Robert Hugh Benson’s Life and Letters,
On the Centenary of His Conversion

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N 11 SEPTEMBER 1903, FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, A SON OF AN ANGLICAN ARCHbisho
of Canterbury made his submission to Rome. The conversion of 1903 won immediate
prominence in the religious press, where readers learned that this was a double defection: the subject
was not only of a prominent Anglican family, he was also an ordained priest of the State Church.

At the center of this furor was a slight man, of modest height, fair-haired, two months short
of his thirty-second birthday. He was Robert Hugh Benson, soon to become the most prominent Catholic
novelist of Edwardian England, indeed the best-selling author of explicitly Catholic literature in English of
the first half of the twentieth century. Today, however, a century after his reception as a Roman Catholic,
Benson is seldom read; his name is restricted to Catholic trivia games, and his life, once internationally lauded,
is largely forgotten. Why is this? Why do people today no longer read Robert Hugh Benson? There is ind-
ed reason for this neglect, but there is also a compelling argument that he should continue to be read.

Hugh, born in 1871, was the fourth and youngest son of Edward White Benson (1829-1896), who would hold
the bishopric of Canterbury from 1882-1896. With his wife, Mary (Sidgwick), the Archbishop sired six children in all,
starting in 1860: two sons, two daughters, then two additional sons. The first-born, Martin (1860-1878), was esteemed for his brilliance of intellect and character. He
was a child of exceptional prospect, sadly felled by a fever at age seventeen, while a
senior schoolboy at Winchester. Nonetheless, his promise had been sufficient to set
the standard to which all the Benson children would aspire.

Arthur Christopher (1862-1925), the second son, would distinguish himself
as a Master at Eton (1885-1903) and at Magdalene College (Cambridge, 1915-1925),
and act as co-editor of the correspondence of Queen Victoria (1907). As an adult,
Arthur was the only sibling to be particularly companionable with Hugh. Neverthe-
less, in assessing his younger brother, Arthur proved severe and often intolerant. His
attitude mellowed somewhat after Hugh’s death, however. The two Benson sisters,
Elinor (1863-1890) and Margaret (1865-1916), seem to have had relatively little
influence upon Hugh. Yet it should be acknowledged that Margaret did exert some
sway by chastising her youngest brother with “Temper Tickets,” citing him for each
of his ungentlemanly displays in youth. Edward Frederick (1867-1940), the fifth-
born child, aspired to a career in Greek archaeology; more notable among his diverse
talents, however, was facility as a light novelist. Finally, he became the 645th mayor

Robert Hugh Benson
of Rye of the Cinque Ports (1934-1937), whereupon he won note by declining a baronage on the grounds that it would have required him to attend the (anticipated) coronation of Edward VIII. That, he surmised, would have been simply too boring to endure.

The Benson home, then, included an archbishop, a future don, and a mayor; five of the siblings would be published novelists; three would produce memoirs and biographies as well. Margaret, furthermore, became the first woman to oversee a major dig in Egyptian antiquities. The Bensons were a distinguished lot. Indeed, when they were but children, the six siblings first issued their own newsletter, the Saturday Magazine, as a medium for their stories, plays, and poetry, as well as family news. Hugh’s contributions to the Saturday Magazine (consisting of both text and illustrations) expressed his own rather mythic and extremely violent and bloody world of fantasy and chivalry.

Reminiscences of Hugh’s youth center upon two qualities: self-will and charm. One story recounts that young Hugh, still residing in the nursery, had refused minor roles in his brothers’ games, saying that he would be no man’s “deputy sub-sub-bootboy.” Frederick Benson writes, “for independence, for knowing what he wanted, and for a perfectly fearless disregard of other people’s opinions, [Hugh] was, for a boy of nine, wholly unique... [It always] was necessary to convince him first, and no amount of bawling or insistence would make him alter his mind if he did not agree.” From an early age, Hugh had his own direction and ambitions.

Nonetheless, although his brothers recalled him as singularly endearing (unless crossed), as imaginative and amusing, even those closest to Hugh could be unsure of how to appraise him. For example, from an early age he displayed an intermittent stammer; it surfaced irregularly and inconsistently, leading to accusations that he had created this impairment for effect. Its endurance through more than forty years seems to belie that charge, but it may at least be conceded that Hugh managed to turn the stammer into an integral element of his native charm; he put this seeming defect, as it randomly appeared, to good and effective use throughout his life.

To understand the distinctive turn of Hugh Benson’s mind, consider how he introduces the protagonist of his 1910 novel, None Other Gods. The figure of Frank Guiseley is used to trace the soul’s development through purgative and illuminative stages to union with God. Yet Benson establishes Frank’s character without an explicitly religious context. Instead, Guiseley is introduced as the perpetrator of one of the great pranks in the lore of Cambridge: the “Bread and Butter Affair” of Hilary Term 1900. This was a first-year boy’s successful effort to tease his college’s annoying senior dean, Mr. Mackintosh. Guiseley is described as having planted about town a quantity of buttered slices of bread, individually wrapped, tied with string, each labeled with the address of Mr. Mackintosh. In consequence, Mackintosh found himself afflicted by a succession of kind people at his door, each of whom was kindly returning a supposedly lost package. Presumably, in consequence, the annoying Mr. Mackintosh was himself annoyed.

Rather than a dreary, self-absorbed and aloof figure of piety, Hugh Benson’s proposed paradigm of religious maturation is a vital young man, marked by humor and fun, untainted by convention. Benson saw his man of religion as a person ordinary in his circumstances, but one who would be made extraordinary by a virile spiritual musculature born of his strenuous gift of himself to God. This was to be a recurring theme in Benson’s life and writing.

Robert Hugh Benson’s own maturation was perhaps more measured, progressing incrementally, sometimes seemingly without direction. He was an undistinguished student. In youth, Hugh longed to attend Winchester, but was sent to Eton (1885), where it was hoped that he might be stimulated to better scholarship. He did take Eton’s Hervey Prize (1889) in poetry (for a
work on Damien of Molokai), but that was to prove his greatest - and virtually his sole - achievement there. Indeed, he only learned of the prize after weak scholarship led to his coming down early. The archbishop already had withdrawn the boy, entrusting him instead to a crammer (1889-1890). Rather than aspiring to university, Hugh had set his sights on the civil service, anticipating an Indian posting. The crammer at Wren's was hired to facilitate this, but Hugh still failed the entry examination, and was denied a civil appointment. Nevertheless, the year would not prove a complete loss, since at Wren's Hugh was exposed to J.H. Shorthouse’s passionate novel, John Inglesant, a volume he would credit thenceforth with awakening his spiritual inclinations.

Shorthouse’s book may have sparked Hugh’s religious proclivities, but its impact was not immediate. After Wren’s, the archbishop sent his youngest son to Cambridge (1890-1893). There, Hugh matriculated at Trinity in classics, where, once again, he began earning an undistinguished record. In consequence, he determined to read theology instead. Yet even in that field, one wherein he clearly had aptitude, Benson was only graduated with a disappointing third; nevertheless, his intellect had been stimulated. Writing, and perhaps history, he determined, were to be part of his future, with the ministry as his profession.

Accordingly, in 1893, Archbishop Benson sent Hugh to Dean Charles John Vaughan at Llandaff to read for Anglican Orders. After one year of study, Hugh was ordained deacon in 1894. His father raised him to the Anglican presbyterate in the following year.

Young Benson’s first curacy took him to the Eton Mission (Hackney Wick). A year later (1896), after his father’s unexpected death, Hugh left the Mission, then traveled; from May 1897 to June 1898, he acted as curate in Kemsing. During this period, Benson moved definitively into High Anglican subculture, leading him in 1898 to join Canon Gore’s Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield (f. 1892). Always a loner, Benson seems to have employed Mirfield less for community life than for study and for the refinement of his religious thought, an endeavor that would culminate in his submission to Rome. The Anglican missionary Edward Bickersteth laments that Hugh “came to Mirfield with certain tendencies which we were able to restrain but not eradicate.” Significantly, however, Mirfield did allow Benson the opportunity to turn seriously to writing.

Up until this point, the adult life of Hugh Benson was peripatetic. His four years at Mirfield would seem a rather stable period; yet virtually from the beginning, Hugh spent his time there searching for something else, seeking to define the calling that, he came to believe, was not contained in Anglican ministry. Hugh reports that as he meandered toward the Holy See it was with “nothing more than the deepest possible conviction-[there was] no emotionalism or sense of relief, or anything of that kind.” In mid-1903, Benson simply recognized the rightness of the Catholic Church: “There was the Truth,” he said, “as aloof as an ice-peak, and I had to embrace it.” He wrote in his memoirs that he “[became] a Roman Catholic not because I was necessarily attracted by her customs, but because I believed that church to be the Church of God...[I would] go to Rome not as a critic or a teacher, but as a child and a learner.” E.E. Benson described his brother’s dynamic this way: “[Hugh] heard in the stillness of his soul the command for its further adventure.”

So, with the decision already made, Hugh presented himself to the eminent Dominican apologist, Father Reginald Buckler (1840-1927), and was received into the Catholic Church that September. He was not yet 32 years old, and for the first time in his life, Hugh Benson was left to choreograph his future without the benefit of his family’s intercession.

The Benson family influence, nonetheless, was to exert itself upon Hugh’s aspirations, though perhaps not in the way the
family had envisaged. The son (even a mere fourth son) of the Anglican primate was an especial addition to the Roman Communion. So when Hugh announced his ambition for ordination as a Catholic priest, the Archdiocese of Westminster responded with alacrity. Ostensibly because of his knowledge, but perhaps more pertinently because of his lineage, Benson was allowed an accelerated program of priestly studies that started a mere two months after his submission. He read theology in Rome, completing his program in just six months, by May 1904. Still in Rome, Benson was made deacon on 5 June. On 12 June, at the behest of Westminster (which incardinates him), he was raised to presbyteral orders.

Robert Hugh Benson kept a daybook, a surprising document, covering his Roman months. This small volume provides precious insight into Hugh’s mind during his first days in the Church. Rather than yielding the story of a spiritual journey or some wrenching adaptation to a different religious culture, however, the daybook documents a whirlwind social calendar. His daily entries provide a rather gossipy account of his Roman life, focusing upon visitors and contacts. Only in the closing days of this narrative does Benson dare to reflect upon the Sacramental imposition of hands he was soon to enjoy. Therein, however, is revealed the key. The daybook’s narrative does not reflect shallowness, but certainty. Having entered the Church, Hugh simply no longer doubted; his Church and his priestly vocation had become - apparently immediately and wholly comfortably - the ordinary way for him. He did not revisit the issues in his choice of Rome; he simply followed his enrollment with a wholehearted embrace. As was said of his character Frank Guseley, “the whole course of his life [brought] him to the only end possible.” Hugh Benson had found his right, true, providential course in life.

A stage version of one of Benson’s novels, Come Rack! Come Rake!, contains a soliloquy that suggests something of the deepening—and of the amplitude—of faith that Hugh had experienced. This speech comes when the central character, a young priest named Robin Audrey, is smuggled into England in 1587. There, the girl he had once planned to marry, a recusant, is assigned to hide him from the Elizabethan pursuivants. Robin says

Marjorie, listen to me; you must understand this. In seminary they accused me of undue formality, of giving quick, measured answers, in the ready formulae of books and lectures. But I did not hide in these. It is simply that I discovered in the Catho-

That was the key to Benson’s understanding: If one’s course in life leads to our divine Lord, then its providence is not to be doubted.

After Rome, by which time Hugh had recognized that pursuing literary endeavors would be a central aspect of his work and calling, he was assigned to residence at Llandaff House to read advanced theology; then, in 1905, Benson was placed at the Catholics’ Cambridge rectory where parochial work was again proven to be outside
his metier. The Cardinal of Westminster seems to have understood and accepted that fact, so that when in 1908 Benson purchased a private residence (Hare Street House, about two miles from Buntington in Hertfordshire), he was separated thenceforth from ordinary parochial engagements.

It is with this 1908 redefinition of his circumstances that the spirituality of Robert Hugh Benson began to flower and prosper. At Hare Street, Hugh designed and arranged a personal chapel and home that he occupied for the remainder of his life (six years). Thenceforward, he gave himself to writing, spiritual direction (both in person and by correspondence), and to preaching retreats and missions. Aided by his early fame and prodigious output, he became an international figure in Catholic letters, and even acquired a reputation for some degree of holiness (although such regard was mitigated somewhat by his eccentricities). His spiritual strength was an ability to go “straight to the marrow and the pith, namely the human thirst for the love of God, and God’s thirst for the love of man. Hugh knew that, he felt that...[T]he ultimate meaning of [life was] his satisfying daily bread.”

In 1911, Pope Saint Pius X recognized Benson, naming him a personal chamberlain, bearing the title “Monsignor.” In his eleven years of sustained writing, Hugh averaged almost four books, plays or monographs per year. These included sixteen novels (eight modern novels, five historical, two apocalyptic, one conceit), three collections of stories (plus single stories published in other media), a volume of poetry, three children’s books, four dramas, five volumes on theological or spiritual topics, six containing his sermons and conferences (some in these last two categories were collected after his death), two prayer books, and one each in autobiography and travel, plus a quasi-biography. There were also pamphlets, shorter pieces for various publishers, and prefaces for works of other writers.

Yet it was not only his writing that attracted attention. In particular, Hugh’s peculiarities and diverse adventures, especially his fascination with spiritualism, won him some derisive press and comment. The New York Times, for example, covered Benson’s visit to a purportedly haunted house in Brooklyn in 1912, and even resurrected that episode for his obituary two years later.

Another problem for Hugh was his trusting nature. He is remembered as a man who “always believed whatever [a person] chose to tell him,’ . . . [he was just] incapable of being suspicious,” according to his brother Arthur. Benson, for example, became one of the several Catholics who sought to aid the Edwardian misanthrope and Catholic man-of-letters; Frederick William Rolfe (1860-1913), only to be repaid with the latter’s incomparable brand of vitriol. In addition to numerous epistolary assaults on Hugh, addressed to various correspondents, Rolfe is said to have written a malign and vilipendatory attack on Benson that he entitled DePresbytero. Rolfe also inserted Benson into his novel The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole (written 1909-1910, published posthumously). Therein, Monsignor Benson, christened here “The Reverend Bobugo Bonsen,” is splenetically described as a man of “fantastic arrogance” and “savage cruelty.” In one passage (that spreads across three pages), Rolfe describes “Bonsen” as a stuttering little Chrysostom of a priest, with the Cambridge manners...[and] face of the Mad Hatter out of Alice in Wonderland...[H]is mind...was vastly occupied...[b]y sensational novel-writing...and by perfunctory preaching, [whereby he...] nourished the notion that several serious mistakes had resulted from his absence during the events described in the first chapter of Genesis.

Despite such assaults, on the whole Hugh’s charm served to win him kind regard from the public. Indeed, it is probably that which, at least in his lifetime, helped disguise the irrefutable fact that his prose is rather uninspired. Benson's novels are severely flawed as literature. Nevertheless, there is still reason to read his works today. If one can see past the lack of literary merit, there resides in his texts enormous insight into the workings of divine and human intercourse. It is for this that his writings still merit attention.

Hugh Benson's most mature novel is Come Rack! Come Rope! While not great literature, it is at least a good tale, an historical novel in the genre of what past generations termed a “boys’ book.” Come Rack! Come Rope! is an adventure story of a young man’s maturation through heroism in the face of trial. Set primarily in the 1580’s, it features an ordinary (but well-born) young man, Robin Audrey, who defies his father by remaining Catholic despite the Elizabethan persecution. Robin abandons his patrimony, and journeys to France where he is ordained a priest. Returned to England after seven years of study, he ministers to Mary Stuart and others, profits from the
Then he boasts his virtue, but is thought a charlatan. None Other Gods displays Benson’s unflagging confidence in the facility of the Catholic religion to open a person to providence. Rather than worrying over his resources for meeting death, Robin Audrey fears that he might prove weak upon the rack. He is resolved to face his end bravely, but will he possess that same nobility when confronted with the pain that is death’s prelude? In the stage version of this novel, Robin reflects, “but the dregs before the wine of consummation...that is where weakness may show. That is where holy ambition may bow before sinful humanity?” Might he, to save himself from torture, deny the Church Christ founded? That question is immediate and pertinent, Robin knows, for as a priest in England in 1587, both the pain and the death-no less than holding to truth—are integral to his vocation.

Frank Guiseley, introduced in the bread-and-butter affair of None Other Gods, faces a different problem, although it also turns upon a young man’s fidelity to truth. Frank, however, is a better-drawn, more interesting and appealing hero than is Robin Audrey. Unfortunately, though, None Other Gods is a distractingly heteroclite and parabolic tale; its writing is too expository, with overly explicated images poised against characters too sparingly mined. Yet it is saved by the figure of Guiseley, a fully and attractively drawn young man, who matures in the course of the novel to live as well as profess his faith.

The story of None Other Gods is set in 1902, when Frank Guiseley, aged 22, the younger son of the explosive Lord Talgarth, has the temerity to convert to Roman Catholicism. Thereupon, Talgarth issues an abusive letter, threatening to disown this errant son (who is of course unwilling to abandon his new religion). Frank then annoys his father further by taking him at his word by acceding willingly to his father’s verdict. Replacing his life of wealth and privilege with the poverty of an itinerant laborer, Frank Guiseley decides to take to the roads; he roams the highways of England in penury, taking work as he finds it, even going to prison for a crime he did not commit (in order to spare an associate). Neither Eton nor Cambridge had prepared Frank for haying and construction jobs, but he has pluck, he is adventuresome and willing, and most importantly, he resolves to use his reduced circumstances as an opportunity to live his faith more fully. Benson shows Frank Guiseley on the tramp, testing his religion, enduring adversities, facing the varied blows of quotidian existence, but always trying therein to preserve the honor proper to a man of faith. In the context of this regimen, Frank passes through successive stages of spiritual growth and increasing affinity to God, without fully understanding the transformation taking place inside him. Benson uses Guiseley to show that, rather than the extraordinary or exceptional course, a person’s movement toward the Lord happens in the context of regular, day-to-day life, so long as that existence is genuinely marked by the faith one professes in Christ and His Church.

That meaning must be found and recognized, of course, but also trusted. Benson believed that no one will have a harder road to heaven than people who think that they are sensible or practical. Invariably, according to Benson, such people are merely conventional, possessed by a persnicious and prideful skepticism that requires all things to be evaluated according to his personal perspective, understanding, and appraisal. These supposedly sensible people, Benson argues, do not trust God; they
only trust themselves. Thus they lose their “ballast,” that “wholesome tranquility, [that] grip on [one]self, [that allows] greater faith” in providence, in how God Himself wants a situation resolved. That ballast, that trust, demands that the person summon sufficient courage to actually trust God more than self.35

To nurture this trust in God and His providence, one must place his whole existence in God’s perspective rather than man’s, as in Robin Audrey’s proclamation, “I am killed for treason, but I die for Christ,” 36 or Frank Guiseley’s resolution, “I know, absolutely for certain, that I have got to go on [according to what providence asks of me]...and until that is done I mustn’t do anything else.”37 How is one to achieve this clarity of vision? It requires an uncompromised gift of self. Benson counseled,

picture God as a vast still abyss in the depth of our soul, with cliffs round, and winding ways leading to it...The simplest way [to Him], if only we have faith, is to throw ourselves off the cliff into Him...[and each time] our restless self begins to climb up the cliffs again into the common day...repeat the process of letting go...[I]t is so much simpler and less tiring than climbing down.38

One must be mindful, though, of the effect of this dive into divinity. For, as Hugh Benson warns, mere religious consolation is not its purpose. He writes, speaking of Robin Audrey in his martyr’s passion,

He felt none of that strange heart-shaking ecstasy that had transfigured other deaths like his; ...there was no open vision, such as he had half hoped to see, no unimaginable glories looming slowly through the veils in which God hides Himself on earth, no radiant face smiling into his.39

Benson understands the moment and value of God’s ways, the mystery that is providence and divine order: it means that, although one might long for comforts and spiritual favors, the Lord might well choose to give something really quite other.

Awaiting the final gift of himself for the faith, his certain martyrdom, Robin admits,

I had rather expected angels to be floating around this cell; I thought Christ would fill my eyes with visions, and His Mother would hold my hand, and wipe my tears. But instead, instead of “comfort,” God has given me a strange kind of strength that

I did not expect. He has, with His silence, spoken more, I think, than would the angels whom I did expect. I stand, and lie, and pace, and try at least to sit, ensconced in my hole here, realizing I shall know every conceivable horror before I am allowed to pass, not knowing why they wait before beginning their cruel work. And yet somehow, somehow that I do not understand...I am not offended.40

And yet, he warns,

For this kind of strength to work, I must definitely not be in command of it. This is a reservoir I have never before experienced, nor even anticipated. I am only too content to let it, or Him, have its way with me in this. But I will hold for truth.41

In Benson’s Frank Guiseley, this reflects the illuminative state in which perspective is so changed, so thoroughly focused upon God, that providence becomes more manifest, embraceable whether or not it is clear or even understandable. Benson’s Guiseley says,

The new ‘process’ began quite suddenly...It’s very hard to describe it in words, but the first thing to say is that I was not exactly happy just then, but absolutely content...I saw suddenly that what had been wrong in me was that I had made myself the centre of things, and God a kind of circumference. When He did or allowed things, I said, ‘Why does He?’ from my point of view. That is to say, I set up my ideas of justice and love and so forth, and then compared [God’s] with mine, and mine with His. And I suddenly saw - or, rather, I knew already when I awoke - that this was simply stupid. Even now I cannot imagine why I didn’t see it before: I had heard people say it, of course - in sermons and books - but I suppose it had meant nothing to me...[But] when one once really sees that, there’s no longer any puzzle about anything.42

This surety is the hallmark of Benson’s faith. It is especially prominent in the Hare Street years, marking and accompanying his life, and presumably his end. Hugh died in 1914, not yet aged forty-three.43 As Rolfe says of one of his own protagonists, “he was tired, worn out...[for he had had] a horror of being discovered in a state of inaction.”44 Yet Benson, it seems, did not regret his exhaustion: it was, for him, a not untoward part of the practice of religion.
Frank Guiseley articulates Benson's understanding. He says, ‘I don’t understand quite what people mean by ‘consolations’ of religion. Religion doesn’t seem to me a thing like Art or Music, in which you can take refuge. It either covers everything, or it isn’t religion. Religion never has seemed to me (I don’t know if I’m wrong) one thing, like other things, so that you can change about and back again...[One’s faith is] either the background and foreground all in one, or it’s a kind of game. [Religion is] either true, or it’s a pretense. Well, all this, in a way, taught me it was absolutely true. Things wouldn’t have held together at all unless it was true.’

Benson had learned that God makes a difference. As one character in None Other Gods says of Frank Guiseley, the Catholic faith had “given him a centre—a hub for the wheel...It’s joined everything on to one point in him. He’ll be more obstinate and mad than ever before. [Because h]e’s got a center now...[But then,] I suppose that’s what religion’s for.”

The Church, Benson believed, is not a mere avenue to Christ, but something all-encompassing: it is the person’s ethnicity, his definition, his locus. And perhaps that simple insight, that grasp of the plenitude - or rather, the amplitude of the Catholic faith, is why there remains, a century later, reason to read Robert Hugh Benson.

NOTES

1 This essay is a refinement of a lecture entitled “Why Does No One Today Read Robert Hugh Benson?” It has been delivered by the author before various audiences, most notably the Hintemeyer Scholars of the Hintemeyer Catholic Leadership Program in 2000.

2 Although an Archbishop of York had lost a son (Tobie Matthew) to Rome during the reign of James I, sons of Canterbury’s bishops had heretofore remained faithful to the national church.

3 Edward White Benson (1829-1896) had been headmaster of Wellington College (1859-1872), where Hugh was born. There followed an assignment as chancellor in Lincoln (1873) before he was named Anglican bishop of Truro (1877). He ascended to Canterbury in 1882. The senior Benson’s archepiscopal appointment was thought by some to be attributed less to his promise than to his friendship with Gladstone, then Prime Minister. Nevertheless, E.W. Benson would prove popular at Canterbury, where his achievements included the reform of Church patronage. The archbishop died in 1896, while attending chapel at Hawarden in the company of Gladstone.

4 Thus concluded the Benson line, since none of the archbishop’s children married.

5 He is believed to have been infected with meningitis.

6 A.C. Benson’s co-editor was Lord Esher (Reginald Balfour [sic] Brett [1852-1930], 2nd Viscount Esher); see Victoria Regina, The Letters of Queen Victoria, a Selection from Her Majesty’s Correspondence Between the Years 1837 and 1861, Published by Authority of His Majesty the King, 3 volumes (1837-1843, 1844-1853, 1854-1861), eds. Arthur C. Benson and Viscount Esher (London: John Murray, 1907).

7 Elinor (Nellie) died young from infectious diphtheria. Its origin was never discovered.

8 Margaret (Maggie) also died relatively young, weakened by both psychological and physical infirmities. Margaret’s closest friendship among her siblings was with Fred.

9 Despite her limited expertise in the field, Margaret Benson’s work at the Temple of Mut over three ‘seasons’ (1895-1897) proved of enduring value. Hugh was present with her in Egypt in 1897, but did not participate in his sister’s excavations. Her account of the Egyptian digs is contained in Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay, The Temple of Mut in Ascher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians (London: John Murray, 1899).
11 Although Benson never specifies the exact date, it can be identified from internal evidence.
13 No copy of the 1889 Hervey manuscript is known to exist today, and it was never published in the *Eton College Chronicle*. The archivist of Eton College has not dismissed the possibility of the poem’s eventual discovery, but hope is minimal. See letter to the present author from College Archivist Penelope (Penny) Hatfield, dated 22 November 1995.
15 Quoted in Martindale, 255.
17 Benson, *Confessions*, 119-120.
19 This manuscript is preserved in the Harry Ransom holdings of the University of Texas at Austin.
20 Publisher’s flyer for *None Other Gods* (American edition), 1911. Copy preserved at Belmont Abbey [NC].
21 In the novel, Robin’s patronymic is “Audrey”; the stage edition uses “Aubrey” instead. There appears to be no extant explanation for the change. In this essay, I have used “Audrey,” the earlier of the two versions.
23 At that time, it was ordinary to assign newly ordained Oxbridge graduates to witness and minister at University. For example, two decades before Hugh’s assignment to the mission at Canterbury, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) had received an equally unfortunate, inapt, and abbreviated appointment to the rectory at Oxford.
27 The existence of *De Presbytero* is disputed. Perhaps it was threatened or planned; perhaps it has been lost. I, at least, have failed to uncover any primary source to document that *De Presbytero* was ever written. Yet Rolfe’s modern biographer, Dr. Miriam Benkowitz, seems to regard it as a legitimate Corvín tract. In 1995-1996, I sought access to the late Dr. Benkowitz’s papers, hoping to uncover there a clue to her confidence in the existence of *De Presbytero*. Katherine Philip Chansky, at the Lucy Scribner Library of Skidmore College, was very helpful in locating Dr. Benkowitz’s records (see e.g., letter to the present author, 16 April 1996), but possession had reverted to the family, and I was not granted research privileges from her heirs. In my pursuit of *De Presbytero* many librarians, archivists and conservators have assisted me. Dr. Judith Priestman of the Bodleian was especially helpful, both in her own investigations and in alerting me to British sources and repositories. A recent literary biography of Benson even ignores the possibility of the purported text of *De Presbytero*. See Janet Grayson, *Robert Hugh Benson: Life and Works* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998).
29 Robert, 52.
30 A good editor and a more patient writer could have remedied *None Other Gods* more technical flaws—e.g., in two cases, characters’ names change as the story progresses—but by the time it reached the publisher, Benson was wildly popular in the field of Catholic fiction and had more or less abandoned revisions in favor of simple output. As his brother Fred has written, “The moment a book was finished Hugh never gave another thought to it” (E.R Benson, *Mother*, 202). The year he published *None Other Gods* (1910), Hugh also published five additional books, preached at least three missions and two retreats, and engaged in extensive correspondence with those who sought his spiritual counsel. He was wrestling with Rolfe at this time, too, and also took time to travel; literary quality suffered
31 See n. 11, supra.
34 This has also been discussed in the present author's essay, “Impact of the Will on Mysticism: Compiling Benson's Theory,” *Faith and Reason* (Summer 1983), 101.
36 Robert, 102.
37 Benson, *None*, 317.
40 Robert, 86-87.
41 Ibid., 87.
43 Eccentric to the end, Benson left instructions for various tests to be performed on his remains before burial. These were intended to prove his death and prevent premature interment. His fear of being buried alive is presumed to have been inspired by two macabre short-stories by Rolfe - who had died the year before, but who apparently had inadvertently won the last laugh in their tumultuous relationship.
45 Benson, *None*, 313.
46 Ibid., 411.