

Title

BACON

BY

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About this eBook

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Preface

In preparing this sketch it is needless to say how deeply I am indebted to Mr. Spedding and Mr. Ellis, the last editors of Bacon's writings, the very able and painstaking commentators, the one on Bacon's life, the other on his philosophy. It is impossible to overstate the affectionate care and high intelligence and honesty with which Mr. Spedding has brought together and arranged the materials for an estimate of Bacon's character. In the result, in spite of the force and ingenuity of much of his pleading, I find myself most reluctantly obliged to differ from him; it seems to me to be a case where the French saying, cited by Bacon in one of his commonplace books, holds good—"Par trop se débattre, la vérité se perd." But this does not diminish the debt of gratitude which all who are interested about Bacon must owe to Mr. Spedding. I wish also to acknowledge the assistance which I have received from Mr. Gardiner's History of England and Mr. Fowler's edition of the *Novum Organum*; and not least from M. de Rémusat's work on Bacon, which seems to me the most complete and the most just estimate both of Bacon's character and work which has yet appeared; though even in this clear and dispassionate survey we are reminded by some misconceptions, strange in M. de Rémusat, how what one nation takes for granted is incomprehensible to its neighbour; and what a gap there is still, even in matters of philosophy and literature, between the whole Continent and ourselves -

"Penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos."

I. EARLY LIFE

The life of Francis Bacon is one which it is a pain to write or to read. It is the life of a man endowed with as rare a combination of noble gifts as ever was bestowed on a human intellect; the life of one with whom the whole purpose of living and of every day's work was to do great things to enlighten and elevate his race, to enrich it with new powers, to lay up in store for all ages to come a source of blessings which should never fail or dry up; it was the life of a man who had high thoughts of the ends and methods of law and government, and with whom the general and public good was regarded as the standard by which the use of public power was to be measured; the life of a man who had struggled hard and successfully for the material prosperity and opulence which makes work easy and gives a man room and force for carrying out his purposes. All his life long his first and never-sleeping passion was the romantic and splendid ambition after knowledge, for the conquest of nature and for the service of man; gathering up in himself the spirit and longings and efforts of all discoverers and inventors of the arts, as they are symbolised in the mythical Prometheus. He rose to the highest place and honour; and yet that place and honour were but the fringe and adornment of all that made him great. It is difficult to imagine a grander and more magnificent career; and his name ranks among the few chosen examples of human achievement. And yet it was not only an unhappy life; it was a poor life. We expect that such an overwhelming weight of glory should be borne up by a character corresponding to it in strength and nobleness. But that is not what we find. No one ever had a greater idea of what he was made for, or was fired with a greater desire to devote himself to it. He was all this. And yet being all this, seeing deep into man's worth, his capacities, his greatness, his weakness, his sins, he was not true to what he knew. He cringed to such a man as Buckingham. He sold himself to the corrupt and ignominious Government of

¹ Promus: edited by Mrs. H. Pott, p. 475.

James I. He was willing to be employed to hunt to death a friend like Essex, guilty, deeply guilty, to the State, but to Bacon the most loving and generous of benefactors. With his eyes open he gave himself up without resistance to a system unworthy of him; he would not see what was evil in it, and chose to call its evil good; and he was its first and most signal victim.

Bacon has been judged with merciless severity. But he has also been defended by an advocate whose name alone is almost a guarantee for the justness of the cause which he takes up, and the innocency of the client for whom he argues. Mr. Spedding devoted nearly a lifetime, and all the resources of a fine intellect and an earnest conviction, to make us revere as well as admire Bacon. But it is vain. It is vain to fight against the facts of his life: his words, his letters. "Men are made up," says a keen observer, "of professions, gifts, and talents; and also of themselves."² With all his greatness, his splendid genius, his magnificent ideas, his enthusiasm for truth, his passion to be the benefactor of his kind; with all the charm that made him loved by good and worthy friends, amiable, courteous, patient, delightful as a companion, ready to take any trouble—there was in Bacon's "self" a deep and fatal flaw. He was a pleaser of men. There was in him that subtle fault, noted and named both by philosophy and religion in the ἄρεσκος of Aristotle, the ἀνθρωπάρεσκος of St. Paul, which is more common than it is pleasant to think, even in good people, but which if it becomes dominant in a character is ruinous to truth and power. He was one of the men—there are many of them—who are unable to release their imagination from the impression of present and immediate power, face to face with themselves. It seems as if he carried into conduct the leading rule of his philosophy of nature, *parendo vincitur*. In both worlds, moral and physical, he felt himself encompassed by vast forces, irresistible by direct opposition. Men whom he wanted to bring round to his purposes were as strange, as refractory, as obstinate, as impenetrable as the phenomena of the natural world. It was no use attacking in front, and by a direct trial of strength, people like Elizabeth or Cecil or James; he might as well think of forcing some natural power in defiance of natural law. The first word of his teaching about nature is that she must be won by observation of her tendencies and demands; the same radical disposition of temper reveals itself in his dealings with men: they, too, must be won by yielding to them, by adapting himself to their moods and ends; by spying into the drift of their humour, by subtly and pliantly falling in with it, by circuitous and indirect processes, the fruit of vigilance and patient thought. He thought to direct, while submitting apparently to be directed. But he mistook his strength. Nature and man are different powers, and under different laws. He chose to please man, and not to follow what his soul must have told him was the better way. He wanted, in his dealings with men, that sincerity on which he insisted so strongly in his dealings with nature and knowledge. And the ruin of a great life was the consequence.

Francis Bacon was born in London on the 22d of January, 1560/61, three years before Galileo. He was born at York House, in the Strand; the house which, though it belonged to the Archbishops of York, had been lately tenanted by Lord Keepers and Lord Chancellors, in which Bacon himself afterwards lived as Lord Chancellor, and which passed after his fall into the hands of the Duke of Buckingham, who has left his mark in the Water Gate which is now seen, far from the river, in the garden of the Thames Embankment. His father was Sir Nicholas Bacon, Elizabeth's first Lord Keeper, the fragment of whose effigy in the Crypt of St. Paul's is one of the few relics of the old Cathedral before the fire. His uncle by marriage was that William Cecil who was to be Lord Burghley. His mother, the sister of Lady Cecil, was one of the daughters of Sir Antony Cook, a person deep in the confidence of the reforming party, who had been tutor of Edward VI. She was a remarkable woman, highly

² Dr. Mozley.