

# The Advancement of Francis Bacon

**Philosophical Studies c.1611–c.1619**  
by Francis Bacon,  
edited by Graham Rees.  
Clarendon Press/Oxford University  
Press, 503 pp., \$140.00

**Hostage to Fortune:  
The Troubled Life of Francis Bacon**  
by Lisa Jardine and Alan Stewart.  
Hill and Wang, 637 pp., \$35.00

**Francis Bacon: The History  
of a Character Assassination**  
by Nieves Mathews.  
Yale University Press, 592 pp., \$52.00

**Francis Bacon: History,  
Politics and Science, 1561–1626**  
by B. H. G. Wormald.  
Cambridge University Press,  
421 pp., \$74.95

**Francis Bacon**  
by Perez Zagorin.  
Princeton University Press,  
286 pp., \$35.00<sup>1</sup>

Quentin Skinner

## 1.

Francis Bacon has always been given a leading part to play in the grand narratives about the origins of modern thought. The philosophers of the Enlightenment made him a hero of their story about the triumph of reason over superstition and ignorance. Immanuel Kant, for example, hails him in the preface to *The Critique of Pure Reason* as one of the revolutionary thinkers who first enabled the study of nature “to enter upon the highway of science.” More recently, however, Bacon has been recast in the role of arch villain. Both Heidegger and the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School have held him responsible more than anyone for the catastrophic error of identifying science with technology. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Bacon’s confusion has condemned us to living in a mechanized world in which nature has been made an object of domination and “no obstacles” have been left to “compliance with the world’s rulers” and “the enslavement of men.”

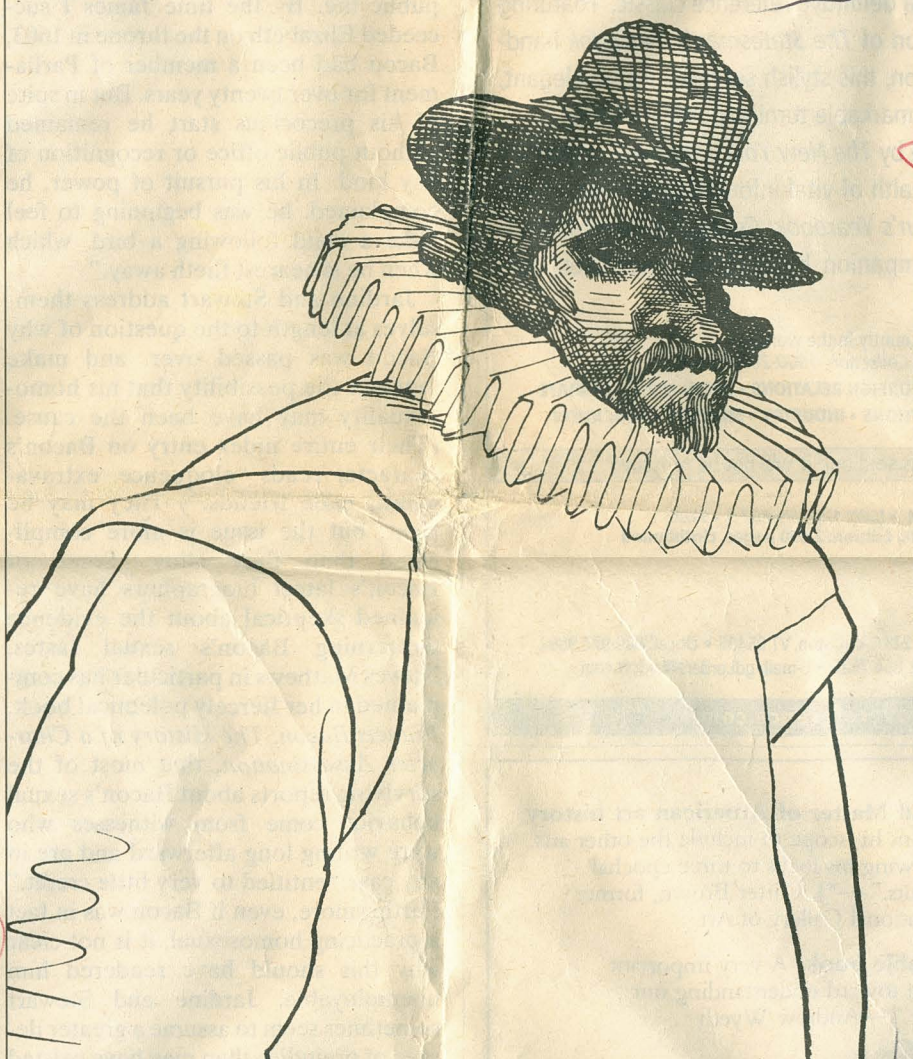
Francis Bacon was born in 1561 into the highest ranks of the English political elite. His uncle, Lord Burghley, was Queen Elizabeth I’s chief counselor; his father, Sir Nicholas Bacon, was Lord Keeper of the Great Seal for nearly twenty years. The young Bacon proved startlingly precocious, and was sent at the tender age of twelve to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he received his tuition from the master of the college, John Whitgift. One of the main features of the curriculum was the study of Aristotelian logic, but Bacon soon learned to distrust ancient learning and set himself to think anew about the methodology of the sciences. By 1592 we find him telling Lord Burghley in a famous letter that he has been meditating “vast contemplative ends” and that “I have taken all knowledge to be my province.”

No less startling was the precocity with which Bacon set himself to emulate his father’s career in public life. As early as 1576 he joined the embassy to France and stayed in Paris for three

formative years. Lisa Jardine and Alan Stewart in their impressive new biography, *Hostage to Fortune*, have uncovered fresh evidence that, within a year of his arrival, Bacon was entrusted with secret letters to carry to Elizabeth’s court, and was able to hand them over in the presence of the Queen. He was just sixteen years old at the time. Back in England in 1579, Bacon gained election to the House of Commons and duly sat in the Parliament of 1581. By 1584 he was ready to issue his first political tract, a letter of advice to the Queen in which—with an

ing, Bacon goes on to explain how its dignity has been compromised by three prevailing vices. The first he associates with the humanist literary culture of the Renaissance, whose exponents pay far too much attention to delicacies of style and not enough to “weight of matter” and “soundness of argument.” The second vice is that of Aristotle and his followers in the universities, who spin useless webs of invented learning without any regard for the world of experience. The last and most serious vice is that of the credulous, who accept everything on au-

Francis Bacon



interesting touch of aggression—he questioned the policy of persecuting the Puritans recently initiated by the new Archbishop of Canterbury, his former teacher John Whitgift. Before the end of the decade he made another skillful move when he joined the entourage of the Earl of Essex, the Queen’s new favorite after the death of the Earl of Leicester. Here too Jardine and Stewart have new evidence to report, this time about the extent to which Bacon’s work for Essex centered on the gathering of secret foreign intelligence. So successful were Bacon’s efforts that, by June 1588, we already find him writing confidently about his prospects of gaining some official post.

Throughout these hectic years Bacon somehow found time to keep up with his philosophical and scientific pursuits. The first outcome was *The Advancement of Learning*, originally published in 1605 and subsequently reissued in a much-extended Latin form in 1623.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with an eloquent tribute to the dignity of learn-

<sup>2</sup>An excellent new edition is contained in *Francis Bacon*, edited by Brian Vickers, Oxford Authors series (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 120–299.

thority without making observations for themselves or reflecting critically on what they have observed.

Bacon extended and deepened this critique in his *New Organon*, on which he worked for many years before finally publishing it in a fragmentary form in 1620. His secretary later declared that he had seen the text in a dozen different drafts. As Perez Zagorin has rightly emphasized in his valuable new survey of Bacon’s thought, the renewed assault in Part I of the *New Organon* on the “Idols” or “false notions” that hinder the progress of knowledge is Bacon’s most original contribution to the philosophy of the sciences. First Bacon examines what he calls the Idols of the Tribe, the ineradicable limitations of human intelligence and perceptual capacity that lead us to misinterpret the world. Next he turns to the Idols of the Cave, by which he means the individual defects of education and prejudice that further “refract and discolour the light of nature.” He then considers the Idols of the Marketplace, his way of referring to the disorienting power of language to “overrule the understanding” and give rise to “empty controversies and idle fancies.” He ends with the Idols of the Theatre, at which point

he makes clear his radical skepticism about all existing systems of knowledge. Taken together, he concludes, these systems provide us with nothing better than “so many stage plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion.”

If these are the problems, what is the solution? Bacon’s immensely ambitious answer is already implicit in the title of his treatise. Given that Aristotle’s logical writings were generally known as the *Organon*, to speak of a new *Organon* was to imply that nothing less than a reformed system of logic will be needed if the sciences are to advance. This is the proposal that Bacon duly takes up in Part II of the *New Organon*, in which he lays out a methodology for the sciences designed to overcome or at least allow for all the deficiencies of human understanding he has isolated.

Bacon’s system takes the form of what he calls a method of “true induction” derived from “natural and experimental histories.” When he speaks of histories in this context, what he has in mind is that the initial task of the scientist, like that of the historian, should be to assemble as much evidence as possible about some given subject matter with a minimum of “premature speculation” about its significance. The next and crucial step must then be to exclude irrelevant information (although Bacon is far from lucid on how this can be done) and thereby build up a positive picture of the nature or “form” of the phenomenon under investigation. The eventual aim is to use this process of induction to arrive at a number of axioms or generalizations about the causes of the given phenomenon and its expected behavior.

Bacon’s attempt to articulate a new scientific method forms the heart of his intellectual enterprise. This is a claim worth underlining, if only because of a recent tendency among commentators to argue that Bacon was at least as much concerned with “policy”—that is, with political and moral questions—as with science. B. H. G. Wormald, for example, has made it the thesis of his important study that Bacon had “two programs” for the reconstruction of knowledge, and that his project of writing civil as well as natural histories served to unify his moral and scientific thought. But as Zagorin has correctly pointed out, Bacon himself always placed his main emphasis on the reformation of the sciences, and above all on the need to make them “operative,” capable of producing results of benefit to human life.

It must be admitted, however, that Bacon made little progress with what he himself described as this “Great Instauration.” After publishing *The Advancement of Learning* he devoted a surprising amount of his time to the purely speculative aspects of his philosophy, concentrating on such issues as celestial motion, vital spirits, and the relations between science and religion. The various sketches he wrote have now been superbly edited by Graham Rees, and they turn out to contain much fascinating information about the sources of Bacon’s thought. But it is evident that Bacon himself remained unsatisfied, and none of this material was published or even completed by the time of his death. Nor did he make much better progress with the grandiose project outlined in the

<sup>1</sup>To be published in paperback in November 1999.

LIMITED EDITION OF A CLASSIC

## The Statesman's Yearbook: Centenary Collection, 1900-2000

Edited by BARRY TURNER

OVER THE LAST CENTURY, the annual publication of *The Statesman's Yearbook* has charted the rise and fall of nations, the emergence of new political, economic, and social trends, and the sweeping technological changes that have transformed our world.

This deluxe boxed set brings into sharp focus the twentieth-century at its beginning and its end, through the perspective of a definitive reference classic. Featuring a limited edition facsimile of the 1900 Edition of *The Statesman's Yearbook* handsomely boxed with a copy of the 2000 Edition, this stylish set provides an elegant, precise, and riveting global memoir at this remarkable turning point in history.

Hailed as an "all you need to know" guide by *The New York Times* and praised by *American Reference Books Annual* as "a wealth of vital information in easy-to-use format," this limited edition of *The Statesman's Yearbook: Centenary Collection* will be welcomed as the ideal millennium companion by readers, researchers and students everywhere.

With information on every country in the world,  
*The Statesman's Yearbook Centenary Collection, 1900-2000* covers:  
ECONOMICS • POLITICS • FINANCE • AGRICULTURE • FOREIGN RELATIONS • POPULATION • CLIMATE  
GOVERNMENT • RELIGION • ENERGY • COMMUNICATIONS • INDUSTRY • MILITARY • EDUCATION

ORDER NOW—Once the limited edition is sold out, it will not be re-issued.

November 1999 • 2-volume boxed set • ISBN 1-56159-262-5 • \$200  
1900 Edition: 1,350 pages, clothbound • 2000 Edition: 2,050 pages, clothbound

**GROVE'S**  
DICTIONARIES

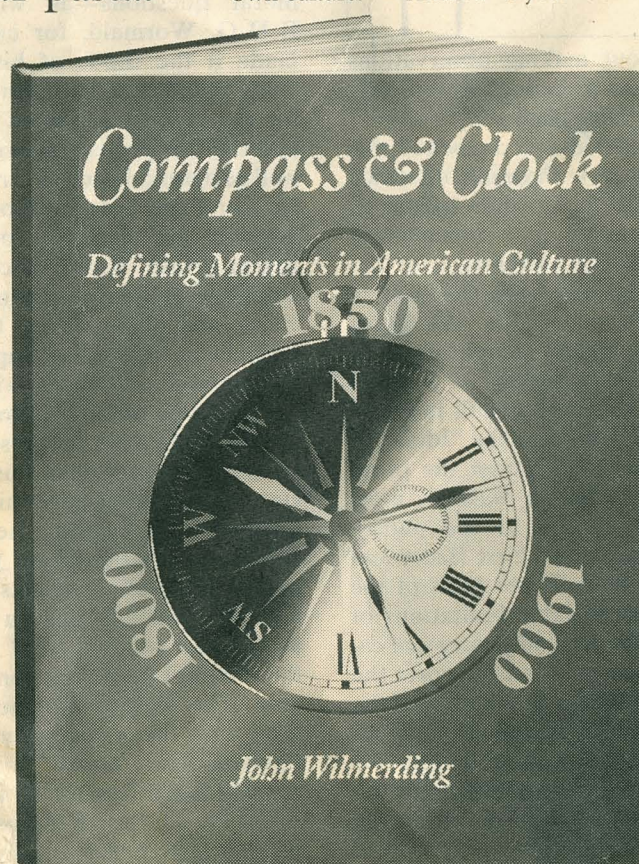
PO Box 2244, Williston, VT 05495 • Or call 800.972.9892  
Fax: 802.864.7626 • E-mail: gdi.orders@aidcvt.com

Visit our website: [www.groverefence.com](http://www.groverefence.com)

"A brilliant,  
innovative,  
magisterial set  
of insights into  
our past..."

"This Grand Master of American art history here broadens his scope to include the other arts, while narrowing his focus to three epochal turning points."—J. Carter Brown, former director, National Gallery of Art

"A remarkable book. A very important contribution toward understanding our own culture."—Andrew Wyeth



With 90 illustrations • Available wherever books are sold

**ABRAMS**

100 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, N. Y. 10011 • [www.abramsbooks.com](http://www.abramsbooks.com)

*New Organon*. The finished work was designed to be in six parts, of which the third was meant to include the various natural histories which, as Bacon himself had stressed, formed the basis of his entire system. He published a preface in which he listed 130 histories that urgently needed to be written, but he only managed to complete three of them, and the other sections of the *Organon* were never written at all.

## 2.

If Bacon felt frustrated by these failures, he was even more vocally and resentfully frustrated by his failure to achieve his expected advancement in public life. By the time James I succeeded Elizabeth on the throne in 1603, Bacon had been a member of Parliament for over twenty years. But in spite of his precocious start he remained without public office or recognition of any kind. In his pursuit of power, he complained, he was beginning to feel "like a child following a bird, which when he is nearest flieth away."

Jardine and Stewart address themselves at length to the question of why Bacon was passed over, and make much of the possibility that his homosexuality may have been the cause. (Their entire index entry on Bacon's character reads "eloquence, extravagance, male friends.") They may be right, but the issue is more complicated than they allow. Some of Bacon's latest biographers have remained skeptical about the evidence concerning Bacon's sexual tastes. Nieves Mathews in particular has complained in her fiercely polemical book, *Francis Bacon: The History of a Character Assassination*, that most of the surviving reports about Bacon's sexual behavior come from witnesses who were writing long afterward and are in any case "entitled to very little credit." Furthermore, even if Bacon was in fact a practicing homosexual, it is not clear why this should have rendered him unemployable. Jardine and Stewart sometimes seem to assume a greater degree of prejudice than may have existed in the circles in which Bacon moved.

On the basic question of Bacon's sexual orientation, however, Jardine and Stewart are almost certainly correct. It is true that they accept as evidence a number of anecdotes that scarcely seem to bear the sexual connotations they place on them. But they rightly point out that Bacon's preferences were notorious at the time. His fellow member of Parliament Sir Simonds D'Ewes was only one of several who commented on his "horrible and secret sin of sodomy." To this Jardine and Stewart interestingly add that the subsequent concealment of the facts appears to have been owing in part to the prudish and hagiographic traditions of later scholarship. John Aubrey's near-contemporary biography provides a good example. Although Aubrey (generally reliable in matters of gossip) roundly informs us that Bacon "was a pederast," he is careful to leave the word in the decent obscurity of the original Greek. A clergyman who preached against Bacon in 1619 seems to have suffered a comparable form of censorship. According to the published transcript of his sermon, what he complained about was the scandal of Bacon's Latinities. But Jardine and Stewart have gone back to

the original document, and are able to inform us in one of their best scholarly asides that what it says is not "Latinities" but "catamites."

A more obvious reason for Bacon's failure to gain preferment was that his early alliance with the glamorous but temperamental Earl of Essex rapidly turned into a liability. Sent to Ireland to crush Tyrone's rebellion in 1599, Essex bungled the campaign, returned to England without permission, and was placed under house arrest. Failing to regain Elizabeth's favor, he hatched a plot to seize the Queen and overthrow the court, at which point he was seized himself and executed for high treason within the month. Bacon was nearly brought down by his fall, and only managed to rescue his own position by agreeing to act as one of Essex's prosecutors at his trial. Nieves Mathews has shown that Bacon made some efforts to save Essex before turning against him, but Bacon's conduct was seen as basely ungrateful at the time, and his close association with the losing faction at court undoubtedly cost him any chance of preferment in the closing years of Elizabeth's reign.

Bacon must have hoped for better things after the accession of James I in 1603, but he still found his aspirations thwarted by powerful enemies. The most implacable of these was his cousin, Robert Cecil, who had succeeded his father, Lord Burghley, as treasurer in 1598. Cecil appears to have harbored a genuine hatred for Bacon, and certainly helped to prevent his appointment as attorney general when the post fell vacant in 1593 and again in 1607. Scarcely less serious was Bacon's quarrel with Sir Edward Coke, perhaps the greatest common lawyer of the age. A personal rivalry exacerbated their antagonism, for when Burghley's kinsman Sir William Hatton died in 1597, leaving a rich young widow, Bacon aspired to relieve his chronic insolvency by marrying her. Not only did he find himself spurned, but two years later Lady Hatton chose to marry Sir Edward Coke. By then the two men were locked in professional enmity, for Coke had made it brutally clear that he regarded Bacon as unsuitable for any kind of legal appointment, and had joined with the Cecils to make sure that his promotion was blocked.

It looks as if the enmity of Robert Cecil may have been the decisive factor, for as soon as he died in 1612 Bacon suddenly found it possible to climb the greasy pole. In 1613 he was at last rewarded with the attorney generalship for which he had been petitioning since the early 1590s. Acting in that role, he had the satisfaction of helping to bring about Sir Edward Coke's dismissal as chief justice in 1616. A year later he was made Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, the position his own father had occupied under the reign of Elizabeth. When he took possession of his official residence in August 1617, he was at the same time re-entering the house in which he had been born. A few months later, his powerful but absent father (who had died when Bacon was eighteen) was finally surpassed. Bacon was raised to the peerage as Baron Verulam and granted the title of Lord Chancellor, thereby becoming the highest law officer in the land.