

FRANCIS BACON: A TER-CENTENARY

HERBERT L. STEWART

It is not too much to say that in temper, in honesty, in labour, in humility, in reverence, Bacon was the most perfect example that the world had yet seen of the student of Nature, the enthusiast of knowledge. DEAN CHURCH.

Bacon was like a barometer that announced the coming of fine weather, and was absurdly supposed to have produced it. JOSEPH DE MAISTRE.

Thou knowest him, O reader. He is that stupendous Bacon, who discovered the new way of discovering truth . . . In brief, they have detected this poor Chancellor to be a hungry Jew of Whitechapel, selling judgment for a bit of money. They twitch the purple cloak off him, all the learned wigs, patch-coifs and trappings off him, and say—with nostrils dilated in disgust—Go! He goes, one of the sorrowfullest of all mortals, to beg bread in Gray's Inn, to augment the sciences, if from the like of him the sciences have any augment to expect. CARLYLE.

ON the day of the execution of Charles I, it was remarked by Samuel Pepys that a good text for preachers would be the motto "The memory of the wicked shall rot." But Pepys, on that 30th January, 1649, was only sixteen years old. With the lapse of time the bitterness of his censure was assuaged. He came to see that mankind is not quite sharply divided into "the wicked" and "the righteous." And he was destined to look with an indulgent eye upon the sins of another monarch, at least not superior to the object of his youthful reprobation.

How far it is good to preserve the memory of men who have been brilliant but far from admirable figures in the past, is a question I shall not here discuss. One would often desire, if it were possible, to remember a man's work while forgetting his personality. But it is not possible, even when the personality and the work have so little intelligible bearing upon each other as in the case of Francis Bacon. On Easter morn, just three hundred years back, that restless spirit passed away, in a friend's house at Highgate. Oddly enough, the philosopher who wrote so much about the way to investigate heat met his death by misadventure in the practical investigation of cold. He had stuffed a fowl with snow, to ascertain how far the decay of animal bodies can thus be arrested, and it is said that we owe to his experiment our earliest hint of the uses of a refrigerator. But the chill contracted in this trial proved fatal to him, and within a few days an obituary notice reminded the reader how high he had once risen, only that he might the further fall.

Just five years had passed since Bacon stood before a tribunal of his peers, humiliated in a manner to which there has been no parallel before or since in the record of the British judiciary. He was there to confess how, as Lord Chancellor, he had been in the habit of accepting presents from litigants whose cases he was to try. He had to admit that his secret agents had exacted on his behalf such "consideration" for preferential treatment in his court. It became clear that suitors before the highest tribunal in the land had been taught to rely upon the venality of the judge, and the matter was not much mended by proof that the Chancellor had been as untrue to the partners of his fraud as he had been to the country which reposed in him so great a trust. Nor could he plead even the poor excuse which has so often been dismissed with indignation when put forward by some common thief. But for his outlandish personal extravagance, Bacon could never have been in straitened circumstances. Provided with an official income which should at least have raised him above the more sordid temptations, and with private means legitimately—though not very creditably—obtained on a scale to make his total revenue comparable to that of a prince, he could not restrain his greed so far as to avoid the dishonesties of a petty attorneyism.

But, as might have been expected from the nimbleness and ingenuity of his mind, he made a great defence when he stood—as Macaulay said—"before the frowning peers." Acknowledging that he had been to blame, he invoked the sympathy due to a man who has but fallen into the habitual vices of his time. If he had not been ahead of the traditional morals of the Court of Chancery, at all events he urged that he had not fallen behind any standard of his predecessors or contemporaries. In his worst practices, he said, he had but conformed to established custom. His rewards from suitors were like a professional fee for work done, and they had been taken just for expediting causes, not for any special decision about them. He had, no doubt, sold justice, but never injustice. Blameworthy as he was, he claimed to have been the most righteous judge that had sat on the English bench for fifty years! What their lordships had to try were thus *vitia temporis*, not *vitia hominis*. And, following the lines of the accused's plea, many a biographer since has declared that Bacon's faults were the faults of his age, while his shining merits were his own.

It is an old scandal now, not worth reconsideration in detail. Unfortunately for Bacon's case, there is abundant evidence that corrupt practice in the courts of his day, though common enough, had been denounced again and again by thinkers and teachers

who made no pretence to his intellectual elevation. It was not for the *buccinator novi temporis* to shelter himself behind the screen of current usage in a society he so heartily despised, and in which he constantly professed himself a reformer. Moreover, in his own books he had written many an eloquent passage against judicial corruption!

* * * * *

Such was Bacon as he appeared at his famous trial. But very different is the Bacon of the *Novum Organum* and the *De Augmentis*. The man we come to know in those books is a resolute thinker, herald of an intellectual dawn, one before whom the gates of the modern world have swung open, and who bids his contemporaries enter with him unafraid. Like the Elizabethan seamen who were exploring new lands, he is the explorer of new avenues of thought. He is the scourge of all prejudice, all traditional assumptions, all that would warp the mind in its quest for truth. Against the illusions of conventional language, against the subtle deceitfulness of pleasing but groundless beliefs, against all tampering with intellectual veracity to win applause from the ignorant or to placate the powerful, he stands as champion of the human mind. Not for him the study of Nature as a means to mere ornament, to personal profit, or to the diverting exercise of rival wits. Not for him the popular search after subtle elegancies of diction, or the subordinating of knowledge to a utilitarian end. Like Pompey who insisted on putting to sea in perilous waters, declaring "It is needful for me to go, but not needful for me to remain alive", he will be turned aside by no risk from pursuing the great adventure of the awakened soul. And he is sure that, in the end, Wisdom will be justified of her children. It is an impressive picture, splendid for the stimulation of the young. The Histories of Philosophy use it to adorn their central paragraph on the passage from *Dark Ages* to the meridian glory of the modern time. Nor is its value really affected by anything we know of the writer's personality. It is true that Bacon seeking Truth was very different from Bacon seeking the Seals. But his quest for the Seals makes no matter to posterity, while his quest for Truth exemplified if it did not initiate a real movement of the human mind.

For not through mere accident or misunderstanding did Francis Bacon win so great a regard as the supposed founder of modern inductive logic. The flaws in his inductive theory have been so much emphasized by later critics, that its high merits and its indisputable originality have been too much forgotten. It is true that he ridiculed Aristotle almost, if not quite, as absurdly as

earlier devotees had glorified him. In zeal to point out the narrow limits of deductive reasoning, he often spoke as if deduction had no important place at all. Of the vast importance of "hypothesis" he had no appreciation. His idea that a reasoning machine might be invented, to make one mind quite as effective as another in investigation,—a machine of the sort advertised with the heading "A child can work it"—was surely as ludicrous a proposal as the records of thought contain. One may remember how Bacon was not more resolute in combatting mediaeval superstition than in extolling Persian magic; how he fiercely denied the earth's diurnal motion in the same breath with which he urged distrust of mere unsifted sense-experience, how he combined with his ridicule of the *Idola Fori* and the *Idola Tribus* a constant deference to divination and a sturdy belief that the stars incline if they do not actually determine the destinies of mankind. Men like Kepler and Harvey, who were actually doing the work of which he was devising a theoretic account, are now seen to have succeeded in great measure because they reasoned on principles very different from his. Men like Descartes were writing a new chapter of human thought, by methods and on foundations which he was gaily mocking as valueless.

Yet when all allowance has been made for such inadequacies and such inconsistencies, Bacon still stands as the first and—in his time—by far the most notable exponent of the change that was to come in logical theory. No other was comparable with him in the clearness with which he realized and the force with which he defined the need for a systematic logic of the natural sciences. No other had grasped with his enthusiasm, or set forth with a tithe of his expository gift, the need for an Aristotle of the modern age which had begun with the Renaissance. And one should not fail to note how, more than two centuries after the issue of the *Novum Organum*, the world of British thought was thrilled again by Mill's *System of Logic*, scarcely more free than Bacon's work from just the same kind of faults, and deriving so great a part of its lasting value from a re-statement of just those enduring principles which he had laid down.

* * * * *

He is, no doubt, far more widely known to-day by his *Essays* than by anything else he wrote. They have a traditional place in school or college courses of English literature. Perhaps Bacon would not have been particularly pleased to see them there, for he scorned those who concern themselves about the choiceness

of a phrase or "the sweet falling of the clauses." Those enamoured of mere words, he said, were like those who displayed the ancient mania of Pygmalion for statues. And for the English language itself he predicted an early decay. It was for this reason that he wrote his *Novum Organum* in Latin, that he translated into Latin—under the title *De Augmentis*—the book he had published in English twenty years before under the title *The Advancement of Learning*, and that he enlisted the help of such friends as Hobbes and George Herbert to make Latin translations even of his *Essays* and his *History of Henry VII*. Works that were to live should, he thought, be in the one language that was "universal."

But he cared more for expression in his native speech than he liked to confess even to himself, and there is wonderful art in the rugged austerity of the *Essays*. Bacon followed the excellent rule of aiming first and foremost to be clear. He felt that a reader's power of attention is limited, that like all other limited resources it should be economised, and hence that a single superfluous word is a fault. It is surprising to hear that one so contemptuous of style used to keep memoranda of alternative forms in which the same thought may be expressed, or that he would store up in a commonplace book phrases and illustrations for which he conjectured that he might some day find a use.

It is to the *Essays* and the *Apophthegms* that we must turn too, not only for priceless gems of expression, but for much light on the personality and the moods of the writer. Bacon has made himself known to us there as Chesterfield is known, or Samuel Johnson, not perhaps intentionally, but for that very reason all the more surely. We can reconstruct the picture, for instance, of his habitual reading, the reflections that engaged his mind from day to day, the things he thought important and the things he thought trivial. Herein too we have an insight into his age, for in the society of the last years of Elizabeth and the whole period of James I it was Bacon's rise to eminence that gave the clearest token of the men and manners around him. The great Chancellor was the very moving spirit of that remarkable group which used to gather at York House or Gorhambury,—Ben Johnson and Fulke Greville, Wotton and Bodley, Selden and Andrewes. The *Apophthegms* show how they talked, and the *Essays* show how the mind of their engaging host was wont to act.

So eager a son of the Renaissance would naturally deal much in classical allusions, and Bacon's thought constantly recurs to something in Tacitus, in Sallust, in Ovid, in Plato. When he quotes Greek or Latin authors for the aptness of some phrase or

the sparkle of some comparison, he is happy; when he quotes them for a philosophic idea, he often misses the point. But more interesting are his ceaseless references to the Bible, which he uses—especially in the Old Testament—with the fervour and copiousness of a Puritan. When he would show how in the body politic there must be division and variety, he illustrates from the tree of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, or from the contrasted burdens laid by Jacob upon Judah and Issachar. When he would drive home his favourite moral about supreme kingship, he recalls how Solomon's throne was supported by lions on both sides, but how—lions though they were—they kept their place *beneath*. When he warns against public innovation, it is in the language of Jeremiah who bade the men of his time ask for the old paths and walk therein if they would find rest for their souls. He is fearful about a purely intellectual defence of sacred truth, lest he should be found offering strange fire upon the altar of the Lord. Even for his most trivial and half-dishonest artifices of diplomacy he has a scriptural precedent. Did not Nehemiah, he asks, affect a mournful visage before Artaxerxes, that the king might enquire why he was sad, and he might thus have a chance to reply "Because the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire"? Capricious as the homiletic may be, it is always suggestive and often original.

A recurring theme in the *Essays* is that of the best way to get on in the world, especially by exploiting at the right moment the foolishness or weakness of one's neighbour. Strange generalizations here and there surprise us. One is startled, for instance, to hear that it is unmarried or childless men who have always served their country best, that friendship is impossible between those of the same age, that slave labour was an excellent trait of the ancient world which had unfortunately been discountenanced by the Christian religion, or that in every well organized State there should be such laws and customs as will lend themselves to the quick manufacture of pretexts for waging war. Intermingled with these cynicisms we meet with pious reflection about those angels who fell by reason of their pride, about the degrading effect of atheism and the cardinal need for unity in the Church, or about the ratio between notes of sorrow and notes of joy in the devotional Psalms.

But surely the most remarkable of all his self-revelations was the strange book called *Commentarius Solutus*. It is a private diary, doubtless intended for no eye but that of the writer, which about fifty years ago was given for the first time to the world. In it Bacon wrote down his own plans and purposes, with a memor-

andum of the method by which he meant to carry them out. Therein we learn how he determined to conciliate King James by sedulous affectation of a liking for Scotsmen, how he made it a rule to keep the good graces of Lord Salisbury by furnishing him with "ornaments for public speeches" and by systematically supporting his proposals at the Council table, how he would cultivate a "natural but no ways perilous boldness", and how he would make occasion—especially in public places—to maintain private speech with "the great persons"! One reads these meditations as a useful comment upon the essay entitled *Wisdom for a Man's Self*.

* * * * *

It is not to be denied, however, that he had often shown wisdom of a more disinterested sort. As a public leader, in troubled and eventful years, Bacon had rendered high national service. He was a very young parliamentarian in that period of peril when successive plots were being formed against the throne and even against the life of Elizabeth. On the defeat of the great Armada, he took his part in discussing the proper measures to guard against recurrence of such a risk, and it is the testimony of one who often listened to him in the House that no speaker held deeper attention or commanded more respect. In those early years, too, he had not yet decided that the wisdom of a politician lies in unfailing obsequiousness to the party in power. For instance, in a shrewd *Letter of Advice* this young statesman—not yet twenty-five—urged that while Roman Catholics must be prohibited from meddling in public affairs, their religious liberty should be complete except for the single imposition of the oath of allegiance. And in the light of his subsequent career it is amusing to recall how the first published product of his pen was an article quasi-religious. There was admirable and opportune common sense in it. In 1589, the year after the Armada, when escape from external peril had given leisure to revive internal discord, Bacon there remonstrated in grave and solemn tone with fanatical Puritanism. That early paper, entitled *Controversies in the Church*, has an interest at once historical and personal.

When he wrote it, he was twenty-nine years old, and member of parliament for the constituency of Liverpool. His upbringing had been such as to make him very familiar with the way of thought of those stern critics to whom the ecclesiastical rearrangement effected by Cranmer was but a hateful compromise. Francis Bacon's mother was of the strait sect of those to whom the Anglican *via media* seemed a dishonest makeshift. To her it was not from

Canterbury, but from Geneva, Strassburg, or Zurich, that the true message of the Reformation had come. Lady Bacon was the sort of mother whose personality a son cannot forget. She had emphatically a mind of her own. Closely related by marriage to the chief Minister under Elizabeth, she aspired with some success not only to share the confidences but even to influence the policies of Burghley. Yet it was not her son Francis, it was rather her other son Antony from whom she expected most—and perhaps with reason. While the two boys were at college, it was Antony that she warned in numerous still extant letters not to follow his brother's example, rather to take care of his health, serve the Lord, and frequent the society of the "sincerer" people! Francis perhaps was more likely to be repelled than to be attracted by such austere advice.

In any case, it was no Puritan who wrote that article on *Controversies in the Church*. The zeal which makes a man a controversialist of the Puritan type was never his. But his sagacity here, as elsewhere, was unailing. In truth, as a politician, Bacon displayed an insight that was almost uncanny. With no love for anything like popular institutions, he never missed a chance to present the problem of government in terms of the practically possible rather than in terms of the theoretically preferable. Under the last and greatest of the Tudors, he saw that the day was past when Tudor absolutism could survive, and he did not scruple to warn Elizabeth against autocratic measures which the people would no longer bear. On such an issue as that of the royal monopolies, that of the recusants, that of interference by the Upper House in a vote of supply, or that of reform in the administration of the Star Chamber, he advised a timely grant by grace of that which would ultimately have to be yielded to fear. Thus too, in the religious feud, first between Romanist and Reformer, next between Puritan and Anglican, he urged that the Crown should be tolerant of the widest diversity of belief or practice so long as the royal supremacy was acknowledged. It was disagreeable counsel for the proud daughter of Henry VIII, accompanied by an explanation—hardly more palatable—that he gave it not because he was ignorant of "the common beaten way to please." How successfully Elizabeth profited by it, is written in the records of her reign.

But, as one of his critics has neatly said, he had "a dangerous tendency to merge minor morals in imposing aims." He was like Browning's

courtly Christian, not so much St. Paul
As a saint of Caesar's household.

And his loyalty to Caesar was shown in a pre-eminent degree by that dark episode, worse surely than his peculations, which befell in 1615. It is worth recalling because it was so characteristic of Bacon at his worst.

The case was that of an aged clergyman named Peacham, who was accused of high treason. Bacon as Attorney-General had to investigate it. The accused had his vicarage in a rural spot of Somersetshire, where there had been much popular resentment against the rapacity of the royal "Benevolences." But the only evidence of Peacham's treason was a manuscript sermon found by the police in his house, though acknowledged never to have been preached. It contained a paragraph in which James I was compared to Ananias, and again to Nabal, in Holy Writ. The judgment of our time may not regard these comparisons as unduly severe. But what, in the eye of the Attorney-General, did such similitudes portend? In the first place, it seemed to Bacon quite clear that if a sermon had been composed, though never preached, there must have been at least an intention of preaching it, and the intention was enough. What lawyers call the *mens rea* was beyond dispute. That the old clergyman might have altered his purpose when he read what he had written, did not seem a possibility worth consideration. And our intellectual Attorney-General decided that the best way of eliciting "truth" was to subject the prisoner to torture!

At the very time when he proceeded so, Bacon was completing and arranging the first sheets of the *Novum Organum*, with all their elaborate provision of safeguards against prejudice. That a man under trial for his life, and "put to the manacles" that he might be forced to testify against himself, would be likely to say—whether true or false—just what his tormentors seemed to desire, might have occurred to a mind less subtle than that of the classifier of the *Idola*. But, as he has himself told us, the light of the Reason is never dry; it "partakes of an infusion from the feelings and the will." It likewise partakes of certain noxious and disturbing ingredients when the philosopher is a Court sycophant. Never was there a man of the first intellectual rank who exemplified more plainly the very defects of mind against which he railed.

* * * * *

But the rest of the acts of Bacon, and all that he did, are they not written in the familiar *chronique scandaleuse* that constitutes his biography by so many hands? The affair of Essex, the faithlessness to friends, the frantic and wanton extravagance which took

him first to the Jew money-lenders and next—in natural sequence—to a sponging-house, his obsequiousness to the great, his constant flatteries and cajolings of all from whom he had anything to expect, his callous neglect of all from whom he could no longer expect more,—these enter into a portrait on which it is not pleasant even now to gaze. But they do not detract from that admiration with which one remembers the rare and versatile gifts of that amazing mind. Lawyers say that he was a great Lord Chancellor. Not less surely was he a statesman of the shrewdest insight in a most difficult time of public affairs. Literary critics have placed his *Essays* among the imperishable treasures of literature. In philosophy his name still symbolizes an epoch and a turning-point. So, three hundred years after his death, it would be ungracious to dwell exclusively on those stains that marred so wonderful a figure,—a mind in which so many and such varied gifts were blended in a degree for which history has seldom shown a parallel. And, after all, it is his greatness, not his littleness, that concerns mankind. There is still point in that warning by George Eliot:

It is a congenial task to dwell upon the transgressions of men of genius, especially when the censor has the advantage of being himself a man of no genius, so that those transgressions seem to him quite gratuitous . . . We make ourselves over-zealous agents of heaven, and demand that our brother should bring usurious interest for his Five Talents, forgetting that it is less easy to manage five talents than two.