Herbert and she and John are married secretly, his wife having conveniently been ‘long lost’. John and Hebe live in love and penury in the Walsh Mountains after the Duke throws them out; none of their children survive. At the

<sup>22</sup> James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy or Bardic Remains of Ireland*, (2 vols, London, 1831) ii, pp. 244-50.

<sup>23</sup> Colm O’Lochlainn, ‘Literary Forgeries in Irish’, in *Éigse*, ii, (1940), pp. 123-6.

<sup>24</sup> A.P. MacGréagóir, ‘Cionnus do ceapadh Marbhna Oiliféir Grás agus dha dhán eile’, in *Éigse*, ii, (1940), pp. 267-73.

<sup>25</sup> Conleth Manning, ‘Delusions of grandeur, the pictorial forgeries of Sheffield Grace’, in John Kirwan, (ed), *Kilkenny, Studies in Honour of Margaret Phelan* (Kilkenny, 1997) p112-28.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The Dominie, ‘The Baron of Courtstown’, in *Fraser’s Magazine*, xii, (1835) pp. 629-41.

end Lady Dillon gets her comeuppance: as she is dying in the south of France she asks a priest to hear her confession and give her extreme unction. But when he hears who she is, he refuses and unburdens himself of a monologue worthy of Shakespeare saying (among other things):

the church spurns you and grace is denied you, unhappy mortal! The flames of the damned are yawning for you ... the oil of unction would blister my fingers. Perish wretch! Perish in the gnawings of remorse, for sins like these are not to be forgiven in this world or the next!

The priest rushed away from her but before another priest could be found she was dead. The story ends with a gothic flourish:

the country people say that when the moon rises at night amid unusual storms, the sheeted spectre of the wicked Lady Dillon is heard screaming amidst the ruins of Courtstown Castle or seen flitting among the tomb stones of the chapel of Tullaroan.

One wonders where *Fraser's Magazine* got the story.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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