

# DOCTORS AND CRICKETERS\*

by

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A HUNDRED years ago British medical practice was making one of its greatest gifts to Englishmen. This may seem an over-statement, but consider the facts. In 1860 few games of county cricket were played. Under-arm or round-arm bowling was the rule. The Lords cricket ground was so rough that stones and chips could be picked off the pitch. Yet by 1870 there was a county championship with eight counties competing. One hundred years ago this very summer the scorers at Lords were first given the shelter of a shed in which to do their work.

But what has all this to do with medicine, you may ask? Properly to understand this, we must go back another thirty-five years when a Somerset lad, Henry Mills Grace settled in practice at Downend. He had been articled to a surgeon in Bristol and had studied at Guy's and St. Thomas's during the period when the teaching schools of these two hospitals were combined. Whilst there he had caught the eye of the great Ashley Cooper and, had he wished, could have made a successful London surgeon, but he preferred the allurements of country practice. Established in Downend, he married, begat five sons and four daughters, rode each winter to hounds, and spent his summers playing cricket. He was instrumental in founding the Gloucester County Cricket Club in 1870–71. Yet he found time to build a successful practice, become surgeon to the Royal Gloucestershire Reserves, and a medical officer to the poor law. W. G. Grace wrote that his father had a large practice, extending over an extensive radius and the writer of his obituary in the *Lancet*<sup>1</sup> commented 'his time was so distributed as to admit to his engaging at intervals in the various other fields of sport in which he was a master. Few better horsemen than he ever rode to cover'. His eldest son, Henry<sup>2</sup>, was born in 1833 and in 1848 was apprenticed to his father whom he helped until he moved to a mining practice at Kingswood Hall, where he was held in high repute. He was for his period unusually interested in health education and published several lectures on this. He was medical officer to the Bristol workhouse infirmary, and in one of his lectures relates how during a typhus epidemic the upper floor was appropriated entirely for infectious cases, and he talks of the special seeds or germs of disease which he thought were lighter than air, and attributed to this the freedom from infection of the wards on the lower floors.<sup>3</sup>

Alfred Grace, born in 1840, practised at Chipping Sodbury, was surgeon and medical officer to the workhouse and district, and to the Gloucester Hussars. He had a large practice, attending 150 confinements a year. The only smoker of the five brothers, he lived the longest, dying in 1916 at the age of 76.<sup>4</sup>

Edward Mills Grace, born in 1841, was, like his brothers, apprenticed to his father at Downend in 1857 and attended the Bristol Royal Infirmary. He must have been one of the last to have been apprenticed under the old system. In 1865 he started practice in Marshfield, moved to Alveston and then to Thornbury where he remained

\* A paper read to the Osler Club of London on 22 June 1965.

until his death in 1911. He was surgeon and medical officer to the Thornbury work-house, and district and public vaccinator from 1867 to 1907. In 1875, he was elected coroner for the southern district of Gloucester, his older brother Alfred being his deputy. He was chairman of the Thornbury school board, a member of the parish council and registrar for births and deaths. Between 1860 and 1865 he was the most famous cricketer in England. He was the best fielder ever at forward short point. When eventually he came to take his diploma, one of his examiners wrote 'Dr. Grace is requested not to write with a stump'.<sup>5</sup>

William Gilbert Grace, the most famous of them all, was born at Downend in 1848 and educated at Bristol Medical School, St. Bartholomew's and the Westminster. For him there was no apprenticeship to his father; the Medical Act of 1858 had put an end to that. He must be ranked as the most famous 'chronic' of all time, for he did not qualify until 1879 when at the age of 31 he gained the diplomas M.R.C.S. (England), L.R.C.P. (Edin.), having been intensively coached by Professor Howard Marsh of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. He received a national testimonial of nearly £1,500, a clock and two bronze ornaments on qualifying. It had even been suggested that a practice be bought for him but this was abandoned because, as Lord Hardinge said, 'Mr. Grace was old enough and strong enough to choose a practice for himself.' This he did. He put up his plate at 18 Stapleton Road, Bristol, where he became surgeon and medical officer and public vaccinator to the Barton Hill district. When later he moved to Clifton he retained his surgery at Stapleton Road. As a clinician his faculty of being able to smell smallpox on entering a sick room made him in great demand amongst his colleagues. At one time he was surgeon to the Pennymills Collieries and the writer of an obituary recalled an occasion when four men were admitted to the Bristol Royal Infirmary, all badly burnt in an explosion at the colliery to which W. G. was medical officer. They asked for him and he called in to see how they were. 'Although they were much covered by wool dressings, when he came, he knew them all by name and his words of sympathy comforted them not a little'. And so he came to know the long hours and dusty rounds, the sadness and the joys, the weary obstetric vigils which even then were the lot of the family doctor. Bernard Darwin records how he would even at the height of the cricket season return home at week-ends to tend his patients, and how once during a match in which he made two centuries he sat up all night with a poor woman whom he had promised to see through her confinement. Many stories and many old chestnuts became associated with his name. When asked to examine and certify an eccentric old gentleman who had been causing his friends considerable trouble, W. G. is said to have put a number of questions to him to test his sanity. 'Have you', he asked 'a canary that talks?' 'No', replied the patient, 'but I have seen you bowled for a duck', and W. G. promptly certified him as suffering from delusions.

His practice was probably the mixed-class practice that most of us enjoy. He held it for twenty years before he left Bristol to become secretary to the London County Cricket Club. This move was probably made possible by the award of a testimonial of over £9,000 on the occasion of his scoring his hundredth hundred, 288 against Somerset in 1885.

The youngest son of Henry Mills Grace was George Frederick who was born in

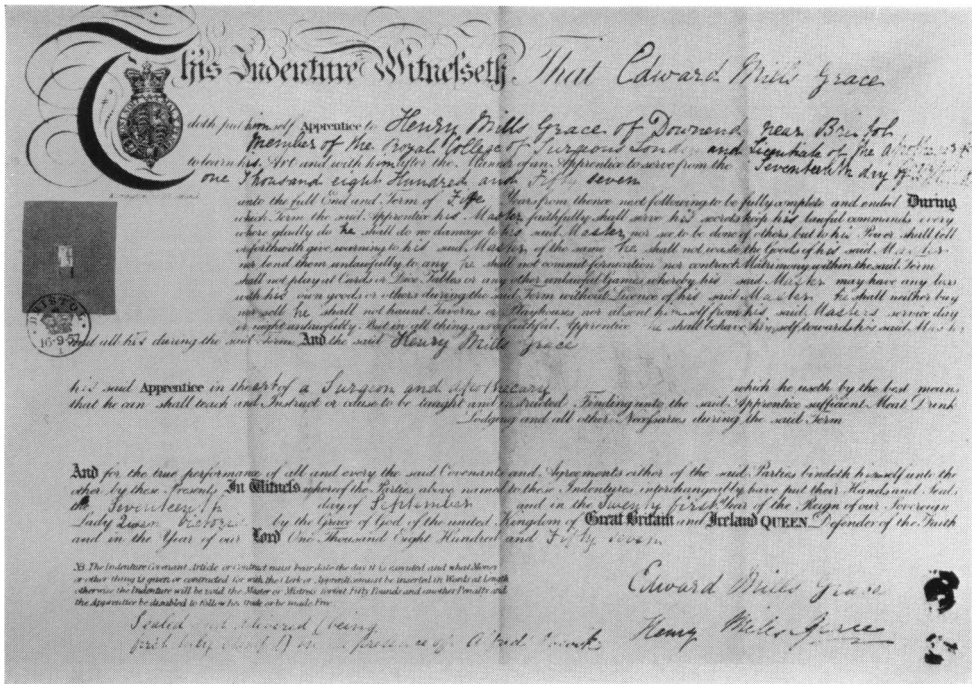


Figure 1

Indenture of Edward Mills Grace (1841–1911), apprenticed to his father Henry Mills Grace, dated 16 September 1857. (Reproduced by courtesy of the College of General Practitioners)



Figure 2

Henry Mills Grace (1808-1871), father of W. G. Grace. (From: W. G. Grace, *Cricketing Reminiscences*, London, J. Bowden, 1899, facing p. 13.)



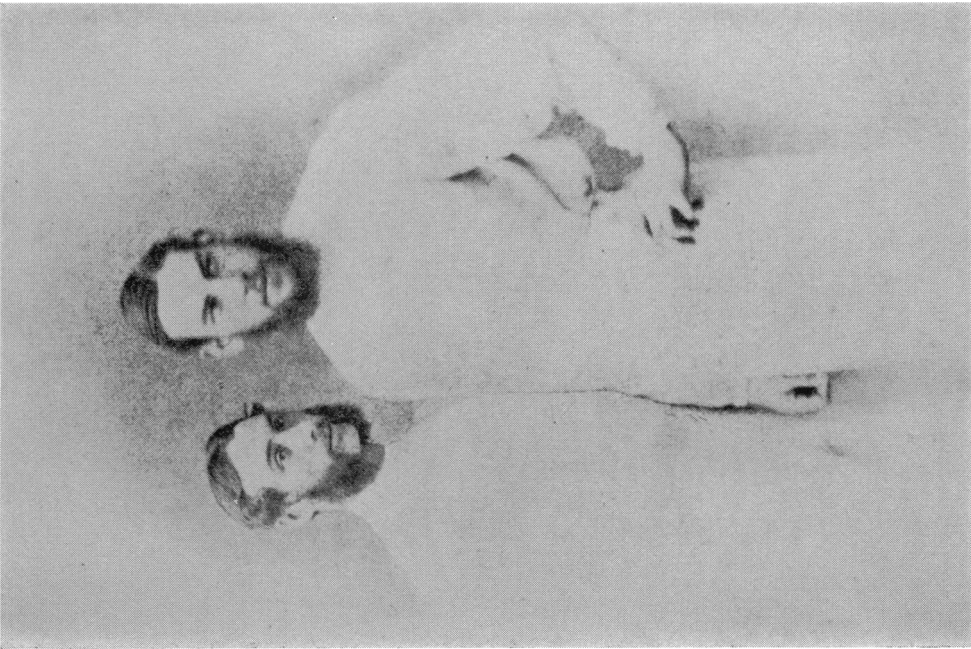


Figure 3

William Gilbert Grace (1848-1915) with his brother Edward Mills Grace (*left*). (From an original photograph by H. Barraud, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the College of General Practitioners.)

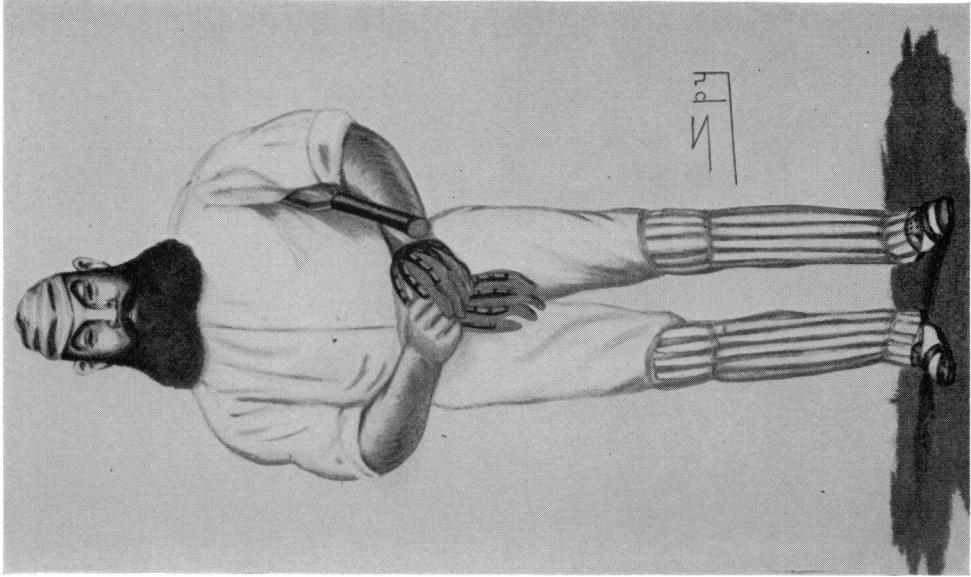


Figure 4

William Gilbert Grace, from a cartoon by 'Spy', *Vanity Fair*, 9 June, 1877.



61, Rappahannock Road  
 Bristol Virginia  
 Dear Mr. Stone  
 My Mother & I  
 have is going up for his  
 Surgery in case then well,  
 He has been working at  
 St. Bathlemew for the last  
 six months, he is pretty well  
 up to the mark, but as he  
 patients since June 1<sup>st</sup> unfortunately they  
 do not all pay. Hoping you are in good  
 health, and with kind regards  
 Believe me  
 Yours very truly  
 W. G. Grace

Figure 5

Holograph letter by W. G. Grace, now in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Wellcome Trustees.)

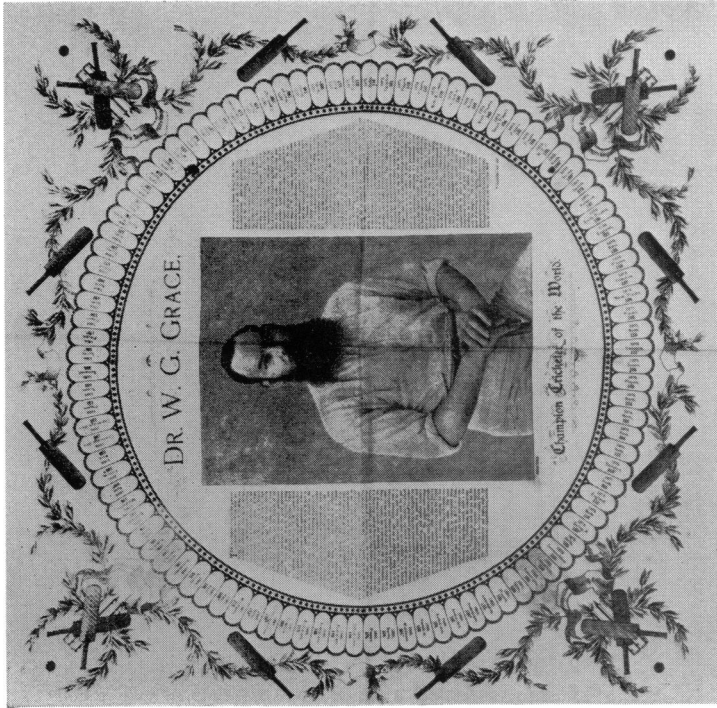


Figure 6

W. G. Grace: commemorative handkerchief to celebrate 100 centuries in first-class cricket, issued c 1895. (Reproduced by courtesy of the College of General Practitioners.)

### *News, Notes and Queries*

1850. Though he never qualified, he helped his father in his practice. In those days it was legal to employ unqualified assistants. He died in 1880 from pneumonia caused by sleeping in a damp hotel bed after playing with his brothers E. M. and W. G. in the first test match at the Oval against the Australians. Before taking his finals, W. G. Grace wrote to the College of Surgeons expressing a desire that his brother should not be kept waiting too long because he was so nervous. All of us I suppose have moments when we get nervous, strange that these brothers so great at cricket, playing in county games and test matches with enormous success, should have had such a fear of an ordinary examiner. But was it so strange?

### REFERENCES

1. *Lancet*, 1872, 1, 63.
2. Much of the information covering Henry, Alfred and E. M. Grace was kindly given me by Dr. Edgar M. Grace of Alveston, Bristol.
3. GRACE, HENRY, *A Lecture on Health and its Preservation*, 1870.
4. *Bristol med. chir. J.*, 1916, 34, 102.
5. *Dictionary of National Biography*, (Supplement 1).  
*Lancet*, 1911, 1, 1466. (obituary of E. M. Grace).
6. For general information see:  
GRACE, W. G., *Cricketing Reminiscences*, London, J. Bowden, 1899.  
*The Memorial Biography of Dr. W. G. Grace*, London, Constable, 1919.  
*Lancet*, 1915, 11, 997.  
*Brit. med. J.*, 1915, 11, 661.