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As Good as God, as Clever as the Devil: The Impossible Life of Mary Benson

Rodney Bolt

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Young Minnie Sidgwick was just 12 years old when her cousin, 23-year old Edward Benson, proposed to her in 1853. Edward went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury and little Minnie—as Mary Benson—to preside over Lambeth Palace, and a social world that ranged from Tennyson and Browning to foreign royalty and Queen Victoria herself. Prime Minister William Gladstone called her "the cleverest woman in Europe." Yet Mrs. Benson's most intense relationships were not with her husband and his associates, but with other women. When the Archbishop died, Mary—"Ben" to her intimates—turned down an offer from the Queen to live at Windsor, and set up home in a Jacobean manor house with her friend Lucy Tait. She remained at the heart of her family of fiercely eccentric and "unpermissably gifted" children, each as individual as herself. They knew Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and Gertrude Bell. Arthur wrote the words for "Land of Hope and Glory"; Fred became a hugely successful author (his *Mapp and Lucia* novels still have a cult following); and Maggie a renowned Egyptologist. But none of them was "the marrying sort" and such a rackety family seemed destined for disruption: Maggie tried to kill her mother and was institutionalized, Arthur suffered numerous breakdowns, and young Hugh became a Catholic priest, embroiled in scandal. Drawing on the diaries and novels of the Bensons themselves, as well as writings of contemporaries ranging from George Eliot to Charles Dickens, Rodney Bolt creates a rich and intimate family history of Victorian and Edwardian England. But, most of all, he tells the sometimes touching, sometimes hilarious, story of one lovable, brilliant woman and her trajectory through the often surprising opportunities and the remarkable limitations of a Victorian woman's life.

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