

FRANCIS BACON

The Essays

EDITED
WITH AN
INTRODUCTION

BY

John Pitcher



FRANCIS BACON: THE ESSAYS

Francis Bacon, philosopher, essayist, lawyer and statesman, was born in London in 1561. He studied at Cambridge and was enrolled at Gray's Inn in 1576. In 1584 he entered Parliament as the member for Melcombe Regis, subsequently representing other constituencies. Bacon made the acquaintance of the Earl of Essex, who endeavoured to advance him in his career. Nevertheless, having been appointed to investigate the causes of Essex's revolt in 1601, Bacon was largely responsible for the earl's conviction. Bacon was appointed Solicitor-General in 1607 and was successively Attorney-General (1613), Lord Keeper (1617) and Lord Chancellor (1618). He was created Baron Verulam in 1618 and Viscount St Albans in 1621. Later in that year he was charged with bribery and confessed that he had been guilty of 'corruption and neglect' but denied that he had ever perverted justice. He was deprived of the Great Seal, fined, imprisoned in the Tower and disabled from sitting in Parliament. Following his release, he retired to the family home at Gorhambury, Hertfordshire, and his remaining years were spent in literary and philosophical work. It was Bacon's ambition to create a new system of philosophy to replace that of Aristotle, and he has been justly acclaimed as an inspiration to later scientists, rationalists and materialists. Of his philosophical works, the principal and best known are *The Advancement of Learning*, *Novum Organum* and *De Augmentis*. He also wrote several professional works including *Maxims of the Law* and *Reading on the Statute of Uses*. Of his literary writings the most important are the *Essays* (1597; issued in final form in 1625), *De Sapientia Veterum*, *Apophthegms New and Old* and a *History of Henry VII*. Francis Bacon died in 1626.

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group
27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published 1985
3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading
Set in Linotron Aldus by
Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

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PRINCIPAL DATES IN BACON'S LIFE

Bacon's life, to adapt one of his own phrases, is a *dark saying*: concealed, reaching deeply within for its wisdom, and not a little dangerous. Even more, it is not yet expounded. It ought to be otherwise, if his long and considerable public career meant anything, for (as is not the case with so many Elizabethan writers) scores of his letters have survived, along with his personal papers, deeds, parliamentary reports, and accounts of his rise to and fall from great office. The documents fill seven volumes of the standard Victorian edition, besides the same number for his writings, literary, historical, scientific, philosophical and legal. Surely, of all the artists and writers who were lucky enough to begin their creative lives with one another in England in the 1590s, we should know most about Francis Bacon. Yet he still awaits his biographer, though many have told his life. Rather out of favour now, or simply more difficult to obtain, is the late-nineteenth-century life, *Francis Bacon* by E. A. Abbott. This is a well-written and well-documented study. Abbott can certainly be sniffy about the Jacobean court, and Bacon's venial and cardinal sins, but his prejudices are evident, and he is not an unfair critic. The biography by C. D. Bowen (1963) is quite a good modern one. Other lives, political and scientific, are listed in the primer by Vickers (see below, p. 49).

- 1561 Born, 22 January, at York House in the Strand, the son of Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the Seal, and Anne Cooke (his second wife). Bacon was the youngest of eight children, six of whom were by Sir Nicholas's first marriage.
- 1573 April. Goes up to Trinity College, Cambridge, with his elder brother, Anthony.
- 1576 June. Admitted to Gray's Inn (again with Anthony).
September. Goes to Paris with Sir Amias Paulet, ambassador to France.

- 1579 February. His father dies, and (in June) he returns to England. Left with only a small inheritance, he is forced to seek a career in the law.
Anthony Bacon sets out on a long tour of the continent.
- 1582 June. Admitted Utter Barrister at Gray's Inn.
- 1584 November. First appearance in Parliament, representing Melcombe Regis in Dorset. (He remains in the Commons, representing various constituencies, until 1618, when he is made a peer.)
- c. 1585 Writes *Advice to Queen Elizabeth*, concerned chiefly with the recusants, and *The Greatest Birth of Time*.
- 1586 Becomes a Bencher of Gray's Inn.
- 1592 Writes four speeches*¹ for an entertainment, *A Conference of Pleasure*, celebrating Queen Elizabeth's accession day. Anthony Bacon returns from abroad and notes that his brother is 'bound and in deep arrearages' to Robert, Earl of Essex.
- 1593 In Parliament, speaks against a government proposal for subsidies, and as a consequence is forbidden to come into the Queen's presence.
With support from Essex, he begins his (unsuccessful) petition for the offices of Attorney-, and then Solicitor-General.
- 1594 Writes six speeches* for the Gray's Inn Christmas masque *Gesta Grayorum*. Begins to compile *Formularies and Elegancies*, a notebook of quotations and ideas; and writes legal and state pieces.
- 1595 Essex gives Bacon an estate (Twickenham) to console him on his failure to gain office.
Writes part of the device presented by Essex to celebrate the Queen's accession day (*Of Love and Self-Love*).
- 1596 Advises Fulke Greville on his studies and the Earl of Rutland on his travels.
- 1597 Publishes the *Essays*,* with *Colours of Good and Evil* and *Meditationes Sacrae*. Writes *Maxims of the Law*.

1. An asterisk by a title indicates that at least part of the work is to be found in the present edition.

Proposes marriage to Lady Hatton, who refuses and then marries his rival and enemy, Sir Edward Coke.

1598 Arrested for debt, but soon released.

Writes a pamphlet about a Jesuit conspiracy against the Queen.

1600 June. Takes part in proceedings against Essex after the Irish débâcle (in which the Earl, close to defeat by the Irish, abandoned his command and returned to England without the Queen's permission).

July. Offers his services to Essex, a fortnight after the Earl has been released but not restored to the Queen's favour.

1601 February. Essex is arraigned after his rebellion and executed as a traitor. Bacon assists the prosecution in his trial, and publishes a *Declaration* of the Earl's crimes.

May. Anthony Bacon dies. Mortgages Twickenham Park.

1603 After Elizabeth's death, tries (unsuccessfully) to obtain King James's favour.

July. Knighted at Windsor, along with three hundred others.

Deeply in debt, he is assisted by Sir Robert Cecil (later Lord Salisbury).

Writes *Valerius Terminus of the Interpretation of Nature, Temporis Partus Masculus* (The Masculine Birth of Time), and *De Interpretatione Naturae Proaemium* (Preface to 'Of the Interpretation of Nature'). Begins work on a series of writings about the union of England and Scotland.

1604 Publishes *Apology in certain imputations concerning the late Earl of Essex*.

August. Appointed King's Counsel.

1605 Publishes *The Advancement of Learning*.

1606 May. Marries Alice Barnham, the daughter of a rich London alderman. There are no children of this marriage.

1607 Writes *Cogita et Visa* (Thoughts and Conclusions).

June. Appointed Solicitor-General.

1608 Writes *Redargutio Philosophiarum* (The Refutation of Philosophies) and short historical pieces.

- 1609 Publishes *De Sapientia Veterum** (Of the Wisdom of the Ancients).
- 1610 His mother dies, several years after losing her wits.
Devises plans for a history of Great Britain, and in Parliament speaks for the King's right to impose taxes.
- 1612 Publishes second edition of the *Essays*,* enlarged and revised.
Writes *Descriptio Globi Intellectualis* and *Thema Coeli* (Description of the Intellectual Globe and Theory of the Heaven).
- 1613 October. Appointed Attorney-General.
Provides an expensive masque for the wedding of the King's favourite, Robert, Earl of Somerset. Writes against duels.
- 1616 Helps to prosecute Somerset for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury.
Writes a letter of advice to the new favourite, George Villiers (later Duke of Buckingham).
June. Made a Privy Councillor.
- 1617 March. Appointed Lord Keeper.
In and out of favour with the King and Buckingham for opposing them.
- 1618 January. Appointed Lord Chancellor.
July. Created Baron Verulam.
- 1620 Publishes *Novum Organum** (The New Organon) as the first part of the (uncompleted) *Instauratio Magna* (The Great Instauration).
- 1621 January. Created Viscount St Albans.
May. Sentenced by the House of Lords for taking bribes. Dismissed from the office of Chancellor. Fined and imprisoned briefly, he receives a limited pardon, and retains his title. Retires to his family home at Gorhambury.
- 1622 Publishes *History of Henry VII*, and (in monthly instalments) part of his proposed Natural History. Writes an *Advertisement touching an Holy War*.
- 1623 Publishes *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, a much enlarged Latin version of *The Advancement of Learning*.
Tries (in vain) to be made Provost of Eton.

- 1624 Writes *New Atlantis*, and publishes *Apophthegms* and a translation of some of the Psalms. Desperately short of money.
- 1625 Publishes the third edition of the *Essays*,* again enlarged and revised.
- 1626 Dies, 9 April, at Highgate, over £20,000 in debt.
Less than three weeks later his widow marries one of his servants.

INTRODUCTION

One of the sure signs that there is something special about Bacon's *Essays* is that they look unbelievably easy to write. So easy, that if we try our hand at the Baconian manner, fragments of the imitation may seem to come out quite close to the originals:

The grain of man be like to wood; rubbed the wrong way doth but ruin the finish.

or

Brutes, we see, do strut apace before their betters, but are, by God's decree, then *named*: for Adam ruled the beasts by cases vocative, and every player can call a knave.

Yet if we put fakes like these (which I have written) alongside the genuine stuff, it becomes clear at once that there is something inimitable in Bacon's style. Words like figures in a tapestry, unfolded and spread out, was how one of Bacon's wise men defined speech,¹ and the unrolling of language into needle-sharp clauses, quotations and sunbright sentences is what keeps the *Essays* as alert and as readable as they were over three centuries ago. It also keeps them ahead of impersonations, as these extracts will show:

There is . . . great use of ambitious men in being screens to princes in matters of danger and envy, for no man will take that part, except he be like a seeded dove, that mounts and mounts because he cannot see about him.

(*Of Ambition*)

He that builds a fair house upon an ill seat, committeth himself to prison.

(*Of Building*)

1. From *Of Friendship*, p. 142 below. Page numbers for the *Essays* refer to the present edition.

. . . number itself in armies importeth not much where the people is of weak courage; for (as Virgil saith) *It never troubles a wolf how many the sheep be.*

(Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates)

The fact is that the writing in the *Essays* took Bacon almost thirty years to perfect, and that by the time he had finished with it (in 1625) it was one of the major achievements in prose to have come out of the Elizabethan academies and courts of law. Contemporary prose writers like Hooker and Nashe and Donne owed much to the universities and the inns of court, but with Bacon the debt was different and more profound, for he went directly to the dying heart of scholasticism, and there made something come alive after centuries of dreariness. Against everything one might expect, Bacon's style was born of Tudor school text-books, the university curriculum and the notebooks of keen young lawyers. Perhaps this is what makes it so vulnerable to mimicry,² for its own history is one of study, memorizing and imitation. If Cicero wrote a line thus, or thus, it was for the Elizabethan undergraduate to break down its grammatical structure, to point to its tropes, to memorize its arrangement, and to frame his own Latin accordingly. So with the law student and pronouncements from the Bench. It is in all these things that we must seek the origins of the *Essays*; that is, in the mental world which Bacon inherited from medieval book learning, disputation and jurisprudence. Only by reading into this world can we grasp just how much he had to do to arrive at that facility of writing which looks so effortless now.

1

The shape of a man's mind, so Bacon thought, either ventilated or sucked in knowledge. It could make him either full or empty, gassy or rarified. It could be inflated like a balloon, with vain opinions and nonsense, or draw in discoveries from nature, and from gullible chatterers: 'if a man be thought secret, it inviteth discovery, as the more close air sucketh in the more open'.³ But if ever there was a

2. As Swift in particular discovered, and relished. There is a discussion of Swift's parodies of Bacon, and his dislike of him, in Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 240-45.

3. *Of Simulation and Dissimulation*, p. 77.

mind which could open and shut, and change shape, it was Bacon's own. When he was most closed (if we wish to read him in Karl Popper's terms), Bacon was an enemy, apprentice among many masters, of the Open Society: yet when fully dilated, no mind could have been freer than his. In one place he wanted the arts repressed;⁴ in another, music and painting were to be especially honoured in his ideal state.

But how could he change the shape of other men's minds, that was the question for Bacon. To hand, he had a tradition of rhetoric over two thousand years old, and a rhetoric which, in its play against logic, might be able to persuade men to think aright. The open palm or the clenched fist, that was how the ancients had characterized the difference between rhetoric, manipulating men into truth, and logic, thumping them into it. The open, welcoming hand of persuasion, or the bunched knuckles of philosophical assertion.⁵ Bacon was to try them both, and together, with varying success. In 1597, for example, along with the first versions of the *Essays*, he published a series of hackneyed propositions, subjects for school debate, which allowed him to gut and tear at the commonplaces, or deceits, or colours, of the mind. Sometimes the anatomy was a slow and bloody business. In one instance the colour put forward was that 'what consists of many divisible parts is greater than that which consists of few, because viewing things part by part makes them seem greater. Further, a lot of things put together give the impression of magnitude, but even more so if there is no order to their arrangement,

4. See *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), II.10.13. In 1623, in the corresponding passage in the Latin translation (*De Augmentis Scientiarum*, IV.2), Bacon still wants some of the arts suppressed, but he concedes that music and painting are virtuous pleasures for the ear and eye, and he distinguishes these from the voluptuary arts like cooking, and making perfumes and 'stimulants of lust' (*Works*, IV.395).

5. It appears, writes Bacon, 'that logic differeth from rhetoric, not only as the fist from the palm, the one close, the other at large; but much more in this, that logic handleth reason exact and in truth, and rhetoric handleth it as it is planted in popular opinions and manners. And therefore Aristotle doth wisely place rhetoric as between logic on the one side, and moral or civil knowledge on the other, as participating of both: for the proofs and demonstrations of logic are toward all men indifferent and the same; but the proofs and persuasions of rhetoric ought to differ according to the auditors' (*Advancement of Learning*, II.18.4). A good place to begin studying rhetoric (classical, Renaissance, and modern) is the brief introduction by Peter Dixon in the *Critical Idiom* series. There is a learned book on its relationship with logic in Bacon's day by W. S. Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700*, Princeton, 1956 (see especially pp. 364-75). See also note 27, p. 34 below.

because the mind cannot take them all in at the same time'.⁶ This is a scholastic enough beginning, but then follow the reasons why an average schoolboy with poor eyesight (and no one else, surely) might find it credible:

This colour seemeth palpable, for it is not plurality of parts without majority of parts that maketh the total greater; yet nevertheless it often carries the mind away; yea it deceiveth the sense; as it seemeth to the eye a shorter distance of way if it be all dead and continued, than if it have trees or buildings or any other marks whereby the eye may divide it. So when a great monied man hath divided his chests and coins and bags, he seemeth to himself richer than he was, and therefore a way to amplify anything is to break it and to make an anatomy of it in several parts and to examine it according to several circumstances.

This is an educative prose for dunces, written on the principle of an abacus, with clauses on wires, but nevertheless there are some real things in it. They become more evident in the *elenchus*, or refutation of the *colour*, even though the writing sheds none of its excess weight of verbs and conjunctions. The *colour* deceives, so we are told, if

the mind of him that is to be persuaded do of itself over-conceive or prejudice of the greatness of anything; for then the breaking of it will make it seem less, because it maketh it appear more according to the truth: and therefore if a man be in sickness or pain, the time will seem longer without a clock or hour-glass than with it; for the mind doth value every moment, and then the hour doth rather sum up the moments than divide the day. So in a dead plain the way seemeth the longer, because the eye hath preconceived it shorter than the truth, and the frustrating of that maketh it seem longer than the truth.

Clearly, with a style like this, *anything* will seem longer than the truth, especially the time spent reading through its repetitions. At every instant in this unreal Aristotelian domain, the clauses look as though they are about to accumulate to a halt, and yet somehow the writing manages to wind itself up and begin again. Appropriately enough, there is a clock in Bacon's mind here, as if he were timing our irritation with the prose, or seeing how long he could stay on his feet, like a barrister in front of the judge, or a teacher in front of his pupils. The idiom seems unalterable, even when (as in the next set

6. A translation of the proposition, which is in Latin. This, and the English text which responds to it, are No. 5 in the *Colours of Good and Evil* (Works, VII.81-4).