



From the Annals of the World History

Sir Francis Bacon

December 14, 1503 - July 1, 1566



Bacon, Francis, Lord Verulam, and Viscount St. Alban's, philosopher and statesman, was the youngest son of Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper, by his second wife, a daughter of Sir Anthony Cooke, whose sister married William Cecil, Lord Burghley, the great minister of Queen Elizabeth. He was born at York House in the Strand on Jan. 22, 1561, and in his 13th year was sent with his elder brother Anthony to Trinity College, Cambridge. Here he first met the Queen, who was impressed by his precocious intellect, and was accustomed to call him "the young Lord Keeper." Here also he became dissatisfied with the Aristotelian philosophy as being unfruitful and leading only to result less disputation.

In 1576 he entered Gray's Inn, and in the same year joined the embassy of Sir Amyas Paulet to France, where he remained until 1579. The death of his father in that year, before he had completed an intended provision for him, gave an adverse turn to his fortunes, and rendered it necessary that he should decide upon a profession. He accordingly returned to Gray's Inn, and, after an unsuccessful attempt to induce Burghley to give him a post at court, and thus enable him to devote himself to a life of learning, he gave himself seriously to the study of law, and was called to the Bar in 1582. He did not, however, desert philosophy, and published a Latin tract, *Temporis Partus Maximus* (the Greatest Birth of Time), the first rough draft of his own system.

Two years later, in 1584, he entered the House of Commons as member for Melcombe, sitting subsequently for Taunton (1586), Liverpool (1589), Middlesex (1593), and Southampton (1597). In the Parliament of 1586 he took a prominent part in urging the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. About this time he seems again to have approached his powerful uncle, the result of which may possibly be traced in his rapid progress at the Bar, and in his receiving, in 1589, the reversion to the Clerkship of the Star Chamber, a valuable appointment, into the enjoyment of which, however, he did not enter until 1608.

About 1591 he formed a friendship with the Earl of Essex, from whom he received many tokens of kindness ill requited. In 1593 the offices of Attorney-general, and subsequently of Solicitor-general became vacant, and Essex used his influence on Bacon's behalf, but unsuccessfully, the former being given to Coke, the famous lawyer. These disappointments may have been owing to a speech made by Bacon on a question of subsidies. To console him for them Essex presented him with a property at Twickenham, which he subsequently sold for £1800, equivalent to a much larger sum now.

In 1596 he was made a Queen's Counsel, but missed the appointment of Master of the Rolls, and in the next year (1597), he published the first edition of his *Essays*, ten in number, combined with *Sarced Meditations* and the *Coulours of Good and Evil*. By 1601 Essex had lost the Queen's favour, and had raised his rebellion, and Bacon was one of those appointed to investigate the charges against him, and examine witnesses, in connection with which he showed an ungrateful and indecent eagerness in pressing the case against his former friend and benefactor, who was executed on Feb. 25, 1601. This act Bacon endeavoured to justify in *A Declaration of the Practices and Treasons, etc., of...the Earl of Essex, etc.* His circumstances had for some time been bad, and he had been arrested for debt: he had, however, received a gift of a fine of £1200 on one of Essex's accomplices.

The accession of James VI in 1603 gave a favourable turn to his fortunes: he was knighted, and endeavoured to set himself right with the new powers by writing his *Apologie* (defence) of his proceedings in the case of Essex, who had favoured the succession of James. In the first Parliament of the new king he sat for St. Alban's, and was appointed a Commissioner for Union with Scotland. In 1605, he published *The Advancement of Learning*, dedicated, with fulsome flattery, to the king. The following year he married Alice Barnham, the daughter of a London merchant, and in 1607 he was made Solicitor-General, and wrote *Cogita*

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et Visa, a first sketch of the Novum Organum, followed in 1609 by *The Wisdom of the Ancients*.

Meanwhile (in 1608), he had entered upon the Clerkship of the Star Chamber, and was in the enjoyment of a large income; but old debts and present extravagance kept him embarrassed, and he endeavoured to obtain further promotion and wealth by supporting the king in his arbitrary policy. In 1613 he became Attorney-General, and in this capacity prosecuted Somerset in 1616. The year 1618 saw him Lord Keeper, and the next Lord Chancellor and Baron Verulam, a title which, in 1621, he exchanged for that of Viscount St. Albans. Meanwhile he had written the *New Atlantis*, a political romance, and in 1620 he presented to the king the *Novum Organum*, on which he had been engaged for 30 years, and which ultimately formed the main part of the *Instauratio Magna*.

In his great office Bacon showed a failure of character in striking contrast with the majesty of his intellect. He was corrupt alike politically and judicially, and now the hour of retribution arrived. In 1621 a Parliamentary Committee on the administration of the law charged him with corruption under 23 counts; and so clear was the evidence that he made no attempt at defence. To the lords, who sent a committee to inquire whether the confession was really his, he replied, "My lords, it is my act, my hand, and my heart; I beseech your lordships to be merciful to a broken reed." He was sentenced to a fine of £40,000, remitted by the king, to be committed to the Tower during the king's pleasure (which was that he should be released in a few days), and to be incapable of holding office or sitting in parliament. He narrowly escaped being deprived of his titles.

Thenceforth he devoted himself to study and writing. In 1622 appeared his *History of Henry VII*, and the 3rd part of the *Instauratio*; in 1623, *History of Life and Death*, the *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, a Latin translation of the *Advancement*, and in 1625 the 3rd edition of the *Essays*, now 58 in number. He also published *Apophthegms*, and a translation of some of the *Psalms*.

His life was now approaching its close. In March, 1626, he came to London, and shortly after, when driving on a snowy day, the idea struck him of making an experiment as to the antiseptic properties of snow, in consequence of which he caught a chill, which ended in his death on 9th April 1626. He left debts to the amount of £22,000. At the time of his death he was engaged upon *Sylva Sylvarum*. The intellect of Bacon was one of the most powerful and searching ever possessed by man, and his developments of the inductive philosophy revolutionized the future thought of the human race.