



## Father and Son

*Edmund Gosse*

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## **Father and Son** Edmund Gosse

"This book is the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences, and almost two epochs. It ended, as was inevitable, in disruption. Of the two being here described, one was born to fly backward, the other could not help being carried forward..." Thus begins this remarkable chronicle of the division between generations. Gosse was born in 1849 into a deeply religious household; both parents were pious members of the Plymouth Brethren, a narrow sect. This book, Gosse's masterpiece, was anonymously published in 1907.

## **Father and Son Details**

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Author : Edmund Gosse

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## From Reader Review Father and Son for online ebook

### David says

This book was right up my alley in that my upbringing paralleled the author's - in spite of being over a century later. Like him, I was brought up in the Plymouth Brethren which, in 1960s-70s New Zealand, as in 1850s-60s England, meant a fixation on literalism, a consequent dryness and lack of imagination, and an almost disdainful rejection of "the world," which to a kid in particular was a blanket term for "everything fun." Seeing this aspect of my childhood before me in a form as dispassionately, yet sensitively and evocatively, retold as "Father and Son" made this a book that spoke so closely in my ear it was almost eerie. I'm not sure if it would have the same hold over anyone with a more liberal, or non-, religious upbringing, but as a narrative that is uncompromisingly frank in its revelations, maintains a calm balance between criticism and empathy, and describes a chasmic generation gap long before it became a catchphrase, this book is a lighthouse.

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### Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

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### Jesse Kraai says

\*I got turned on to this book when I found it on one of Nick Hornby's list of faves\*

The book fails to achieve what it hoped to: to find the seeds of Gosse's later rebellion in his early youth. We spend about two-thirds of the book there, looking. Gosse keeps plodding on, expecting to find the answer himself. But we don't. We also don't get a convincing portrait of the father. How did he come to Botany, what teacher led him to that worldly path, what was the joy he found there? Gosse sr. came from money, what was his class-consciousness? What was it that led his mother and father to convert to the Plymouth Brethren, and descend the social ladder. Gosse sees himself and his family as genteel - needs discussion. What kind of earnest Christianity survived Gosse's youthful rebellion?

I blame some of the author's inability to address central questions on his elaborate and academic style. His long sentences, aiming to impress us, actually get in the way of his own search for truth and our desire to understand his path.

Here is an example of one of the many sentences I was forced to read several times: "In the midst of this, materially, the hardest moment of their lives, when I was nine years old, and there was a question of our leaving London, my mother recorded in her secret notes:"

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### Lucy says

Families, eh. What binds, and what divides. This is a wonderful account of the author as a solitary child, cut off from reality by a strict religion. But what makes it so enthralling for me is the picture he paints of how an intelligent child can for so long squeeze himself into the mould his parents make. It's not at all a stuffy classic, but an absolute must-read.

## Laura says

*From BBC Radio 4 - Extra Debut:*

*Memoir of Edmund Gosse's Victorian childhood, raised in a strictly non-conformist Plymouth Brethren home. Stars Derek Jacobi and Roger Allam.*

Free download available at Project Gutenberg.

I liked this book even if I am not a big fan of christian fiction.

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## Nigeyb says

Another book I discovered through listening to the wonderful Backlisted podcast. Sir Edmund Gosse CB (21 September 1849 – 16 May 1928) was an English poet, author and critic. He was strictly brought up in a small Protestant sect, the Plymouth Brethren, but broke away sharply from that faith.

'Father and Son' is his account of his childhood and his gradual questioning of the fundamentalist religion of his parents. All of which might make this book sound like a misery memoir, and yet nothing could be further from the truth. This is a charming, fascinating and insightful account of Victorian life in the mid-18th century with numerous wonderful little details.

'Father and Son' is subtitled "*A Study of Two Temperaments*" and this signals the approach of Edmund Gosse. He retained enormous respect and affection for his father but ultimately there was to be no way for the different personalities to be true to themselves and reconcile their differences.

It's beautifully written and, as I suggest, absolutely riveting, complete with numerous funny and idiosyncratic memories from a childhood spent both in Islington and, from around age 6, in Ilfracombe in Devon, then, as now, a small and sleepy backwater.

I listened to *Father and Son* (1907) narrated by the peerless Geoffrey Palmer, and courtesy of Audible. Incredibly, this wonderful experience only set me back three British pounds. What a bargain. It's a wonderful book.

5/5

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## Dpdwyer says

This book has been described as the first psychological biography. An only child, Gosse is raised in a Protestant sect, The Plymouth Brethren, which is led by his father, a naturalist and artist. While strict, his parents dote on him, but from early on he questions their beliefs. I loved the scene when he's seven or so, after hearing the prohibition against praying to idols, he secretly puts a chair on a table and prays to it. And nothing happens. His mother, a poet, dies before he is ten. When *The Origin of Species* is published his

father, as a scientist, is torn, but he chooses his religion and his career falters. The son grows up to be a poet, writer, and critic and is friends with Stevenson, Hardy, and Tennyson, among others. An honest and loving portrait of an strange childhood.

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### Scott Harris says

*And he said we must judge not, lest we ourselves be judged. I had just enough tact to let that pass, but I was quite aware that our whole system was one of judging, and that we had no intention whatever of being judged ourselves. Yet even at the age of eleven one sees that on certain occasions to press home the truth is not convenient.*

The dripping sarcasm of the line above is an apt characterization of this delightful memoir of the relationship between poet Edmund Gosse and his father Philip. Although historians have subsequently challenged the factual accuracy of Gosse's memory and portrayal of his young life, it nevertheless offers a rather insightful peek into the tragedy of the loss of his mother, the scandal of his father's "greatest work" and on the impact of their temperaments and religious views in creating a tension of love and passive-aggression between them. At the personal level, it documents their psychological, personal and spiritual lives. At the broader level, it provides a wonderful window into the social, scientific, and religious realities of that time and place.

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### Victoria Lie says

I don't know if I liked this book so much because it is *good* or simply because its theme is of such importance to me. Edmund Gosse writes about his upbringing in a deeply religious home, and the consequences it has for the relationship he has with his father. It is a powerful and sad exploration of a desolate childhood, limited by unbearable constraints and expectations in the name of the Holy.

It is impossible for me to talk about this book without trailing off with my own thoughts on faith and upbringing, so instead I want to share some passages that struck me, either for their poignancy, or their sheer power:

"And he said we must judge not, lest we ourselves be judged. I had enough tact to let that pass, but I was quite aware that our whole system was one of judging, and that we had no intention whatever of being judged ourselves."

"My little faults of conduct, too, assumed shapes of terrible importance, since they proceeded from one so signally enlightened. My father was never tired of reminding me that, now that I was a professing Christian, I must remember, in everything I did, that I was an example to others. "

"He who was so tender-hearted that he could not bear to witness the pain or distress of any person, however disagreeable or undeserving, was quite acquiescent in believing that God would punish human beings, in millions, for ever, for a purely intellectual error of comprehension."

And the most beautifully passionate of them all:

"Let me speak plainly. After my long experience, after my patience and forbearance, I have surely the right to protest against the untruth (would that I could apply to it any other word!) that evangelical religion, or any religion in violent form, is wholesome or valuable or desirable adjunct to human life. It divides the heart

from heart. It sets up a vain, chimerical ideal, in the barren pursuit of which all tender, indulgent affections, all the genial play of life, all the exquisite pleasures and soft resignations of the body, all that enlarges and calms the soul, are exchanged for what is harsh and void and negative. It encourages a stern and ignorant spirit of condemnations; it throws altogether out of gear the healthy movement of the conscience; it invents virtues which are sterile and cruel; **it invents sins which are no sins at all, but which darken the heaven of innocent joy with futile clouds of remorse.**"

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## Jan-Maat says

[ my gratitude is tempered by the fact that he dissuaded me from studying archaeology, though in the context of those days, and perhaps still now when it seems at times that we are rushing back towards the Victorian era, I would be wise to be grateful for that too (hide spoiler)]

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## Michael Perkins says

While literary eggheads like to debate whether the writer, the son in the title, Edmund, is being fair to his father, Philip, or not, the reality is that, for good or ill, our parents have a profound effect on us. It lasts a lifetime, even if we are not always conscious of it.

This is the son's account, during the Victorian Era, of his parents and the life he had with his father after his mother died. He makes it clear he is not trying to write a biography. These are his impressions and memories, to which he's entitled.

This particular edition I bought, besides having a rather bad introduction, that should be skipped, also left off the author's all-important subtitle: "A Study of Two Temperaments" which offers immediate insight into the perspective the reader will get in this story.

First of all, the author is quite critical of himself as a child. He is not setting himself as some kind of paragon in contrast to his parents or even a victim. In fact, he is quite affectionate toward his parents in this memoir. Secondly, the loss of his mother, to very painful breast cancer, was a huge blow to both the author and his father, that neither seemed to recover from.

His parents were Biblical literalists and members of a very strict Christian fundamentalist sect, The Plymouth Brethren (the progenitor of Christian fundamentalism in the U.S, including the elaborate apocalyptic schemes). His mother was a natural storyteller, which no doubt was useful in her evangelistic efforts but, as a child, she was scolded by her Calvinist nursemaid, who explained that all stories and fiction were in fact lies and, therefore, a sin. So there were to be no storybooks in the author's house as a child, adding to his grey existence.

His father was an enthusiastic amateur naturalist and zoologist, who popularized the indoor aquarium, and who belonged to the British Museum and the Royal Society until he left London, with his son, for seaside Devon. He had been well connected in scientific circles.

The trouble for the father began, however, when Charles Lyell published his "Principles of Geology" (1830–1833) that delineated geologic change as the steady accumulation of minute changes over enormously long spans of time. Philip's problem became more severe when Darwin developed his theory "The Origin of Species." A friend of Darwin, Gosse got to read it well before it was published in 1859.

Philip immediately saw these ideas as a threat to the literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis, as well as the entire Bible. He concocted a strange scheme, which he called Omphalos (which reflected his belief that both Adam and Eve were created with navels), which in some fundamentalist circles today is referred to as “mature creation.”

No one was accepting of this scheme, neither his fellow scientists or Christians. Darwin stayed silent, but others were free with their mockery. Between the loss of his wife and this humiliation, Philip became quite melancholic, which cast a cloud over his son’s life.

This is a book roughly in the genre of “The Way of All Flesh,” by Samuel Butler and “Eminent Victorians,” by Lytton Strachey.

Here is more detail on Philip’s fantastical creationist theory...

<https://www.wired.com/2009/11/p-h-gos...>

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## **Dave says**

One of the best books about intellectual freedom that I have ever read. Gosse manages to make his father a deeply sympathetic and tragically sad character (and himself a real, selfish, immature boy) while clearly showing how oppressive and ridiculous puritanism can be. When young Edmund discovers Dickens and Shakespeare it's like coming up for air after deep submersion.

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## **John says**

Edited by Peter Abbs

Gosse's Life and Works and Chronology

Introduction

FATHER AND SON

Notes

Select Bibliography

Published 1907

Father = Philip Gosse, Marine Zoologist and Plymouth Brother. If he was living today we'd probably label him a Christian Fundamentalist (and even a child abuser). Edmund Gosse, an only child, was brought up in an erstwhile loving home whilst required to wear a religious straitjacket and undergo constant 'spiritual' interrogation. That he remained sane, managed to “escape” and develop in a contrary direction to his father, becoming a poet, writer, biographer, literary critic and academic is extraordinary.

Father and Son is his most popular work, probably the only one now in print. I found it a slog much of the time though and his wordy style didn't help. That said, there are some very memorable passages throughout

the book. Writing of one of the 'saints', as the individuals forming the congregation of Plymouth Brethren, presided over by Philip Gosse, their preacher, are referred to:

“I do not know exactly what she (Mrs Paget) wanted my father to do with me; perhaps she did not know herself; she was meddlesome, ignorant and fanatical, and she liked to fancy that she was exercising influence. But the wonderful, the inexplicable thing is that my Father, - who with all his limitations was so distinguished and high minded, - should listen to her for a moment, and still more wonderful is it that he really allowed her, grim vixen that she was, to disturb his plans and retard his purposes. ....My Father found himself brought face to face at last, not with a disciple, but with a trained expert in his own peculiar scheme of religion. At every point she was armed with arguments the source of which he knew and the validity of which he recognised. He trembled before Mrs Paget as a man in a dream may tremble before a parody of his own central self, and he could not blame her without laying himself open somewhere to censure.

But my stepmother's instincts were more primitive and her actions less wire-drawn than my Father's. She disliked Mrs Paget as much as one earnest believer can bring herself to dislike a sister in the Lord. My stepmother had quietly devoted herself to what she thought the best way of bringing me up, and she did not propose now to be thwarted by the wife of a lunatic Baptist”.

Interesting but scary portrayal of this 19th century childhood, helped me put into perspective my own childhood. Perhaps it wasn't so bad after all!

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## Rebecca Foster says

(4.5) I can't believe how long it's taken me to get to this splendid evocation of 1850s–60s family life in an extreme religious sect. I'd known about Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907) for ages, and even owned a copy. Two of its early incidents – the son's anticlimactic birth announcement in the father's diary, and the throwing out of a forbidden Christmas pudding – were famously appropriated by Peter Carey for creating Oscar's backstory in his Booker Prize-winning novel *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), which I read in 2008 but didn't much like. I was reminded of that literary debt when I worked for King's College London's library system and did a summer placement in the Special Collections department in 2011. For my “In the Spotlight” article about a book in particular need of conservation, I chose Philip Henry Gosse's *Omphalos*, his well-meaning but half-baked contribution to the Victorian science versus religion debate, and did a lot of secondary reading about the Gosses and their milieu.

The book's subtitle, “A Study of Two Temperaments,” gives an idea of the angle Gosse takes here: this is not a straightforward biography (after all, he'd already written his father's life story in 1890) or a comprehensive memoir, but a snapshot of his early years and an emotional unpicking of the personality clash that results from fundamentally different approaches to life. While Gosse *père* (1810–88) was a devoted naturalist as well as a dogged believer in the literal truth of the Bible, even in adolescence his son (1849–1928) was a literature aficionado and troubled skeptic. Philip Gosse was a minister with the Plymouth Brethren and married late, at 38; his wife was 42, very late for contemplating motherhood in those days. Like Thomas Hardy, the infant Edmund was presumed dead at birth and set aside, so it's thanks to keen-eyed nurses that we have these two late Victorians' significant literary output today.

Although his first word was “book” and he could read by age four, Edmund was initially forbidden to read fiction. His mother quashed her own love of making up stories because she believed fiction was in some way sinful. It was always taken for granted that Edmund would follow his father into the ministry, and early on he had a sense of a split self: the external persona he put on to please his parents, and the deeper self that

struggled to divine its purpose. He would cheekily test the limits of his familial faith by petitioning the Almighty for an expensive toy that he ‘needed’ and praying to a wooden chair to see if he’d be struck down for idolatry. The absurdity of such scenes is a welcome foil to the sadness of his mother’s death when Gosse was just seven. A year later the boy and his father moved from London to Devon, where both were captivated by the sea. (Indeed, if Philip Gosse is remembered as a natural historian today, it’s largely for his work on marine life – he discovered a new genus of sea anemones in 1859.) After Philip remarried, Edmund began attending a weekday boarding school and fell in love with literature, especially Shakespeare and the Romantic poets.

There’s a stretch of the book at about the two-thirds point that I found less compelling; much of it describes the other members of his father’s congregation (“the saints”) and the tedium of Sundays. It’s also a shame there isn’t a brief afterword that continues the story through to his father’s death. But for much of its length this is a riveting investigation of how the conflict between reason and religion plays out both within individual souls and between family members. The purpose here is to chart the course that led him out of religion and made the supernatural rift between him and his father permanent by the time he was 15 or so, and Gosse fulfills that aim admirably. In doing so he maintains a delicately balanced tone: Although he vividly recreates funny moments from his childhood, he also makes clear-eyed, scathing assessments of a religion that is ostensibly based on love but all too often veers towards judgment instead:

Here was perfect purity, perfect intrepidity, perfect abnegation; yet here was also narrowness, isolation, an absence of perspective, let it be boldly admitted, an absence of humanity. And there was a curious mixture of humbleness and arrogance; entire resignation to the will of God and not less entire disdain of the judgment and opinion of God.

[H]e allowed the turbid volume of superstition to drown the delicate stream of reason.

He who was so tender-hearted that he could not bear to witness the pain or distress of any person, however disagreeable or undeserving, was quite acquiescent in believing that God would punish human beings, in millions, for ever, for a purely intellectual error of comprehension.

Even so, this is a loving portrait, as well as a nuanced one, and a model of how to write family memoir. I enjoyed it immensely, and will no doubt read it again.

**Further reading:**

*Glimpses of the Wonderful: The Life of Philip Henry Gosse 1810–1888* by Ann Thwaite

*In the Days of Rain*, Rebecca Stott’s memoir of growing up in the Plymouth Brethren in the 1960s

Originally published with images on my blog, Bookish Beck.

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**Dr. Carl Ludwig Dorsch says**

Published anonymously in 1907, when Gosse was 58, "Father and Son" recounts his childhood among the Plymouth Brethren, centering largely, after his mother's early death, on his relation with pere Philip Henry

Gosse, English naturalist and author of "Omphalos: an Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot," in which is formulated what has come to be known as the 'omphalos hypothesis,' reconciling the fossil record to revelation by supposing it too to having been created ex nihilo.

(Though it should be remembered that, as even Russell once evidently put it, "...there is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that 'remembered' a wholly unreal past".)

Philip Henry Gosse's "Omphalos" was published in 1857 (two years prior to "Origin of Species"), when Edmund was 8 years old. Edmund writes:

"In the course of that dismal winter, as the post began to bring in private letters, few and chilly, and public reviews, many and scornful, my Father looked in vain for the approval of the churches, and in vain for the acquiescence of the scientific societies, and in vain for the gratitude of those 'thousands of thinking persons', which he had rashly assured himself of receiving. As his reconciliation of Scripture statements and geological deductions was welcomed nowhere, as Darwin continued silent, and the youthful Huxley was scornful, and even Charles Kingsley, from whom my Father had expected the most instant appreciation, wrote that he could not 'give up the painful and slow conclusion of five and twenty years' study of geology, and believe that God has written on the rocks one enormous and superfluous lie',--as all this happened or failed to happen, a gloom, cold and dismal, descended upon our morning teacups. It was what the poets mean by an 'inspissated' gloom; it thickened day by day, as hope and self-confidence evaporated in thin clouds of disappointment. My Father was not prepared for such a fate. He had been the spoiled darling of the public, the constant favourite of the press, and now, like the dark angels of old,

so huge a rout  
Encumbered him with ruin.

He could not recover from amazement at having offended everybody by an enterprise which had been undertaken in the cause of universal reconciliation."

"Father and Son" is offered, as Gosse notes in his Preface, as "...a *document*, as a record of educational and religious conditions which, having passed away, will never return. In this respect, as the diagnosis of a dying Puritanism, it is hoped that the narrative will not be altogether without significance."

A hundred years on we see still how slowly the landscape changes (thus far at least) and how the terrors and wonders suffusing Gosse's world suffuse it yet.

Full "Father and Son" text available at:  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2540/2...>

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## **Heather(Gibby) says**

A non-fiction account of Edmund Gosse's relationship with his father. Everything in Mr. Gosses's upbringing was focused on piety and service to God. As the story unfolds the young Edmund slowly begins to understand that there is more to life than worship, and that his father is not infallible. I found the section dealing with Mr. Gosse's senior addressing Charles Darwin's theories to be particularly interesting, as I have

been slowly reading through *The Origin of the Species* concurrently to this book. He explains it away by stating that evolution is how God designed things, and that when God created the earth, he also placed the fossils there.

An interesting read, but I did find it got a bit repetitive. Mr. Gosse senior certainly had the exact same mantra throughout the book, and the son very very slowly, began to question his father's extremism.

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### **Jamie says**

This is probably my favorite book from the Victorian era.

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### **Stephanie Patterson says**

Edmund Gosse's father was a self-taught marine biologist and his mother, a poet and illustrator, but the center of their lives was their fundamentalist faith. They were Plymouth Brethren and were devoted to this fundamentalist Christian sect. Edmund was their only child and this is how he describes their life together: "For over three years after their marriage, neither of my parents left London for a single day, not being able to afford to travel. They received scarcely any visitors, never ate a meal away from home, never spent an evening in social intercourse abroad. At night they discussed theology, read aloud to one another, or translated scientific brochures from French or German. It sounds a terrible life of pressure and deprivation, and that it was physically unwholesome there can be no shadow of a doubt. But their commitment was complete and unfeigned."

Gosse, who eventually became a poet, critic and memoirist was not allowed to read fiction in this household. Fiction was made up. It was a lie and therefore a sin. This is particularly interesting as his mother enjoyed making up stories as a child and was able to hold an audience rapt as she told them. The family had little to do with people outside their religious sect and only decided to subscribe to a newspaper once England became engaged in the Crimean War.

Gosse's mother died when he was 8 of breast cancer and his father remarried a woman with whom young Edmund got along very well. But a rift with his father continues to grow. When Edmund brings home a volume of poetry, his father burns it. His stepmother asks her husband's permission to introduce Edmund to Sir Walter Scott's Waverley novels. No dice.

Gosse's father who found great comfort and satisfaction in his scientific work is dealt a blow when Darwin publishes "*The Origin of the Species*" because he cannot reconcile his literal interpretation of the Bible with Darwin's theory. He published *Omphalos*, a book that argued that the world was created with all its species all at once. It was dismissed by almost everyone as a preposterous idea. Though Gosse says that this destroyed his father, indications are that his father continued to lecture and publish.

*Father and Son* is worth reading for Gosse's close attention to his own development (his understanding that his father was fallible, his belated delight in literature and his ability to become for lack of another phrase, "his own person.")

His literary style is somewhat formal but a pleasure to read

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## Wayne says

When I was offered the Opportunity to go to Adelaide University to study Two Subjects in the Arts of My Own Choice, I should have JUMPED at it; but unfortunately, as far as I was concerned, it meant NOT doing my Second Year of Philosophy, a subject I was absolutely WRAPPED IN. I mentioned My Dilemma in a letter to my Auntie Rosie. She settled it with her: "Whenever Opportunity knocks, TAKE IT!!!" I didn't know then that she had made a decision between marrying her current Sydney Beau and a Man-On-The-Land. Being a Social Climber she had taken the Man-On-The-Land and saw her Ex- whenever she came to Sydney!!

So I went to Adelaide Uni to study English Lit. and History.

Unfortunately or Not, the Reformation History I chose to Take, too soon had me discovering that I was Firmly on the side of Martin Luther in his dispute with the Catholic Church; and in English Lit. I was to read a book I never knew existed - "Father and Son" by Edmund Gosse, a true tale of how a young boy's Faith was gradually eroded by his Father's strict adherence to the Plymouth Brethren. As I was studying to be a Priest, and in My Philosophy Studies, having already been swept away by the line: "The Gods don't create Mankind. It is Mankind who creates his Gods." - this Double Dose I was taking at Adelaide University was certainly stirring the embers, my embers!!!

When I enrolled at Sydney University some years later as an atheist, this time to continue with my Beloved Philosophy and with the History and English still in tow, I added Biblical Studies as well. This latter was run by Radical Believers, such as Barbara Thiring, who became intent on ALWAYS reading out my essays. The course was fairly close to my Biblical Studies in the Monastery. So I easily topped the Bib. Studies Class here, along with being in the first Ten places in the Philosophy. During our Philosophy Lectures, the lecturer was getting a bit pissed off, when he suddenly declared "Who has read Edmund Gosse's "Father and Son?" I shot up my hand, to suddenly find it was a very Lone Hand !!! The lecturer glared round and then made another declaration.: "Thank God there is SOMEONE here WHO IS EDUCATED !!!!" Despite not feeling THAT educated, no one came near me after that. But I was always to LOVE Edmund Gosse, Bib Studies, History, Philosophy and English Lit.

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## Cynthia says

I loved this memoir, written by the son, who grew up in Devonshire in the latter half of the 19th century. He loved his father, a scientist who was also something of a religious fanatic, a member of the Calvinistic Plymouth Brethren. By the time he was 19, the son was through with religion, but remained on affectionate terms with his narrow-minded dad. He tells their story with honesty and humor.

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