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Reading for Pleasure

O Absalom

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If we put aside the Oedipal hypothesis the conflicts between sons and their fathers are commonly caused by the distance between maturity and adolescence, authority and revolt, established convention and new mores. The traditional battlegrounds are sexual, vocational, financial, and religious. Hundreds of autobiographies have been written by suffering sons when they have escaped from paternal control.

James Boswell's diaries, for example, are filled with the accounts of the contests between himself and Lord Auchinleck, which were conducted on all four fronts. He hated the law (his father was a judge) and wished to join the Army. He was sexually promiscuous. For a time he became a Roman Catholic; Auchinleck was an orthodox Presbyterian who extolled Cromwell to Dr Johnson as the man "who taught kings that they had a lith in their necks." James was a spendthrift who begged continually for additional funds. Their conflicts were exacerbated by profound differences in character and temperament. James was volatile, friendly, idle, and indiscreet. His father was rigid, stern, industrious, and close. "James, Jamie," protested the outraged Auchinleck, "if ye'd shat your breeches ye'd tell the world." Auchinleck made a second marriage and there was an unpleasant threat of what Samuel Butler was later to describe in *The Way of All Flesh* as "will-shaking."

Few daughters seem to have found it necessary to get their fathers out of their systems by writing a book about them. I can recall only two. Dame Daphne du Maurier wrote *Gerald* (actor-manager, 1878-1934), and Sarah Campion wrote *Father* (G G Coulton, Cambridge ecclesiastical historian, 1853-1947). Both authors were novelists and their recollections were affectionate, honest, and merciless. Let no father forget that there may be a cherished female child in the family circle taking invisible notes.

Father and son

Hostilities engendered solely by religious differences are now outmoded, but in *Father and Son* Edmund Gosse related a nine-

teenth century example with consummate skill. He was born in 1849, the only child of middle-aged parents who were Plymouth Brethren of the strictest sect. They found in this esoteric, evangelical religion, and in the constant study of the Bible—with a lively expectation of the Second Coming when the redeemed would "meet their Lord in the air"—their predominating interest. *Father*, Philip Henry Gosse, FRS, was a distinguished zoologist and at his death the *Son* wrote 4½ columns about him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, giving only two lines to the matters that had been the subject of his famous book, first published in 1907—16 years after his father's death. Philip Gosse was profoundly disquieted when, in 1856, Darwin began the essay that was to become *The Origin of Species*. After earnest consultation with friends of like mind and prayerful discussion with his wife, who was then suffering from her final illness, he decided to write a book entitled *Omphalos* (1857) in which he argued that the geological evidence substantiated the account of creation as described in *Genesis*. None of his scientific friends supported him and he was publicly derided for holding the belief that God had put the fossils in the rocks to test the faith of geologists.

Father and son (then aged 8) lived together at Marychurch in south Devon. Both of them were engaged in active biological research on the beaches. Before he was 10 years old, Edmund had added a new genus to British fauna, *phellia microcincta*, the walled corklet. His spiritual progress was equally dramatic. His father, who was the leader of the small local congregation of Brethren, persuaded the "saints," as they dubbed themselves, that Edmund on his tenth birthday should "take up his cross" in public baptism by immersion, a ritual usually permitted only to adults. The faithful came from all over south Devon to watch so unique a ceremony. Edmund's regeneration may not have been complete for he was afterwards seen to put out his tongue at other boys not yet considered worthy to "break bread at the Lord's table."

A little later his father told him, somewhat nervously, that he was to have a new mother. "Papa," he asked, "is she one of the Lord's children and has she taken up her cross in baptism?" Philip Gosse had to admit that she had not yet been baptised. The story, told with living restraint, irony, and humour, moves on to its inevitable climax. When Edmund was 16, Charles Kingsley obtained for him an appointment at the British Museum. He was pursued, almost daily, by long, closely argued theological letters from his father: "When I left you in

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London my heart full of sorrowing love, found its refuge and resource in the thought that you were one of Christ's flock." The time came when Edmund had to tell his father that he must be allowed to make up his own mind on religious matters.

Life in London

Edmund soon made his way in literary circles. He continued for some years to read each day a chapter of his Greek Testament and to teach in a Sunday school, to the astonishment of Swinburne and his pre-Raphaelite friends. *Father and Son* was his chief creative work but he wrote some poetry and works of literary scholarship. He introduced the plays of Ibsen to the English public. Only one small setback disturbed his early career. Churton Collins, later professor of English literature in University of Birmingham, published an article in the *Quarterly Review* uncovering some serious errors in Gosse's writings. He was the more mortified as he was about to stay for the first time with the Tennysons at Aldworth. As he fearfully entered the garden, Tennyson called out to him, "Do you know what I think of Collins? He's a louse on the locks of literature." Gosse's injured pride was immediately soothed.

These early errors were soon forgotten. In 1904 he was appointed librarian to the House of Lords, and he became the leading literary critic of the day. Osbert Sitwell, who gave him a gay chapter in his memoirs, *Noble Essences*, wrote of him: "He brooked no rivals, he gave no mercy and he implored none." The Gosses were at home on Sunday afternoons at 17 Hanover Terrace and the three redoubtable Sitwells—Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell—were often invited to tea. "One Sunday in autumn my sister, my brother, and myself, were just leaving the house. We were undefeated but thoroughly mauled, and glad to go home and lick our wounds. Gosse, with his usual beautiful manners, saw us down to the door himself and then called after us in the blue dusk, 'Good-bye, you delightful but deleterious trio.'"

The boy was father to the man and in this anecdote we can recognise the son who cross-examined his father concerning the spiritual state of his stepmother to be, and the pietistic neophyte who showed his superiority to unregenerate urchins by protruding his tongue.

Sir George and other Sitwells

Osbert Sitwell's brilliant four-volume autobiography *Left Hand, Right Hand!* portrays his father (1860-1943) as a Gothic character of high comedy, unaware of his often tragic isolation. He was an antiquarian, expert in heraldry and genealogy. His studies were pursued for 50 years on the same seat in row L in the reading room of the British Museum. Sacheverell asked an official if he knew him, "Yes, I may say he doesn't know me yet, though I've attended him since 1878." His other interest was the planning and construction of formal gardens and major developments were always in hand at Renishaw, his great house in Derbyshire. His behaviour was eccentric and often irrational so that his family and servants had to defend themselves from his interventions in their affairs by evolving a carapace of stratagem and deceit. The account of these devices forms one of the main comic themes in the books. Sir George contended with his children on two battlefronts—vocation and money—and on these he fought untiringly, but without ultimate success. Osbert pays Coutts, the bankers, a grateful tribute for their unquestioning support of his own wayward account. Sir George stopped his allowance when he was in the trenches, realistically recognising that he would find nothing there to spend money on.

Happily, there were some chinks in Sir George's armour—

fear of infection was one of them. When Osbert was standing as the Liberal candidate for Scarborough in the 1919 General Election, Sir George came along to show him how to win the seat, until it became apparent that he could certainly cause him to lose it. "Leave him to me, darling," said Lady Ida, his mother, and she persuaded her husband that an ache in his side was due to shingles, a dangerous disease, which might be fatal if he did not stay in bed for three weeks. Unknown to their father Osbert and Sacheverell shared a house in London, which he understood to be their lodgings, and their housekeeper, Mrs. Powell, to be their landlady. During her 13 years of service, Mrs Powell "became an authority on my father's psychological troubles and cunning plans for my improvement, as well as foiling them on my behalf." Sir George called one day to see Osbert, who, reported ill, was now convalescent and out visiting friends. He returned just before his father knocked at the front door, and Mrs Powell hurried him into bed in his army uniform. He pulled the bed-clothes up to his chin, now suitably sweating, while Mrs Powell explained that the doctor was uncertain of the nature of his illness but he feared it might be infectious. Sir George pushed back his chair. "Good-bye, my dear boy, I'm sorry I must hurry away. I had forgotten that I had an appointment."

Sir George's eccentricities increased as he grew older and he would come down to the drawing room at Renishaw, and, sitting in the middle of the regency sofa in full evening dress, announce to his guests, "I must ask anyone entering the house never to contradict me as it interferes with the functioning of the gastric juices and prevents my sleeping at night." His interventions and ambushes, his contradictions and controversies, made Renishaw a penal place for his children and they persuaded him to buy a castle in Italy, whither in 1925 he happily departed to pursue more reconstructions.

The books are illustrated by line reproductions of John Piper's paintings, some of Renishaw. They would have made suitable backcloths for a production of *Macbeth*, foretelling the disasters that were to envelop its inhabitants. Lady Ida, extravagant and feckless, fell into the toils of a moneylender. Sir George was at first completely unaware of these affairs and when he learnt of them refused to extend a helping hand. His wife had broken the law and in 1915 was sent to prison for three months. Osbert, while describing in vague phraseology the fearful family anguish, gives no detailed account of his mother's disaster: "Of this our private calamity, I will write no more. . . . The skeletons have jerked themselves for a moment out of their cupboards. Let them never again *with my consent* be disturbed."

Throughout the lives of the three Sitwells their servants became their personal friends, a not uncommon happening in earlier days if parents were remote or tyrannical. In adolescence Osbert was so terrified by his father's relentless cross-examination that he collapsed into stupefied silence. He was rescued from inertia by courageous companions in the servant's hall, notably by Henry Moat the butler, by the example of his sister, and by his own reading. He gave his father *The Way of All Flesh* to read, hoping, one imagines, to convict his father of inhuman behaviour. The book made Sir George so angry that he took to his bed for three days. This hostility at home united sister and brothers in affectionate encouragement when their creative arts were first challenged by the critics. A cartoon by Max Beerbohm is reproduced in the fourth volume, *Laughter in the Next Room*, in which Osbert and Sacheverell are pictured in evening dress, each with a parrot on his arm, the one saying, "Quite Sacheverell," and the other, "Well done, Osbert." It moved them, too, to the generous support of young artists. William Walton was financially dependent on Osbert for some years.

The books are better described as memoirs rather than as autobiography. Neither religion nor sex find any place in them. This psychological resistance to intimate communication became later a physical inability when Parkinson's disease incapacitated Osbert, and his life ended in loneliness at Renishaw.