

A black and white photograph of a cricketer, W.G. Grace, in a batting stance. He is wearing a white cricket shirt and trousers, a dark cap with a white emblem, and has a full, dark beard. He is holding a cricket bat with both hands, ready to strike. The background is a blurred green field.

'The best biography of
W.G. ever produced.'
Christopher Martin-Jenkins

W.G. Grace

Simon Rae

W. G. GRACE
A Life

SIMON RAE



To the Memory of Geoffrey Rippon

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PREFACE

W. G. Grace was unquestionably the dominant personality in Victorian cricket. Some saw him as a classic case of arrested development, a perpetual schoolboy. Certainly he could act the part, and snapshots of him irritating a decidedly unamused Lord Hawke and the Kent captain, J. R. Mason, at the Hastings Festival in 1901, graphically demonstrate (see Plate 25). This is the W.G. of a hundred well-loved anecdotes – irrepressible, child-like, larger than life – and the excuse many writers have taken to produce a caricature rather than a character. For A. A. Thomson, ‘the outsize opulence of his personality made him akin to Mr Pickwick or the jolly Ghost of Christmas Present or Tristram Shandy’s Uncle Toby ... or the great Sir John Falstaff ... G. K. Chesterton once said that Pickwick was the true English fairy and W.G., that bulky sprite, was a prodigious Puck in a truly English midsummer day’s dream.’¹ In this fairy-tale world, Grace ‘was king, and though he was a merry monarch rather than an absolute one, his reign was never challenged.’²

C. B. Fry, who had the advantage of knowing and playing with Grace, was also reminded of the original merry monarch, but was unequivocal about which aspects of Henry VIII he had in mind: ‘Except for his real friends W.G. had a formidable eye and a beetling brow; ... he knew who he was and who you were, and he possessed when it came to it, an Olympian dignity.’³ In fact, Grace had what all kings have, power, and the story of his life is largely the story of the exercise of that power.

Perhaps a distinction needs to be made between influence, which Grace unquestionably had, and the daunting personal power that Fry identified. The timing of Grace’s emergence onto the scene in the mid-1860s happened to give him an enormous say in the future of the game, which hung in the balance between, on the one hand, a demoralized MCC and the few amateur-controlled counties and, on the other, the northern professionals who, with their Packer-like touring teams, had the makings of an alternative structure wholly independent of Lord’s. Grace was the pivotal figure in this power struggle. With his explosive talent, he was the man the crowds wanted to see, and they would have followed him into either camp. In throwing in his lot with the MCC, he effectively headed off the schism which could have seen the amateur and professional elements drift apart, and handed the control of the game back to the Lord’s establishment.

He demanded nothing in return except to be allowed to flout that establishment’s most sacred tenet, amateurism. Grace made far more money from the game than any of the professionals, and although this led to controversy that blew up periodically throughout his career, there was nothing anyone could do about it. This was the pattern of his life. He used his power to get what he wanted, and given his imperviousness to criticism, it has to be said he was remarkably successful.

In addition to causing much friction during his lifetime, Grace’s ‘shamateurism’ has drawn reproach from later writers. Benny Green wonders aloud what Grace thought of the ‘nonsense’ of the amateur-professional divide, and chides him for not renouncing his amateur status and putting paid ‘once and for all to the hypocrisy of a two-tiered social structure in the game which was to endure for a hundred years’.⁴

The reason why such a course was unthinkable lies with Grace’s family and upbringing. Coming from a fairly humble provincial background, Grace straddled the class lines, but his father, Dr Henry Mills Grace, had no doubts as to the family’s rightful place in Victorian society. For any son of his to have played openly as a professional would have been anathema to him. His death in 1871 came at

crucial stage in Grace's life, and it is arguable that he would not have adopted such a blatantly semi-professional lifestyle as he did during the 1870s had his father still been alive. Just how much money Grace made in this period is difficult to determine, but in extrapolating from the known facts, I have shown that cricket provided him with a comfortable living while he was qualifying to become a doctor.

Apart from his mother, Martha Grace, and his uncle, Alfred Pocock, who between them took an impassioned interest in his development as a player, the other formative influence in his life was his elder brother, Edward Mills Grace (E.M.). E.M. was seven years his senior, and a brilliant cricketer in his own right. He set a high standard for his younger brother, who trailed in his wake for many years before finally overhauling him. The intense rivalry between the two – indeed, the fiercely competitive atmosphere generated by five excessively keen if variously talented siblings – is at the root of Grace's extraordinarily combative character.

Grace's ability to assert himself received a huge boost when he shot up in height as a teenager. He ultimately reached six foot two, and with his enormous beard and the weight he put on in his late twenties, he became a truly imposing physical presence. Unfortunately this went with a violent temper, and there were too many occasions on which he was provoked to actual violence (and was once extremely lucky to avoid ending up in court on a charge of assault). For the man who came to personify cricket, Grace's behaviour often fell woefully short of acceptable standards, and accusations of sharp practice, trickery, intransigence and bullying ring down the years.

Nowhere were the howls of protest louder than Australia, where Grace was twice welcomed as a hero and twice seen off on the boat home with a sense of relief. With the exception of Douglas Jardine, he is the most unpopular England captain ever to tour down under. This makes his two tours (1873–4 and 1891–2) of particular interest. Never was he subjected to such close scrutiny, and never as he questioned umpires' decisions, appealed for catches that he knew were not out, threatened to come to blows with officials, and ran a piratical course through his contractual agreements – was his character shown up in such a bad light. The Australians encountered similar behaviour from him when they came to England. In 1878 he more or less kidnapped a player from their dressing room at Lord's and at the Oval in 1882 he so incensed the entire team, and specifically the Demon, Frederick Spofforth, that England suffered a devastating retribution. There is a strong case for saying that Grace was inadvertently responsible for the creation of the whole Ashes saga.

But for all his lack of judgement in the heat of the moment, Grace had the best interests of the game at heart, and did an enormous amount to promote Anglo-Australian cricket. He played a more vital role in setting up the first ever Test on English soil in 1880 than he has normally been given credit for, and even though past his cricketing prime, he established the competitive tone over the next two decades. If sport is war without the shooting, Grace was cricket's natural warlord, and though his antics sometimes appalled them, the Australians kept coming back with wave after wave of superlative bowlers to try their skills against him. Spofforth and Boyle, Turner and Ferris, Trumble, Giffen, Noble, Jones – his was the wicket they sought above all others. And when the smoke of battle rolled away, there were few grudges. In later years Grace became the best of friends with men like Billy Murdoch and Spofforth, and is mentioned with affectionate admiration in the memoirs of others. For all his faults, Grace was a difficult man to dislike for long, and for the vast majority of his contemporaries, playing with him was a privilege. George Beldam, the brilliant sports photographer, spoke for many when he wrote: 'To play under him was to worship him ... To know him was to love him.'⁵

Stories of his kindness are legion, and though in money matters he was penny sharp, he was n

mean – in 1879 he insisted on giving Alfred Shaw the gate money from his benefit match at Lord's to compensate the great Notts bowler for the disaster of his own benefit match earlier in the season. His medical skills were often disparaged, but as a humble GP in Bristol he won the confidence and affection of his patients, and many of the poorest testified to his generosity in neglecting to send bills they could ill afford to pay. He was especially fond of children, and they were obviously fascinated by him. In 1995 his grand-daughter, Primrose Worthington, told Cliff Morgan on *Sport on 4* how she remembered sitting on his lap as a little girl, plaiting his beard. Grace was a demanding father, perhaps too demanding in the case of his eldest son, who bore his world-famous initials, but he was undeniably devoted to his family, and experienced the agony of so many Victorian parents when he lost two of his four children as young adults.

He had become a legend long before the end of his playing career, but though he could walk with kings – he strolled with two future monarchs – he never lost the common touch, and would readily shake hands with complete strangers if they had the courage to approach him in the street. For all the adulation he attracted, he remained, according to the editor of *Wisden*, the most natural and unspoiled of men. 'Whenever and wherever one met him he was always the same. There was not the smallest trace of affectation about him ... No man who ever won such world-wide fame could have been more modest in speaking of his own doings.'⁶

His achievements speak for themselves: 54,896 first-class runs (boosted by his phenomenal scoring in minor cricket to over 100,000 runs in all), and 2,876 wickets. And yet, because of their Victorian provenance, his figures do not seem to carry as much conviction as one would expect. The question that has been most frequently asked while engaged on this book is: Just how good was W.G.? Perhaps the abandonment of England's first Test against the West Indies in January 1998 can help put his performances in perspective. As a leader in the *Guardian* pointed out, in Grace's day, 'Tests were routinely played on awful pitches and batsmen just had to cope – W.G. Grace was famous for the way he dealt with shooters.'⁷ The Lord's wicket of the 1860s and 1870s was far worse than Sabina Park, and if the bowlers weren't as fast as Ambrose and Walsh, they were certainly quick enough to kill, as the death of George Summer in 1870 proved. In his teens Grace was hitting centuries when fifty was the summit of most batsmen's ambition, and by the time the wickets had improved in the 1890s and Ranjitsinhji, Fry, Abel and Hayward were vying to break the records he had established, old-stage spectators reflected that had Grace then been in his prime, the bowlers would simply never have got him out.

The truth is, 150 years after his birth W. G. Grace remains, deservedly, the best-known cricketer in the history of the game.

*

This book had its origins in a radio programme I wrote and presented for Radio 4 in 1995. *Not at Dorking* took its title from a remark attributed to the Surrey stonewaller Harry Jupp, when he was bowled first ball in a benefit match in his home town. 'Ain't you going out, Juppy?' the opposition captain plaintively enquired. 'Not at Dorking,' replied Jupp, busily putting the bails back on. Grace, who played a lot of cricket with Jupp in the 1860s and 70s, was similarly reluctant to leave the crease, and although the programme was not exclusively about him, he naturally became a leading character. A cast of professional actors was supplemented by Christopher Martin-Jenkins and David Lloyd, who played themselves, and gave a very convincing performance commentating on Grace's last great innings at the Oval in 1906 while staring out from the BBC commentary box over the empty acres of Edgbaston. My thanks to them and the rest of a versatile team, and to the producer, Viv Beeby.

Among those who heard *Not at Dorking* was Matthew Evans, the Chairman of Faber and Faber who put my vague thoughts of exploring Grace and his period further into sharp focus by inviting me to submit a proposal for a biography. I am extremely grateful to him for that initial spur and the commission that followed. I am also indebted to my editor, Julian Loose, and his assistant, Lulu Vinten, for their support, encouragement and invaluable criticism. I should also mention Dani Balado-Lopez, who undertook the demanding task of copy-editing the manuscript. My thanks go to them, and to everyone else involved in the production and promotion of this book.

I would like to thank John Whitworth, Janice Thomson, Ian Smith and Lachlan Mackinnon for their valuable suggestions during the manuscript's progress. I am particularly grateful to David Kynaston who generously volunteered to read each chapter as I wrote it, and gave me the benefit of his expertise, not only on W.G. and nineteenth-century cricket, but on the wider historical background, saving me from innumerable howlers (though, needless to say, the errors that remain are entirely my responsibility).

All biographers are indebted to those who precede them. By and large, Grace has been well served. In addition to the four books which bear his name as author, Methven Brownlee's biography of 1888 gives an intimate, if uncritical, portrait of him as he appeared to his contemporaries. The *Memorial Biography* of 1919 is, I think, unique in drawing on the recollections of so many contributors, and remains an invaluable source to this day. Bernard Darwin's personal memoir of 1934 vividly evokes Grace in his later years, while, for all its tendency to hagiography, A. A. Thomson's *The Great Cricketer* (1957) is an entertaining and ultimately moving book. No survey, however brief, should overlook Neville Cardus's persuasive essays on both the man and his period, and C. L. R. James's seminal work *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), which was (in part) an attempt to place W.G. and the game he championed at the centre of Victorian culture. Eric Midwinter's *W. G. Grace: His Life and Times* (1981) successfully set Grace in his social context, while, most recently, Robert Low turned the spotlight back onto Grace the cricketer in *W.G.* (1997).

I have also gained illumination from a number of other publications concentrating on different aspects of Grace's life and career. In 1989 the Downend Local History Society published Peris Jones's extensive research into the family background, and *Gentlemen and Players* is the most thorough account of the early years that I know of. David Kynaston's *W.G.'s Birthday Party* (1991) is a masterly celebration of Grace's 1898 Jubilee Match, and those who took part in it. Derek West's three scholarly volumes issued by Darf Publishers are essential reading for anyone interested in the background to W.G.'s cricketing life, and *The Players* (1988) by Ric Sissons is another major contribution to the history of Victorian cricket. David Rayvern Allen's anthology *Cricket with Grace* (1990) brings together many fugitive pieces, and I also found much of interest in *Bat & Pad* (1984) edited by Pat Mullins and Philip Derriman, and *Cradle Days* (1989), a collection of the cricketer's writings of T. P. Horan ('Felix'), edited by Pat Mullins and Brian Crowley. In *W.G. at Kadina* (1990) Bernard Whimpress produced an exemplary monograph on the most shameful episode of Grace's career, and I am also grateful to him for allowing me to read his unpublished thesis on the strained relations between Grace and his Australian hosts. *W.G. Down Under* by Rick Smith and Ron Williams gives a complete account of both Grace tours, while Rick Smith's *ABC Guide to Australian Test Cricketers* proved a highly useful reference work.

I found myself consulting Sir Pelham Warner's *Gentlemen v. Players* with great regularity, and Bill Frindall's *The Wisden Book of Test Cricket* was similarly never far from the top of the volume heaped around my desk. I am also very grateful to Bill Frindall for compiling the Statistical Survey and for outlining the controversy surrounding Grace's record. While accepting the arguments for

retaining the traditional figures, I have, perhaps inconsistently, used Derek Lodge's volume published by the Association of Cricket Statisticians for Grace's season-by-season aggregates and averages, and take this opportunity to acknowledge this invaluable resource. As far as Grace's minor cricket concerned, I have relied upon Neville Weston's meticulously researched summary, published in a limited edition of fifty in 1973. At last, in this 150th anniversary year, the two halves of Grace's career will be united in the covers of one book: J. R. Webber has produced the definitive match-by-match account of Grace's performances in both first-class and minor cricket, *The Chronicle of W.G. Grace* to be published by the Association of Cricket Statisticians. While I regret not having had access to this treasure trove of 1,100 pages, I am grateful to its compiler for some useful hints and sound advice. For modern monetary equivalents I have used the conversion table at the back of Richard Roberts' *Schroders: Merchants and Bankers* (MacMillan 1992).

I have been greatly helped by a number of cricket archivists, librarians and museum curators, both the United Kingdom and Australia, and would like to thank the following for their courtesy and kindness: Stephen Green and his assistant Michael Wolton at Lord's, Peter Wynne-Thomas at Trent Bridge, Bert Avery at the County Ground, Bristol, Jeff Hancock at the Oval, and Malcolm Lorimer, Don Ambrose and Keith Hayhurst at Old Trafford; John Wood at the Library of the New South Wales Cricket Association, Sydney, Bernard Whimpress at the Adelaide Oval, and Ross Peacock, David Studham and Jena Pullman at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

I have also benefited from the generosity of several private collectors. Roger Mann opened his great collection to me and worked tirelessly to supply my requests for photographs; David Frith sent photocopies of his Grace letters along with a selection of photographs; Malcolm Lorimer showed me some of Neville Weston's scrapbooks; Rick Smith gave me a copy of George Arthur's scrapbook covering Grace's tour of 1873–4, along with much other valuable material, including a couple of rare photographs. Roy Barratt and Tony Sheldon also contributed valuable prints. My thanks to all of them. I would also like to thank Brian Bearne for allowing me access to Grace's collection of cricket books that his firm auctioned in Exeter in 1996. I was given every assistance by Robin Barlow and Richard Bearne to take the fullest advantage of this unique opportunity, and I am extremely grateful to them. Anton Bantock, of the Malago Society, generously loaned me Nora Peache's diary.

A number of people have shared their family reminiscences of W.G. with me: Julian Lawton Smith, Peggy Gruber, Robert Gretton, Richard Matthews. I am particularly grateful to Colonel G. F. Grace, the grandson of E. M. Grace, for allowing me to listen to an audio cassette he had made of his father's (Edgar Mervyn Grace's) recollections of W.G., and to Dr Richard Bernard for showing me round the various family sites in Downend, and discussing his great-great-uncle's medical career with me. It was with great sadness that I heard of Dr Bernard's death as the book was nearing completion. Keith and Anne Clarke generously shared the fruits of their meticulous research into Grace's servant Harry Fowler, and I am happy to acknowledge the help they have given me in passing on census returns, death certificates and other painstakingly acquired material. Dr Peter Toghill displayed a similar generosity in giving me the benefit of his extensive knowledge of Grace's medical training, as did Major A. A. Greenwood in providing invaluable details of his father's time as W.G.'s locum in Bristol.

I am also indebted to the secretaries, librarians or archivists of the following institutions for their prompt and full responses to enquiries: The Royal Archive, Windsor; The Royal College of Surgeons in England; The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh; The General Medical Council; The University Library, Aberdeen; The Central Library, Aberdeen.

I did the bulk of my research in the British Library, and was fortunate to experience both the fading

splendour of the old British Museum Reading Room and the chaste opulence of Colin St John Wilson's new St Pancras building. The staff maintained a high level of efficiency and courtesy throughout what must have been an enormously stressful period and I am grateful for all the help I have received from them. I would also like to thank the staffs of the other libraries I visited: The Bodleian Library, Oxford; Grimsby Reference Library; Hull Central Library; The Mitchell Library, Glasgow; Bristol Central Library; Manchester Central Library; The London Library; Devizes Library; Chippenham Library; and the British Library's Newspaper Division, Colindale. In Australia I used the state libraries of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, as well as the town libraries of Ballarat (Victoria) and Launceston (Tasmania).

The hospitality I met with on my Australian trip was quite overwhelming and I would like to thank the following for making my stay as enjoyable as it was productive: Holly Davis and Noek Witzan; Penny and Roger Fenton, Jack Pollard, Richard Cashman, Alfred James, Charles and Audrey Nicholson, Angus Trumble, Simon Trumble, Robert Trumble, Fiona Gruber and Mark Williams; Martin Flanagan, Rick and Leanne Smith.

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All writers demand tolerance and understanding from those closest to them. I have received both in abundance from my mother, Jill Rae, whose great generosity also removed the additional burden of financial worry in the closing stages. Janice Thomson was exposed to dangerous levels of fresh information gleaned over long periods of time, but came through the ordeal with her temper intact and at a crucial moment boosted morale with the gift of a splendid pub sign featuring Grace himself. My daughter, Albertine Rae, has been forbearance personified. I am deeply grateful to each of them and without their support I would not have completed this book in time for W.G.'s 150th birthday.

S. R.

Devizes – Hackney

January 1996 – February 1998

Notes

[1](#) Thomson, *The Great Cricketer* (1957; new edn 1968), p. xiii.

[2](#) Thomson, 'W. G. Grace', in Arlott (ed), *Cricket: The Great Ones* (1967), p. 16.

[3](#) Fry, *A Life Worth Living* (1939), p. 214.

[4](#) Green, *A History of Cricket* (1988), p. 69.

[5](#) Gordon et al, *The Memorial Biography* (1919), p. 312.

[6](#) *Wisden*, 1916, p. 88.

[7](#) *Guardian*, 31 January, 1998.

ONE

ONE of W. G. Grace's grandfathers was a butler; one of his sons became an admiral. Grace, like his father and his four brothers, trained as a doctor. Though he did not go to public school or either of the ancient universities, he made sure his eldest son did. This steadily rising curve from relative obscurity to moderate eminence may seem insignificant beside Grace's spectacular leap to enduring and world-wide fame, but it was of great importance to him. As a towering figure on the stage of Victorian England, he was rivalled in terms of public recognition only by the Queen herself and William Ewart Gladstone, but he remained, to a remarkable degree, an ordinary representative of Middle England.

He was born and brought up a West Countryman, and never lost the slight burr of a Gloucestershire accent. Bristol, where he spent his years in general practice, was a major port and a bustling commercial centre, participating fully in the unprecedented economic expansion of the Victorian period, but the surrounding countryside, where he spent his formative years, remained locked in the timeless agricultural cycle celebrated in the novels of Thomas Hardy. Unimpressed – and certainly unintimidated – by metropolitan sophistication, Grace conducted his life with a countryman's canniness according to a dependable, and unquestioned, provincial code of hard work and thrift.

Typical of his class and true to his regional origins, Grace was undoubtedly also the creation of his family. Some great men appear like cuckoos in the nest, having nothing in common with their parents or siblings. Grace is inseparable from his background, and his success was grounded in a tight-knit family network whose support, values, training, code of discipline and internal rivalries underpinned his personality. It was a hard school, but it generated huge self-confidence. The family was fiercely protective of its own, pulling together instinctively in the face of any external challenge. Grace's home provided a bastion against the outside world, and a forcing house for his immense talents. What he learned in this family environment sustained and governed him throughout his life, and his career developed in accordance with the path laid down for him. His strengths and weaknesses were family strengths and weaknesses. His greatness, it might be said, was simply an exaggeration of his Graceness.

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Little is known about Grace's paternal grandfather, Henry Grace, and the facts that exist are mainly derived from a court case in which he was posthumously cast in the role of villainous family retainer. Thirty years after his death he was remembered as 'a great coarse, potbellied, unwieldy man, wholly deficient ... in the Grace of God'.¹ This vicious portrait is hardly reliable, however. It was part of the testimony of Thomas Provis, who, like the far more notorious Tichborne Claimant after him, concocted a false identity and laid claim to a great inheritance. Provis's intended victims were the Smyth family of Ashton Court, Bristol.

The case was heard at Gloucester Crown Court in August 1853. Provis appeared as the plaintiff under his alias, Sir Richard Smyth, and presented a 'last will and testament' that had turned up conveniently in an old family servant's trunk. This document purported to prove that he was the legitimate, if unacknowledged, son of Sir Hugh Smyth, who had died in 1825. In it the deceased

baronet explains how he came to accept his long-lost heir:

From the circumstances of a family nature, this boy was brought up in private, and through the rascality [sic] of my butler, Grace, under whose especial charge my son was, he left England clandestinely in the year 1813, and I had been assured by Grace that my son had died abroad, but at the death of Grace I became possessed of doubts of my son's demise. Now under the impression that my son had died I made a will in the year 1814. That will I now abrogate, annul and sett asside [sic], by this last will and testament, and by the document do acknowledge Richard Hugh Smyth my legitimate son and heir.²

This was a persuasive piece of evidence, if genuine. But as Sir Frederick Thesiger, acting for the Smyth family, pointed out, the only thing it unquestionably proved was that in the later stages of his life, Sir Hugh had developed the same spelling foibles as his supposed son. To the great amusement of the court, a brief spelling test exposed the plaintiff's ingrained preference for double consonants. Indeed, so effective was Thesiger's conduct of the case generally that Provis's position collapsed on the third day of the trial and he was bounced into an ignominious confession of perjury and fraud.

One of the many witnesses called was Elizabeth Grace, Henry Grace's widow. Although well into her seventies, she made the effort to travel to Gloucester, and the evidence she gave supplies the bulk of what is known about her and her husband.

Elizabeth Mills, as she was before her marriage, was the personal maid of Margaret Wilson (daughter of the Bishop of Bristol), who married Hugh Smyth in 1797. Elizabeth soon followed her mistress into matrimony when she met Henry Grace in 1800 and it was through her that Grace came to be employed, in 1801, at Ashton Court. (This scotched Provis's claim that Henry Grace had taken charge of him as an infant in 1797.)

As has been pointed out in previous accounts of the case, Elizabeth Grace's evidence completely cleared her husband and contributed to Provis's downfall, but the surprising fact is that she appeared not for the Smyth family, but for the plaintiff. 'Sir Richard' had been in the Bristol area for some years prior to the court case, testing the water and building up support. He masqueraded as an educationalist (and claimed amongst other things to have shared a study with the great Thomas Arnold at Winchester). It was in this capacity that Elizabeth Grace had met him, as she had been running her own small school in Bristol for many years. 'Sir Richard' developed the acquaintance, seeing how useful Mrs Grace could be to him, and doubtless hinting that he would be generous to his friends if he won his case. She agreed to be interviewed by his solicitor and came to court prepared to testify that the new will was in Sir Hugh's handwriting. However, when the implications of Provis's position became apparent, she beat a hasty retreat, claiming, 'I cannot see any writing.' In a rather candid aside later, she lamented, 'I was never told, if I came to speak for the plaintiff, it was for a forger and I should be imprisoned.'³ There was no danger of that, but Thesiger subjected her to a rigorous cross-examination which revealed the details of her early life.

The Graces had started a family soon after their marriage, and Elizabeth moved out of Ashton Court to set up home in Bristol. Henry later took out a lease on the house for his own lifetime and that of his daughter, Anne, who was born in 1805. His wages, which were fifteen shillings a week in 1800, proved inadequate, and in 1808, fewer than three weeks before she was due to give birth again, Elizabeth took the drastic step of advertising for pupils in the local papers. She announced the opening of a school for girls under twelve years of age, at her own home, offering board and tuition for eighteen guineas per annum. Her son, Henry Mills Grace, was born on 22 February 1808.

After living apart for several years, Elizabeth and her husband formally separated in 1819. Two years later Henry Grace died, leaving Elizabeth nothing but the lease on the house. She never remarried, and spent the rest of her long life struggling to provide for herself and her children.

addition to Anne, she had two other daughters, Elizabeth and Mary. They remain shadowy figures. The likelihood is that after helping in their mother's school they left home to become governesses, slipped quietly into the anonymity of marriage.

Life offered very different prospects for Henry Mills. Surrounded by adoring females from the beginning, and the focus of his mother's ambitions, he was to escape the genteel poverty in which he was raised and make dramatic progress up the social ladder by joining the medical profession. The process of becoming a doctor was a difficult one for someone from a poor background. The Royal College of Physicians recruited its members almost exclusively from Oxford and Cambridge, and had little interest in widening the social catchment of the profession. Pressure for change came from the Royal College of Surgeons, which by the 1830s had about 200 fellows and 8,000 licentiates. Third in the jealously guarded medical hierarchy was the Society of Apothecaries. It was their desire to raise their members' standing above that of common tradesmen through a rigorous examination system which made a great contribution to improving standards in the first half of the century. The society required five years' apprenticeship before examination, and developed the custom of 'walking the hospitals' as useful work experience.

This at least would weed out those who fainted at the sight of blood. Hospitals in those days were not for the squeamish. Watching someone having a leg sawn off with no palliative other than a glass of laudanum and a rag on which to bite was guaranteed to weed out those who hadn't the stomach for it. All five Grace brothers followed in their father's footsteps through the bloodied sawdust. Though not without compassion, they were not a sentimental family.

With London taking the lead, hospitals began to organize schools of their own to take the place of the unregulated apprenticeship system. The men they turned out were relatively well educated and well trained, though socially beneath the physicians and surgeons. By about 1830 the term 'general practitioner' came into use.

This is what Henry Mills Grace aspired to be, though as there was no Medical School in Bristol until 1833, he must have worked towards his examinations as a local surgeon's apprentice before finishing his training at St Thomas's and Guy's in London. He certainly worked hard. His son records that he used to play cricket on the Clifton Downs 'between the hours of five and eight in the morning because that was the only time he could get off.'⁴

Although there was no legal requirement for a doctor to be qualified until the Medical Act of 1858, Henry Mills Grace gained his LSA (Licentiate of the Apothecaries Company) in 1829 and MRC (Member of the Royal College of Surgeons) in 1830. He set great store by his qualifications, an attitude he passed on to his sons. When he applied to the Westerleigh Parish Vestry committee in 1830 for the post of parish surgeon, he emphasized that he 'would not presume to propose myself were I not legally qualified'.⁵

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In 1830, Henry Mills Grace faced the new decade with the hard-won title of 'Doctor' and every prospect of a rewarding career ahead of him. He was an energetic, well-favoured man of five foot ten inches, devoted to outdoor pursuits. Cricket absorbed what spare time he could find in the summer and in winter he followed the hounds. Although not possessed of a good fortune, he had his health and his profession, and was now clearly in want of a wife.

He found her in the home of one of Bristol's most prominent, not to say eccentric, citizens, George Pocock. Pocock, like Henry's mother, was in the education business, running his own school – o

rather, 'Academy' – at Prospect Place. His prospectus spoke encouragingly of the 'airiness and extent of the premisses', and described a 'system of education ... calculated chiefly for men of business'. This included 'penmanship, in all its hands, elocution, arithmetic, mensuration illustrated by globes accompanied by a general view of the commercial world'.⁶

As viewed from Prospect Place, the commercial world must have appeared full of promise. Bristol was a prosperous city and the country's second port. A gazetteer of the time gave this thumbnail sketch: 'Bristol is a seaport, and county of itself, its chief trade is with the West Indies, its manufactures are the sugar refinery, earthenware, soap, and hats; has 18 churches, a cathedral, guildhall, custom-house, and exchange ... Steam packets to Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Liverpool, Carmarthen, Haverford west, Swansea, Newport, Chepstow, Ilfracombe, and Tenby.'⁷ And the city's communications were soon to be extended by the engineering genius of the age, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the rising star of the Great Western Railway.

With boarders paying twenty-five guineas a year and day pupils four, the Academy was a success. A measure of Pocock's worldly wealth can be gleaned from a public audit he printed in 1820 to establish his credentials as a leading supporter of the Methodist community. He had been, he said,

the primary cause under God of raising not less than ten entirely new societies, and eight new chapels, for the erection of some of which he advanced the whole amount, £900 on one, £600 on another, and £300 on a third; [he had contributed] liberally towards the erection of every chapel in the kingdom whenever applied to, and that without a solitary exception; ... giving £60 toward the erection of St Philip's Chapel in this city; [and] lending various sums of money to Trustees of chapels in almost every direction; [while] aiding the funds for the Methodist poor, several of whom are and have been for years the regular pensioners of himself and his wife ...⁸

This catalogue of charitable activity appeared in Pocock's opening broadside in a vitriolic pamphlet war with the city's Methodist establishment. The fundamental issue was authority and power. Pocock was an active and energetic man of progressive ideas, and his ambitions to improve the lot of his fellow man were by no means limited to teaching the sons of tradesmen the basics of mensuration. He wanted to extend the benefits of education and religious instruction to those on the fringes of society, and if they would not come to chapel to hear the Word, he would take the Word to them. In addition to its port and other commercial interests, Bristol was also an important mining area. The miners eked out a pitiable existence in slovenly villages or squatter camps, with no provision for schooling or worship. Pocock's scheme involved travelling round the mining districts and preaching from a tent. The project was a notable success. The colliers were even persuaded to subscribe a pittance towards some basic education for their children. The number of tent preachers rose.

Unhappily, Pocock's good results, combined with his insistence on keeping the reins of the operation in his own hands, provoked jealousy among the Bristol brethren, and in scenes that could have been lifted from *Silas Marner*, and which foreshadowed some of his grandsons' battles, Pocock and his supporters were called to account, roundly stigmatized, and finally 'excluded'.

Displaying the robust passion for self-justification which became a pronounced family trait, Pocock retaliated. He had the organ he had donated to his local chapel removed. Further fuel was added to an already blazing fire by the appearance of 'The Methodist Pill', a defamatory satire on the hypocrisy of Pocock's opponents ('the Pill is an excellent discovery for enabling the Preachers' Wives and Daughters to follow the fashions of the World, and the Preachers to study Politics, instead of Religion, for on the Sunday morning this Pill will cast a sanctimonious smirk on the former, and will work miracles on the latter').⁹ Despite Pocock's denials that the noxious pamphlet emanated from his Academy, a couple of the brethren paid a visit to the printer, as a result of which they were able to

denounce two of Pocock's sons, George Pocock junior and John, as the perpetrators.

Undeflected by this embarrassing filial support, Pocock signed off with a third pamphlet, 'Fact without a Veil' (1820), in which he defended the stance he and his allies had taken and roundly condemned the 'fabric of Methodist Government [which] is tottering on every side, and must eventually fall, unless the disgusting haughtiness of several lordly Preachers be speedily humbled'. The rupture with the Bristol brethren was total and irreparable. History does not relate what happened to the organ.

Pocock retired inside the walls of his Academy for a while, but the timetable's unvarying treadmill could not keep him satisfied for long. Through experimenting with his pupils' kites on 'the breezy eminences of Clifton and Durdham Downs' he stumbled upon a radical new form of transport.

The story of how he developed his kite-drawn carriage is told at exuberant length in his book *The Aeropleustic Art* (1827). Parts of this make chilling reading for anyone concerned with the development of English cricket. First Pocock launched his third son, Alfred, on a kite-drawn sledge. This was whisked away by the wind 'with a velocity so great, that all attempts to overtake it were quite fruitless'. The Downs in those days were pitted with quarries and the future coach of England's greatest cricketer whistled over the lip of one of these, landing '(as it happened) in perfect safety'. Pocock's confidence in his inventions, and his casual attitude to his children's safety, are demonstrated even more clearly in his next experiment, which involved flight. He proudly records that he allowed his daughter, Martha, 'the daring honour' of being 'the first Aeropleust', and gained the launch of W. G. Grace's mother-to-be into the sky, strapped into a chair attached to an array of huge kites.¹¹ In one version of the story, Martha was actually sailed across the Clifton Gorge, but Pocock himself, never one to play down the heroics of any member of his family, makes no such claim.

Despite Martha's inaugural flight, kites could not mount a serious challenge to the hot air balloons which the Montgolfier brothers had pioneered in the 1780s. Pocock, however, persisted with his kite-drawn carriage, or 'charvolant' as he called it. Most of the stories about this bizarre experiment have to be treated with suspicion, but it seems Pocock first road-tested his invention in 1822, taking his family from Bristol to Marlborough at speeds of between sixteen and twenty miles an hour, and scandalizing onlookers by allowing his daughters their turn to steer. A more ambitious trip to London in 1827 is said to have caused a sensation in the capital, and the following year it is claimed that George IV demanded to inspect the 'charvolant' personally at Ascot in June, but newspaper accounts of the royal meeting are silent on the subject, and the Royal Archive at Windsor has no record of any such encounter.¹² Nevertheless, there does seem to have been something of a craze for kite-riding among the young men of Bristol at this time, and Henry Mills Grace was one of them, and this is presumably how he met Martha. By the autumn of 1831 a date had been set for the wedding.

Unfortunately it coincided with the worst riot in the city's history. The whole country was in a volatile state after the House of Lords' rejection of the second Reform Bill. Sporadic window-smashing in London was followed by more serious disturbances in the Midlands, but by far the worst trouble flared up in Bristol. The immediate cause was the visit of the city's recorder, Sir Charles Wetherell. Wetherell was heartily disliked for his anti-Reform position, and when he arrived on Saturday, 29 October, he was met by large and hostile crowds who stoned his carriage enthusiastically all the way to the Guildhall. By the time he was hustled on to the Mansion House for a formal dinner the situation was getting out of control. Despite a personal appeal by the mayor, who showed great courage throughout, the crowd would not be placated, and soon rioters broke into the ground floor of the building, seizing among other things Wetherell's portmanteau. The sight of his linen being ripped

to shreds by a jeering mob was enough to persuade him to beat a retreat, and he escaped over the roof disguised, it was said, in women's clothing.

Although the recorder escaped with his skin, the city did not get off so lightly. Mindful, no doubt of the embarrassing carnage of the Peterloo massacre only a dozen years earlier, the commanding officer of the military force on hand deployed his men with great restraint, and at no little personal risk rode about through the mêlée pleading with the crowds to disperse. They would not, and the rest of the weekend was given over to an orgy of looting and destruction. Sunday was particularly bad with a ragged army tramping in from the outlying districts led, according to several sources, by the same marginalized miners to whom Pocock had addressed his tent ministry.

The mob broke into the prisons and laid siege to the bishop's palace on College Green. Then, although ticking off the buildings on the gazetteer's list, they burnt down the Customs House and several warehouses, from one of which issued a stream of burning rum 'filling the gutters so fast that the drains could not carry it off'. A 'hedge of fire' ignited across a street and several women who ran its terrifying gauntlet were set alight and were only saved by the alacrity of a detachment of sailors who wrestled them to the ground and rolled them about until the flames were extinguished. Floodgates were opened and bridges wantonly destroyed. And through the town, bands of young men lurched from house to house demanding 'drink or blood'.¹³ Pocock and his family must have spent an agonizing night looking out over the ravaged city, wondering where the next plume of flame and smoke would spring up, and whether they would hear the heavy blows of a cudgel on the door.

By Monday the whirlwind had blown itself out, but the city presented a dismal spectacle:

Morning dawned on such a scene as had never before been witnessed in this place. The flames, it is true, were subsiding, but the appearance of Queen square was appalling in the extreme. Numerous buildings were reduced to a heap of smoking ruins, and others were ... falling in; while around, in various parts, lay several of the rioters, in the last stage of senseless intoxication, and with countenances more resembling fiends than men.¹⁴

Pocock's Academy had survived unscathed (unlike a number of other schools that appeared in the lengthy newspaper lists of businesses destroyed). Estimates of the damage ranged from £200,000 to £1 million; casualties were put at twelve dead and ninety-four wounded. Tuesday and Wednesday saw inquests on some of the charred and mutilated remains, and on Thursday, 3 November, Henry Milner and Grace and Martha Pocock were married in St Michael's Church, just around the corner from Prospect Place. The church was described by a contemporary as 'a vicious combination of Grecian and Gothic architecture', but it seems unlikely that, with much of the city beyond its walls reduced to smouldering rubble, either bride or groom would have been unduly worried by its 'architectural absurdities'.¹⁵

Notes

¹ Quoted in Bantock, *The Last Smyths of Ashton Court*, Part I (1990), p. 137.

² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³ *The Times*, 9 August 1853.

⁴ Grace, *Cricket* (1891), pp. 61–2.

⁵ Quoted in Jones, *Gentlemen and Players* (1989), p. 12.

⁶ Elizabeth Ralph, 'People Matter: George Pocock' in *St Stephen's Review* (1961–2).

⁷ Metcalf, 'Bristol' in *England at a Glance* (1835).

⁸ George Pocock et al, 'A Statement of Facts' (1820), p. 13.

⁹ George Pocock junior and John Pocock, 'The Methodist Pill' (1820), p. 22.

[10](#) George Pocock et al, 'The Facts without a Veil' (1820), p. 49.

[11](#) George Pocock, *The Aeropleustic Art* (1827), pp. 10–12.

[12](#) Letter from the Deputy Registrar, Royal Archives, 29 October 1996.

[13](#) *The Times*, 2 November 1831.

[14](#) *Bristol Mercury*, 1 November 1831.

[15](#) 'An Occasional Visitor', *Observations on the Churches of Bristol* (2nd edn, 1843), p. 150.

TWO

HENRY Grace had already decided where he would practise his profession, and, leaving Bristol bury the dead and start rebuilding, he and Martha ‘settled down in Downend, Gloucestershire where they lived for the rest of their lives’.¹ Although today subsumed into the urban sprawl of Bristol, Downend in 1831 was a distinct village surrounded by countryside. The Graces’ first home was Downend House, North Street, an unexceptional Georgian building with creeper partially covering the façade and two cedar trees in the front garden. When the house was sold after the Great War, the estate agent advertised this ‘old-world Period House where the late W. G. Grace, the Famous Cricketer, was born’ as having six bedrooms, a cloakroom, a bathroom and three reception rooms.² It sounds spacious, but as their family increased, it gradually began to seem less so.

Like any other community in England, Downend was rigidly stratified in terms of class. There were a handful of powerful and wealthy inhabitants like the Caves of Cleve Hill, who were Bristol bankers and Merchant Venturers, and Robert Lewis of Cleve Lodge, whose estate included property in Wales. Such people would, in all but the most extreme emergency, call on their Bristol physicians for medical attention. There was a small middle-class contingent centred on the vicar and the vicarage, and below them a jealously calibrated scale of tradesmen, servants and artisans engaged in cottage industries like pin-making or candle-making. Below them were the bedraggled ranks of labourers and farm-workers. Times were difficult in the 1830s, and even more so in the 1840s when the ‘Condition of England Question’ became a major concern with politicians, novelists and social commentators alike. Whatever its eventual benefits, the Reform Act which was finally passed in 1832 did nothing in the short term to alleviate the endemic poverty of the lower classes.

With the prosperity of the High Victorian period still some way off, a young doctor dependent on the fees of his patients had to work hard to make ends meet. Henry Grace would ride for miles at a moment’s notice to visit the sick. The roads were poor, and treacherous at night, and a man on horseback or thrown about in a gig had no protection from the weather. Like the sons he fathered, Dr Grace was exceptionally tough, and he needed to be.

His first son, Henry, was born on 31 January 1833, followed by Annie in 1834. The early years in Downend were taxing as Dr Grace strove to establish himself, and Martha adapted to her role as mother and mistress of the household. But no matter how busy they were, they kept up with the family in Bristol, and would almost certainly have found time to visit Clifton during a momentous week in August 1836, when the British Association for Advancement of Science held its first conference there. The nation’s leading ‘philosophers’, as scientists were then known, gathered for a week of lectures and demonstrations which were enthusiastically attended by the local inhabitants. Among the many peripheral attractions on offer, *The Times* reported, ‘Mr Pocock will exhibit his kite-carriage daily on Durdham-down’.³

The kite-carriage was, however, upstaged by the dramatic events at the Clifton Gorge when Isambard Kingdom Brunel attempted to establish a fixed link between the two sides as the first stage of his magnificent suspension bridge. This attracted enormous public interest, which intensified when half-way through the week, a hawser drawing the first solid bar across to the Clifton side gave way. Miraculously no one was killed, but the bar was seriously damaged. The accident was a severe setback, ‘but Mr Brunei immediately set a great number of hands to work, and feels confident he shall

have the bar in its place, uniting these stupendous rocks, on Saturday morning'.⁴ That confidence was justified, and on Saturday, 27 August 1836 the bar was in place and the foundation stone laid. The Downs were thronged with people, and the river below was filled with jostling boats. A trumpet blast and cheers from crowds on both sides of the gorge announced that Brunel's great project was truly under way. George Pocock saluted the efforts of a fellow visionary with a sky message reading 'Success to the Undertaking', though surprisingly his banner was suspended not from kites but from balloons.

Such high days and holidays would have been few and far between – a village celebration of the coronation of the new young Queen in June 1837 certainly, but there can have been little else to disrupt the hard-working routine as Henry and Martha devoted themselves to their responsibilities. They were to have nine children in all – the same as Victoria and Albert – and in every respect they were the typical Victorian family.

With more mouths to feed, Dr Grace sought ways of increasing his income. The neighbouring parish of Mangotsfield was at the heart of Bristol's mining area, and, tapping perhaps the old Smyth connection, Henry Grace became surgeon to the collieries of Sir John Smyth & Co., the most important of the Coalpit Heath mines. The lot of the miners had barely improved since the days of George Pocock's tent mission, and in Bristol, as elsewhere, boys were still sent underground despite the Factory Act of 1833 which had outlawed the employment of children under the age of nine. Pressure from Lord Shaftesbury and others eventually resulted in a Commission of Inquiry into the State of Children in Employment, and a government commissioner, Elijah Waring, arrived in southern Gloucestershire in 1841. Henry Grace was one of the doctors Waring interviewed, and he came across as 'an intelligent practitioner [and] a gentleman of benevolent and considerate feelings'. However, he towed the company line on the dangers of mining and told Waring that accidents 'were generally the result of carelessness on the part of the miner, in not supporting the roof with proper caution'.⁵

He may have reviewed his confidence in the mines' safety standards when he was called to attend a terrible accident in 1845. Five men died at one of the Soundwell collieries when a rope snapped at the end of a shift. There was only one survivor, and the terrible fall had left him with an arm 'broken in pieces and his head and back cut in several places'. Dr Grace had the unenviable task of amputating the ruined limb, while his patient, conscious throughout, stoically smoked his pipe. A local rope maker told the inquest: 'I never saw rope ... in such a bad condition in my life. I have seen better rope brought to my yard as old junk.'⁶

In addition to his work for the collieries, Dr Grace served as parish doctor, and, after 1848, as Medical Officer for the Mangotsfield Guardians of the Poor, with responsibility for Mangotsfield, Staple Hill and Downend. He was also a consultant at the nearby lunatic asylum, known locally as Mason's Madhouse, and in 1848 was involved in a case against its owner, Dr Joseph Bompas, on the charge of admitting patients without the proper certificates signed by two doctors. An inquiry was held, but the charges were not substantiated. At some stage his medical responsibilities were further increased when he was appointed Surgeon to the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars, a position of sufficient importance to be inscribed on his tombstone.

On top of his duties as a doctor, he added to his workload by becoming the local registrar, recording the births, deaths and marriages of the parish, and, from 1841, overseeing the census returns. He liked to involve his family in his activities as much as he could, and over the years anyone available was conscripted as an enumerator. Dr Grace exemplified the Victorian values of hard work, ambition and public service, and it is a mark of his success as a father that he instilled the same

Dr Grace's best-known legacy to his sons was, of course, his love of cricket (though he was also a keen huntsman, following the Duke of Beaufort's hounds during the winter months). The most detailed account of how cricket came to dominate life at Downend comes in the two volumes of memoirs written by W.G. – *Cricket* (1891) and '*W.G.*' *Cricketing Reminiscences and Personal Recollections* (1899). Although they were both ghosted, Grace took enormous pains over them, and they certainly tell the story as he wanted it told. He was meticulous as far as facts and figures were concerned, and between them the two books provide an accurate, if unanalytical, record of the cricket of his time and his personal achievements. Though they remain selectively silent on the controversies that dogged his career, there is no reason to doubt their reliability as far as the early years are concerned. The portrait of Dr Grace that emerges from their pages is a loving and appreciative one.

According to W.G., it appears that it was his eldest brother, Henry, who was mainly responsible for the resurgence of their father's interest in the game. There was no team in the village, and Dr Grace had to be content with 'running into Bristol now and again, to look at the matches of the Clifton and Bristol clubs'. However, when Henry was sent away to school as an eight-year-old, he became besotted with the game, and 'every time he came home he would talk of nothing but cricket. My father realised that he would be compelled sooner or later to create time to help him, if he desired to keep in touch with him physically as well as mentally. He was strong in the belief that if you want to educate and influence a boy thoroughly it is as important to play with him as to work with him.' Dr Grace decided to make a cricket pitch in the garden. 'It was not much of a pitch, nor was it full size; but it was sufficient to teach the rudiments of the game.'² That was the start of the family regime of practice and coaching that was to bear such astonishing fruit in the years to come.

Not content with providing practice in the garden, and perhaps feeling that he still had some life as a player left in him, Dr Grace decided to establish a cricket club in the locality. Downend was not large enough to support a club on its own, so he brought in the neighbouring villages which collectively formed the Mangotsfield Cricket Club. The best place to play was a nearby common called Rodway Hill. As its name suggests, it was by no means flat, so once again Dr Grace took the lead in making a new cricket pitch. He had a most useful ally in his brother-in-law, Alfred Pocock, the youngest of Martha's brothers. Although he had been living at the St Michael's Hill Academy when his father died in 1843 (he is the witness on George Pocock's death certificate), Alfred had not followed his elder brother, the scurrilous pamphleteer, into the family education business. In the census of 1861, his occupation is given as 'Lithographic Artist'. The fact that he was staying at Downend when the census was taken is not surprising. He was very close to his sister, got on extremely well with his brother-in-law, and made the twelve-mile round trip from his home on the other side of Bristol two or three times a week.

The two men who founded the Downend cricketing dynasty were only average players themselves. Alfred Pocock did not take up the game until he was twenty-three, though he had the advantage of being a 'first-class racquet player'. It was perhaps this late start and the need to apply himself consciously to acquire the basics of the game that made him such a good coach. Dr Grace was an obstinate right-hand bat, though he bowled and threw with his left. Although he lacked the natural skills of his famous sons, he brought to his game an abundance of energy, enthusiasm and determination. He was also a forceful personality with the power to bend others to his will – a

instinctive empire-builder. In 1846 he persuaded the neighbouring West Gloucestershire Cricket Club to amalgamate with the Mangotsfield Club, whose unpromising name passed into oblivion. The control of the new club, however, passed swiftly into Dr Grace's hands. On the field he was supported by Alfred, and two of Martha's nephews who came down from London for their summer holiday William Rees and George Gilbert. And of course his own sons swelled the ranks as soon as they were considered old enough. The West Gloucestershire Club was the launch-pad for three of the greatest careers in nineteenth-century cricket, but once it ceased to be a useful vehicle for the family ambitions, it was allowed to die. It played its last match in 1867, the year after Fred, the youngest of the Test-class triumvirate, made his first-class debut.

As Henry and Martha became an established feature of Downend life, the family grew in the approved fashion. Fanny was born in 1838, Alfred in 1840. Edward Mills, known throughout his adult life by his initials, E.M., was born on 28 November 1841, followed by Alice in 1845 and Elizabeth Blanche in 1846. The year 1848 was troubled by revolutions on the continent and sporadic Chartist outbreaks at home, but the Graces were more concerned with Martha's eighth pregnancy. With seven children as well as servants to accommodate, the house was crowded, and there is a family tradition that Martha moved into the nearby midwife's home, Clematis Cottage, for her confinement. Whether this happened or not, she gave birth to her fourth son on her own birthday, 18 July, and on 8 August with his cricketering cousin William Rees as godfather, the baby was baptized William Gilbert. Of the two Christian names he received, Gilbert was the one favoured by his family and close friends, though his mother apparently called him Willie. The rest of the world would know him by his initials, and a range of titles from the Champion to the Old Man, derived in awe and affection from his unique position in the game he made his own.

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Although he would have known Downend House throughout his childhood, Gilbert can have had no memories of actually living there. In 1850, with another baby expected (George Frederick), Dr Grace decided to move. The new house was called The Chesnuts ('the dropping of the centre "t" "Chestnuts" is an etymological freak sanctioned by custom').⁸ It wasn't a big move, as the new house was only a couple of hundred yards away, on the other side of the street.

Downend House still stands, albeit in a rather drab, anonymous condition, its front garden lost to a busy main road, but The Chesnuts has not survived. It was knocked down in the 1930s to make way for a cinema that was never built, and the site is now occupied by a Somerfield supermarket. A contemporary description of the lost building reads: 'Standing with its back to the high-road, "The Chesnuts" is embowered in fine old chestnut-trees (from which the house derives its name) ... and the avenue leading up to the house from the lodge, though short, is exceedingly picturesque.'⁹ The lodge doubled as Dr Grace's surgery and boarding accommodation for several young medical students over the years. The property's distinguishing feature as far as the Grace boys were concerned was the orchard. Now the supermarket's car park, in the 1850s it became an extraordinary forcing house for cricketering talent.

Aided by Henry, already embarked on his medical studies, and the faithful Uncle Pocock, Dr Grace set about creating his third cricket pitch, assaulting the apple trees with Gladstonian vigour and the mowing and rolling the grass until it was fit to play on. 'The orchard was about eighty yards in length ... On the left of it was a high wall; on the right, Mr Cave's wood and a deep quarry full of water. This pioneering work of 1851 was supplemented by other members of the family. E.M., in particular

devoted much time to improving the wicket as he grew older, and W.G. commented, 'I cannot remember when it was not in a condition worthy of a first-rate club.' The best thing about it, though, was its situation: 'we had only to step out of the house and begin to play, and that to a medical family whose duties took them so far from home was a priceless boon'.¹⁰

Well within W.G.'s own lifetime, something of an Arcadian myth grew up around the family cricket practice, with sisters, not to mention Martha herself, gamely bowling at the boys, and the three dogs – Don, Ponto and Noble – gambolling about fielding the ball and barking disapprovingly at E.M.'s cross-batted slogs into the quarry. At the centre of it all, whirling his bat like Excalibur removed effortlessly from the stone, stands the infant Champion himself. Grace was at some pains to dispel the wilder flights of fancy, denying, for instance, that his sisters ever did more than look on and occasionally throw the ball back if it was hit in their direction. As for his own talents, he dismissed the notion that he was 'born a cricketer': 'I believe that cricketers are made by coaching and practice, and that nerve, eyesight, physique and patience, although necessary, would not be of much use alone.' He allowed, however, that 'Hereditary instinct is helpful, because it would be absurd to deny that successful cricketers often run in families.' But Grace tended to back nurture over nature:

I was born in the atmosphere of cricket. My father, who was a keen sportsman, was full of enthusiasm for the game, while my mother took even more interest in all that concerned cricket and cricketers. When I was not much taller than a wicket, I used to wonder what were the hard cuts, leg hits, and long drives, about which my father and brothers were constantly talking. As far back as I can remember cricket was a common theme of conversation at home.¹¹

Unlike his father, who was very much the focus of attention as a child, Gilbert was a relative minor character in a large and busy household. The 1851 census shows that in addition to the family and a visitor, Martha's niece Catherine Gilbert – there was a domestic staff comprising a lady's maid, a cook, a parlourmaid and a nursemaid. Living in the lodge above Dr Grace's surgery were Henry Grace junior, another medical student, Stephen Langley and an errand-boy, William Harris of Mangotsfield.

Alfred and E.M. were not included in the census; they were away at school – Goodenough House in Ealing, run by Martha's brother-in-law, George Gilbert. Alfred was eleven and E.M. ten, so their two-and-a-half-year-old brother would have been of little interest to them when they were home in the holidays. Henry, now eighteen, probably had a cheery word for him when their paths crossed, but as a hard-working medical student would have had little time to stop and play, while Dr Grace was as frenetically busy as ever. Fred was still a baby, which meant not only that he was too young to be a companion, but also that he attracted a disproportionate share of Martha's maternal attention. Immediately above Gilbert in the family hierarchy were his two sisters, Alice and Blanche. In 1851 they were six and five respectively, and though they may have doted on the infant Fred, it is probably fair to assume that they had a lot more in common with each other than with an importunate toddler. It would be overstating the case to suggest that Gilbert was in any way neglected as a young child, but he must nevertheless have been somewhat isolated within the family structure before Fred came on the stream as a serviceable younger brother, and this may have been one of the roots of the shyness he displayed in his teens and as a young man.

This state of affairs did not last long. Gilbert was soon inducted into the 'rudiments' of the family obsession, and as soon as Fred was up and running, 'we played about the garden in a rough and ready way, and used to make the nurses bowl to us'. Gilbert soon graduated from this kindergarten cricket to something nearer the real thing:

I used to chalk a wicket on a wall and get a stable-boy and one or two youngsters from the village to join me. So I got some sort

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