

Francis  
BACON

# The Essays



*Essential Classics of Liberal Studies*



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Central Compilation & Translation Press

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# CONTENTS

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THE LIFE OF FRANCIS BACON.....	1
PROLOGUE.....	16
PREFACE .....	54
OF TRUTH.....	55
OF DEATH.....	58
OF UNITY IN RELIGION .....	60
OF REVENGE.....	66
OF ADVERSITY .....	68
OF SIMULATION AND DISSIMULATION.....	70
OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN.....	74
OF MARRIAGE AND SINGLE LIFE .....	76
OF ENVY.....	79
OF LOVE.....	85
OF GREAT PLACE .....	88
OF BOLDNESS.....	92
OF GOODNESS AND GOODNESS OF NATURE.....	94
OF NOBILITY.....	97



OF SEDITIONS AND TROUBLES .....	99
OF ATHEISM.....	107
OF SUPERSTITION .....	111
OF TRAVEL .....	113
OF EMPIRE.....	116
OF COUNSEL.....	122
OF DELAYS .....	128
OF CUNNING .....	130
OF WISDOM FOR A MAN'S SELF.....	135
OF INNOVATIONS .....	137
OF DISPATCH.....	139
OF SEEMING WISE .....	142
OF FRIENDSHIP.....	144
OF EXPENSE.....	152
OF THE TRUE GREATNESS OF KINGDOMS AND ESTATES .....	154
OF REGIMENT OF HEALTH .....	165
OF SUSPICION .....	168
OF DISCOURSE.....	170
OF PLANTATIONS .....	173
OF RICHES .....	177
OF PROPHECIES.....	181
OF AMBITION .....	185
OF MASQUES AND TRIUMPHS .....	188
OF NATURE IN MEN.....	190
OF CUSTOM AND EDUCATION .....	192
OF FORTUNE.....	195
OF USURY .....	197
OF YOUTH AND AGE .....	202

OF BEAUTY.....	205
OF DEFORMITY .....	207
OF BUILDING.....	209
OF GARDENS.....	214
OF NEGOTIATING.....	222
OF FOLLOWERS AND FRIENDS.....	224
OF SUITORS.....	226
OF STUDIES .....	229
OF FACTION.....	231
OF CEREMONIES AND RESPECT .....	233
OF PRAISE.....	235
OF VAIN-GLORY .....	237
OF HONOR AND REPUTATION.....	239
OF JUDICATURE.....	242
OF ANGER .....	247
OF VICISSITUDE OF THINGS.....	250
OF FAME.....	256
APPENDIXES.....	259
I A GLOSSARY OF ARCHAIC WORDS AND PHRASES .....	260
II BACON TIME LINE .....	265



# THE LIFE OF FRANCIS BACON

*By William Rawley, D.D.*  
(1657)

**F**rancis Bacon, the glory of his age and nation, the adorning and ornament of learning, was born in York House, or York Place, in the Strand, on the two and twentieth day of January, in the year of our Lord 1560. His father was that famous counsellor to Queen Elizabeth, the second prop of the kingdom in his time, Sir Nicholas Bacon, knight, lord-keeper of the great seal of England; a lord of known prudence, sufficiency, moderation, and integrity. His mother was Anne, one of the daughters of Sir Anthony Cook; unto whom the erudition of King Edward the Sixth had been committed; a choice lady, and eminent for piety, virtue, and learning; being exquisitely skilled, for a woman, in the Greek and Latin tongues. These being the parents, you may easily imagine what the issue was like to be; having had whatsoever nature or breeding could put into him.

His first and childish years were not without some mark of eminency; at which time he was endued with that pregnancy and towardness of wit, as they were presages of that deep and universal apprehension which was manifest in him afterward; and caused him to be taken notice of by several persons of



worth and place, and especially by the queen; who (as I have been informed) delighted much then to confer with him, and to prove him with questions; unto whom he delivered himself with that gravity and maturity above his years, that Her majesty would often term him, *The Young Lord-keeper*. Being asked by the queen how old he was, he answered with much discretion, being then but a boy, That he was two years younger than Her Majesty's happy reign; with which answer the queen was much taken.

At the ordinary years of ripeness for the university, or rather something earlier, he was sent by his father to Trinity College, in Cambridge, to be educated and bred under the tuition of Doctor John White-gift, then master of the college; afterwards the renowned archbishop of Canterbury; a prelate of the first magnitude for sanctity, learning, patience, and humility; under whom he was observed to have been more than an ordinary proficient in the several arts and sciences. Whilst he was commorant in the university, about sixteen years of age, (as his lordship hath been pleased to impart unto myself), he first fell into the dislike of the philosophy of Aristotle; not for the worthlessness of the author, to whom he would ever ascribe all high attributes, but for the unfruitfulness of the way; being a philosophy (as his lordship used to say) only strong for disputations and contentions, but barren of the production of works for the benefit of the life of man; in which mind he continued to his dying day.

After he had passed the circle of the liberal arts, his father thought fit to frame and mould him for the arts of state; and for that end sent him over into France with Sir Amyas Paulet then employed ambassador lieger into France; by whom he





was after a while held fit to be entrusted with some message or advertisement to the queen; which having performed with great approbation, he returned back into France again, with intention to continue for some years there. In his absence in France his father the lord-keeper died, having collected (as I have heard of knowing persons) a considerable sum of money, which he had separated, with intention to have made a competent purchase of land for the livelihood of this his youngest son (who was only unprovided for; and though he was the youngest in years, yet he was not the lowest in his father's affection); but the said purchase being unaccomplished at his father's death, there came no greater share to him than his single part and portion of the money dividable amongst five brethren; by which means he lived in some straits and necessities in his younger years. For as for that pleasant site and manor of Gorhambury, he came not to it till many years after, by the death of his dearest brother, Mr. Anthony Bacon, a gentleman equal to him in height of wit, though inferior to him in the endowments of learning and knowledge; unto whom he was most nearly conjoined in affection, they two being the sole male issue of a second venter.

Being returned from travel, he applied himself to the study of the common law, which he took upon him to be his profession; in which he obtained to great excellency, though he made that (as himself said) but as an accessory, and not his principal study. He wrote several tractates upon that subject: wherein, though some great masters of the law did out-go him in bulk, and particularities of cases, yet in the science of the grounds and mysteries of the law he was exceeded by none. In this way he was after awhile sworn of the queen's council learned, extraordinary; a grace (if I err not) scarce known before. He



seated himself, for the commodity of his studies and practice, amongst the Honourable Society of Gray's-Inn, of which house he was a member; where he erected that elegant pile or structure commonly known by the name of The Lord Bacon's Lodgings, which he inhabited by turns the most part of his life (some few years only excepted) unto his dying day. In which house he carried himself with such sweetness, comity, and generosity, that he was much revered and beloved by the readers and gentlemen of the house.

Notwithstanding that he professed the law for his livelihood and subsistence, yet his heart and affection was more carried after the affairs and places of estate; for which, if the majesty royal then had been pleased, he was most fit. In his younger years he studied the service and fortunes (as they call them) of that noble but unfortunate earl, the Earl of Essex; unto whom he was, in a sort, a private and free counsellor, and gave him safe and honourable advice, till in the end the earl inclined too much to the violent and precipitate counsel of others his adherents and followers; which was his fate and ruin.

His birth and other capacities qualified him above others of his profession to have ordinary accesses at court, and to come frequently into the queen's eye, who would often grace him with private and free communication, not only about matters of his profession or business in law, but also about the arduous affairs of estate; from whom she received from time to time great satisfaction. Nevertheless, though she cheered him much with the bounty of her countenance, yet she never cheered him with the bounty of her hand; having never conferred upon him any ordinary place or means of honour or profit, save only one dry reversion of the Register's Office in the Star Chamber, worth



about 1600*l.* per annum, for which he waited in expectation either fully or near twenty years; of which his lordship would say in Queen Elizabeth's time, That it was like another man's ground buttalling upon his house, which might mend his prospect, but it did not fill his barn; (nevertheless, in the time of King James it fell unto him); which might be imputed, not so much to Her Majesty's averseness and disaffection towards him, as to the arts and policy of a great statesman then, who laboured by all industrious and secret means to suppress and keep him down; lest, if he had risen, he might have obscured his glory.

But though he stood long at a stay in the days of his mistress Queen Elizabeth, yet after the change, and coming in of his new master King James, he made a great progress; by whom he was much comforted in places of trust, honour, and revenue. I have seen a letter of his lordship's to King James, wherein he makes acknowledgment, That he was that master to him, that had raised and advanced him nine times; thrice in dignity, and six times in office. His offices (as I conceive) were Counsel Learned Extraordinary to His Majesty, as he had been to Queen Elizabeth; King's Solicitor-General; His Majesty's Attorney-General; Counsellor of Estate, being yet but Attorney; Lord-Keeper of the Great Seal of England; lastly, Lord Chancellor; which two last places, though they be the same in authority and power, yet they differ in patent, height, and favour of the prince; since whose time none of his successors, until this present honourable lord, did ever bear the title of Lord Chancellor. His dignities were first Knight, then Baron of Verulam; lastly, Viscount St. Alban; besides other good gifts and bounties of the hand which His Majesty gave him, both out



of the Broad Seal and out of the Alienation Office, to the value in both of eighteen hundred pounds per annum; which, with his manor of Gorhambury, and other lands and possessions near thereunto adjoining, amounting to a third part more, he retained to his dying day.

Towards his rising years, not before, he entered into a married estate, and took to wife Alice, one of the daughters and coheirs of Benedict Baraham, Esquire and Alderman of London; with whom he received a sufficiently ample and liberal portion in marriage. Children he had none; which, though they be the means to perpetuate our names after our deaths, yet he had other issues to perpetuate his name, the issues of his brain; in which he was ever happy and admired, as Jupiter was in the production of Pallas (Athena). Neither did the want of children detract from his good usage of his consort during the inter-marriage, whom he prosecuted with much conjugal love and respect, with many rich gifts and endowments, besides a robe of honour which he invested her withal; which she wore unto her dying day, being twenty years and more after his death.

The last five years of his life, being withdrawn from civil affairs and from an active life, he employed wholly in contemplation and studies—a thing whereof his lordship would often speak during his active life, as if he affected to die in the shadow and not in the light; which also may be found in several passages of his works. In which time he composed the greatest part of his books and writings, both in English and Latin, which I will enumerate (as near as I can) in the just order wherein they were written: *The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh; Abcedarium Naturae, or a Metaphysical piece* which is lost; *Historia*



*Ventorum; Historia Vitae et Mortis; Historia Densi et Rari*, not yet printed; *Historia Gravis et Levis*, which is also lost; a *Discourse of a War with Spain*; a *Dialogue touching an Holy War*; the *Fable of the New Atlantis*; a *Preface to a Digest of the Laws of England*; the beginning of the *History of the Reign of King Henry the Eighth*; *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, or the *Advancement of Learning*, put into Latin, with several enrichments and enlargements; *Counsels Civil and Moral*, or his book of *Essays*, likewise enriched and enlarged; the conversion of certain *Psalms* into English Verse; the Translation into Latin of the *History of King Henry the Seventh*, of the *Counsels Civil and Moral*, of the *Dialogue of the Holy War*, of the *Fable of the New Atlantis*, for the benefit of other nations; his revising of his book *De Sapientia Veterum*; *Inquisitio de Magnete*; *Topica Inquisitionis de Luce et Lumine*; both these not yet printed; lastly, *Sylva Sylvarum*, or *The Natural History*.

These were the fruits and productions of his last five years. His lordship also designed, upon the motion and invitation of his late majesty, to have written the reign of King Henry the Eighth; but that work perished in the designation merely, God not lending him life to proceed farther upon it than only in one morning's work; whereof there is extant an *ex ungue leonem*, already printed in his lordship's *Miscellany Works*.

There is a commemoration due as well to his abilities and virtues as to the course of his life. Those abilities which commonly go single in other men, though of prime and observable parts, were all conjoined and met in him. Those are, sharpness of wit, memory, judgment, and elocution. For the former three his books do abundantly speak them; which with what sufficiency he wrote, let the world judge; but with what celerity he wrote them, I can best testify. But for the fourth, his



elocution, I will only set down what I heard Sir Walter Raleigh once speak of him by way of comparison (whose judgment may well be trusted), That the Earl of Salisbury was an excellent speaker, but no good penman; that the Earl of Northampton (the Lord Henry Howard) was an excellent penman, but no good speaker; but that Sir Francis Bacon was eminent in both.

I have been induced to think, that if there were a beam of knowledge derived from God upon any man in these modern times, it was upon him. For though he was a great reader of books, yet he had not his knowledge from books, but from some grounds and notions from within himself; which, notwithstanding, he vented with great caution and circumspection. His book of *Instauratio Magna* (which in his own account was the chiefest of his works) was no slight imagination of fancy of his brain, but a settled and concocted notion, the production of many years' labour and travel. I myself have seen at the least twelve copies of the Instauration, revised year by year one after another, and every year altered and amended in the frame thereof, till at last it came to that model in which it was committed to the press; as many living creatures to lick their young ones, till they bring them to their strength of limbs.

In the composing of his books he did rather drive at a masculine and clear expression than at any fineness or affectation of phrases, and would often ask if the meaning were expressed plainly enough, as being one that accounted words to be but subservient or ministerial to matter, and not the principal. And if his style were polite, it was because he would do no otherwise. Neither was he given to any light conceits, or descanting upon words, but did ever purposely and industriously avoid them; for he held such things to be



but digressions or diversions from the scope intended, and to derogate from the weight and dignity of the style.

He was no plodder upon books; though he read much, and that with great judgment, and rejection of impertinences incident to many authors; for he would ever interlace a moderate relaxation of his mind with his studies, as walking, or taking the air abroad in his coach, or some other befitting recreation; and yet he would lose no time, inasmuch as upon his first and immediate return he would fall to reading again, and so suffer no moment of time to slip from him without some present improvement.

His meals were refectations of the ear as well as of the stomach, like the *Noctes Atticae*, or *Convivia Deipno-sophistarum*, wherein a man might be refreshed in his mind and understanding no less than in his body. And I have known some, of no mean parts, that have professed to make use of their notebooks when they have risen from his table. In which conversations, and otherwise, he was no dashing man, as some men are, but ever a countenancer and fosterer of another man's parts. Neither was he one that would appropriate the speech wholly to himself, on delight to outvie others, but leave a liberty to the co-assessors to take their turns. Wherein he would draw a man on and allure him to speak upon such a subject, as wherein he was peculiarly skilful, and would delight to speak. And for himself, he contemned no man's observations, but would light his torch at every man's candle.

His opinions and assertions were for the most part binding, and not contradicted by any; rather like oracles than discourses; which may be imputed either to the well weighing of his sentence by the scales of truth and reason, or else to the



reverence and estimation wherein he was commonly had, that no man would contest with him; so that there was no argumentation, or pro and con (as they term it), at his table; or of there chanced to be any, it was carried with much submission and moderation.

I have often observed, and so have other men of great account, that if he had occasion to repeat another man's words after him, he had an use and faculty to dress them in better vestments and apparel than they had before; so that the author should find his own speech much amended, and yet the substance of it still retained; as if it had been natural to him to use good forms, as Ovid spake of his faculty of versifying, "*Et quod tentabam scribere, versus erat.*"

When his office called him, as he was of the king's council learned, to charge any offenders, either in criminals or capitals, he was never of an insulting and domineering nature over them, but always tender-hearted, and carrying himself decently towards the parties (though it was his duty to charge them home), but yet as one that looked upon the example with the eye of severity, but upon the person with the eye of pity and compassion. And in civil business, as he was counsellor of estate, he had the best way of advising, not engaging his master in any precipitate or grievous courses, but in moderate and fair proceedings, the king whom he served giving him this testimony, That he ever dealt in business *sauvibus modis*; which was the way that was most according to his own heart.

Neither was he in his time less gracious with the subject than with his sovereign. He was ever acceptable to the House of Commons when he was a member thereof. Being the king's attorney, and chosen to a place in parliament, he was





allowed and dispensed with to sit in the House; which was not permitted to other attorneys.

And as he was a good servant to his master, being never in nineteen years' service (as himself averred) rebuked by the king for anything relating to His Majesty, so he was a good master to his servants, and rewarded their long attendance with good places freely when they fell into his power; which was the cause that so many young gentlemen of blood and quality sought to list themselves in his retinue. And if he were abused by any of them in their places, it was only the error of the goodness of his nature, but the badges of their indiscretions and intemperances.

This lord was religious: for though the world be apt to suspect and prejudge great wits and politics to have somewhat of the atheist, yet he was conversant with God, as appeareth by several passages throughout the whole of his writings. Otherwise he should have crossed his own principles, which were, That a little philosophy maketh men apt to forget God, as attributing too much to second causes; but depth of philosophy bringeth a man back to God again. Now I am sure there is no man that will deny him, or account otherwise of him, but to have him been a deep philosopher. And not only so; but he was able to render a reason of the hope which was in him, which that writing of his of the Confession of the Faith doth abundantly testify. He repaired frequently, when his health would permit him, to the service of the church, to hear sermons, to the administration of the sacrament of the blessed body and blood of Christ; and died in the true faith, established in the church of England.

This is most true—he was free from malice, which (as he said himself) he never bred nor fed. He was no revenger of injuries; which if he had minded, he had both opportunity and place

