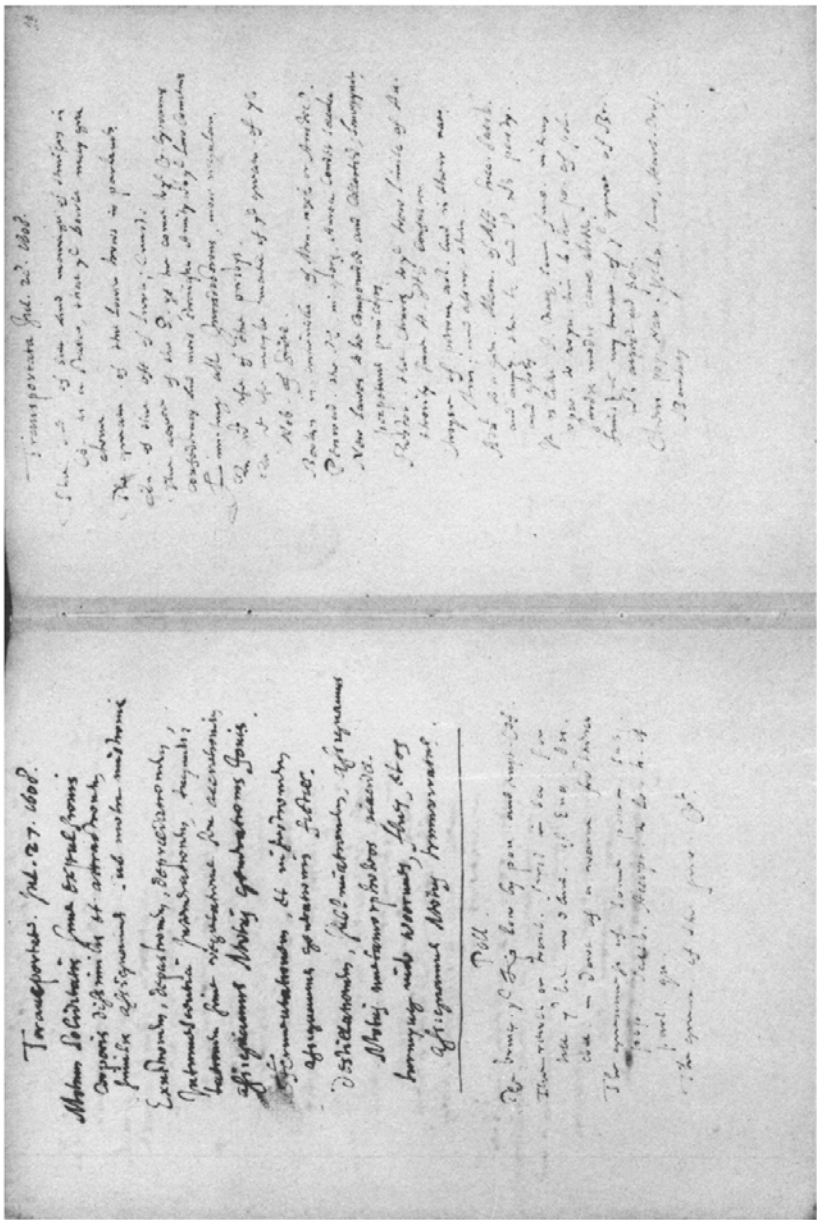


CHAPTER I

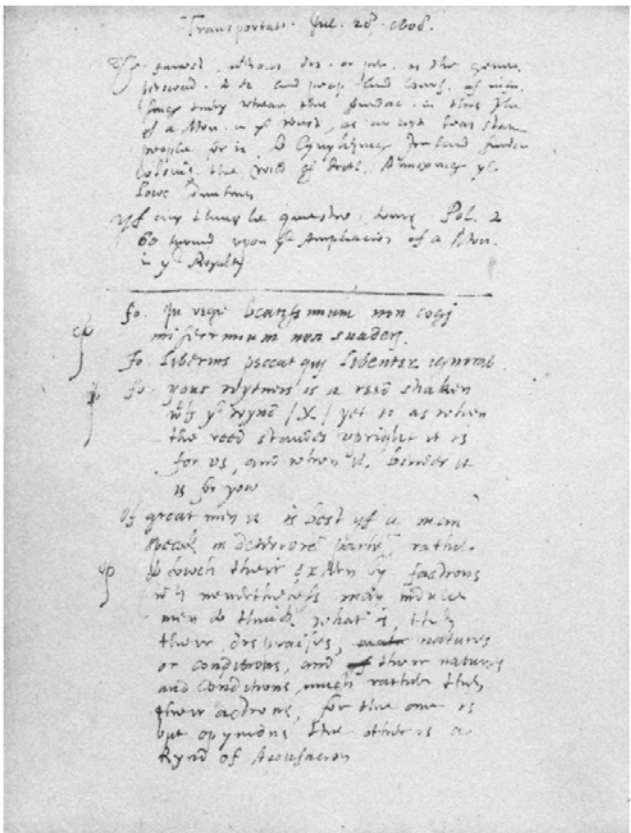
Introduction

In the course of his lifetime and career Francis Bacon pre-enacted his subsequent reputation. He advertised and in so doing inflated his part as proponent, inaugurator and instigator of a new natural science. Without renouncing them, he played down what he achieved in other realms. In the centuries after his death, in the early times of the efflorescence of the natural sciences, he was often taken at his word. He was acclaimed as hero of a scientific revolution. He was hailed and celebrated, not as prophet only, but as agent and perpetrator of a great transformation. The rest of what he did was largely neglected – though his *Essays*, it is true, furnish the exception. The rest was neglected not only for this reason, namely, the successful ‘rise of science’, casting much else into shadow; but also because in the matter of this remainder, government, law and the constitution, he turned out – in terms of what he stood for – to be on the losing side in subsequent discords and troubles. Upheavals and civil wars disqualified in people’s minds his political and constitutional philosophy, ostensibly discrediting it.

Bacon also pre-enacted this piece of history. His overthrow as Chancellor of England and minister of King James VI and I was the upshot of initiatives which were made in a parliament. This was in 1621. A parliament which assembled in 1640 instituted successful attacks not only on a minister but on King Charles I’s entire government. Thus Bacon was victim of a revolution before it took place – a revolution, moreover, which he predicted was likely to occur given the arrival of a certain set of contingencies. Further, because men rejected measures which he urged regarding the implications of the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland, he was also able to predict the contingencies.



Introduction



Above and left: manuscript extracts from Bacon's notes, British Library Add. MS 27278, fos. 22 v, 23 and 23 v. © British Library.

The revolution foreseen was a successful assault in a parliament upon the power of the monarch, which, given the financial straits of the latter, consisted of withholding – or, if not refusing – then of remorseless bargaining over supply. Among highly abbreviated jottings dated 1608 under the head ‘Poll.’,¹ which, because of the contents of these notes, manifestly stands for ‘policy’, we find Bacon writing: ‘The. bring. ye K. low by pov. and empt. Cof.’ (The bringing the King low by poverty and empty coffers.) Such a subversion, he observed in the same notes, would be unlikely to occur unless an emergency took place first in Scotland: ‘The revolt or troub. first in Sco. for till yt be no dang. of Eng. discount. in dowl of a warre fro. thence.’ (The revolt or trouble first in Scotland: for till that be, no danger of English discontent: in doubt of a war from hence.) This rebellion in Scotland took place. Troubles in England were duly triggered. After the accession of King James VI and I Bacon had worked in vain for a closer and more durable union between the Scots and the English. In the House of Commons he pointed out not only the impermanence but the dangers of incomplete unions.

Whether or not the Scots moved in the way he feared, Bacon constructed a long-term strategy for avoiding unmanageable situations in England. Parliaments should continue to be assembled. But they should be implicated, when summoned, in joint exercises, jointly that is to say, with the King’s government. Among the 1608 private notes – *Commentarius Solutus* – under the head ‘Poll.’ Bacon wrote:

The fairest, without dis. or per. is the gener. perswad. to K. and peop. and cours. of infusing every whear the foundat. in this Ile of a Mon. in ye west, as an apt seat state people for it; so cyvylizing Ireland, funder coloniz. the wild of Scotl. Annexing ye Lowe Countries. Yf any thing be questio. touch. Pol. to be turned upon ye Ampliacion of a Mon. in ye Royalty. The fairest, without disputes(?), discontents(?), distempers(?), discords(?), disfavour(?), disabilities(?) or perils, is the general persuading to King and people, and course of infusing everywhere the foundation in this isle of a monarchy in the West, as an apt seat, state, people for it; so civilizing Ireland, further colonizing the wild of Scotland. Annexing the Low Countries. If anything be questioned touching policy, to be turned upon the ampliation of a Monarchy in the Royalty.²

Challenges to the monarch’s prerogatives would be parried by investing the attentions and interests of parliaments in projects such as were sketched.

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Evidence is abundant that Bacon worked consistently and coherently in this course. We are helped – because he did so – in deciphering the jottings in which he described it. He made of the course an enterprise which he tried to put into practice. He based it on scrutiny of past practices in such matters. He also argued that present circumstances and prevailing conditions favoured it and invited it. Hereinafter I refer to it as a grand strategy. The enterprise can be described as analogous to and comparable with his *Great Instauration*. But by the 1640s revolutions had happened both in Scotland and in England. On the face of things Bacon, his position and his ‘course’, were consigned to the limbo of failure and defeat. Nevertheless his grand strategy was later implemented to the full, this including, though still without a common law and a common church, a closer and less precarious union between the English and the Scots. In less than a century after Bacon’s death both King and people had been persuaded, governments and parliaments working together, into founding ‘in this isle a monarchy in the West’. The Crown as restored in 1660 had lost prerogatives which Bacon had defended. But supremacy in matters of war and peace survived. Parliaments and monarchs, the latter retaining supremacy in affairs of war and peace even after 1688, were more closely joined. Britain after that date emerged into the company of greater powers, establishing itself among them. After 1688 the island and the Low Countries even acquired for a time a common ruler. The year 1707 saw the achievement of less fragile union between the northern and the southern nations.

None of these things took place as the result of Bacon’s plans. They happened nevertheless because they were possible opportunities and/or properly unavoidable necessities, acted upon by others, which Bacon had correctly perceived. He had conjured up the accurate vision of them. John Robert Seeley (1834–95) introducing *The Growth of British Policy* (1895) remarked that it was only natural ‘that while we have entered early into the conception of constitutional history...we have scarcely yet perceived that constitutional history requires the history of policy as its correlative’.³ But Bacon had already joined the two, recognizing that they could not be divided. A constitution cannot be envisaged apart from what men do with it. What is done cannot be contemplated apart from constitutional arrangements making such actions possible. In the private notes of 1608 ‘Poll.’ means policy – and policy in his usage

we shall see, means a science, civil science: policy also means a course or courses of action which this science dictates: policy also means an agency – the royal government – with a recognized duty to undertake the action or actions. In addition, in his usage, policy means constitutional arrangements of a state as a whole – including parliaments – these in their turn requiring or facilitating the action or actions.

In the course of the present century, the authority and prestige of natural science being established and taken for granted, Bacon's part in its origins has in general been graded down. The nature of the scientific revolution and the processes of its emergence have come to be recognized by historians of science as complex. Neither Bacon's claims for himself in natural philosophy, nor his enduring impact in that field can be rated as highly as once seemed possible. Time and studies have seen to that. In this presiding matter of natural philosophy – Bacon himself sharing responsibility for it being a presiding one – he has suffered successively a twofold misfortune: first from having been endowed with too little historical context and second and latterly with too much. In the present century a normal stance of historians is to insist that it is only by furnishing 'contexts' that men's thoughts and deeds in past times become intelligible. According to this teaching in its extreme forms men are functions of contexts. Historians must see to it, they seem to say, that a man is 'cut down to size', that he be 'kept in his place'. Subjects become objects consisting of situations in which they find themselves – or rather of situations into which historians decide to place them. During the later twentieth century Bacon in the matter of natural philosophy has been rightly restored to his times. But also he has been riveted back into them to such a degree that sometimes he barely emerges in this field as different from them. A likely result of such proceedings is that we shall know more about the context than about Bacon.

He conveniently pre-enacted in his life the story of his scientific reputation in after centuries. Declared ambitions and plans in natural philosophy were not successfully matched by output. In parallel with this, as the answering echo of his time, his reputation as exercising controls over posterity's achievements in this field has shrunk in the estimate of investigators. There could for instance be no question of him filling the part of a second Aristotle. Though urgently describing and recommending his procedures, his own

efforts resulted in producing little in what came to comprise the sciences of nature. In the other fields – civil history, studying it, writing it, using it for making policy (civil philosophy, a science which he claimed to have invented by emancipating it from morality), the applying of this civil science in government and in law, and in seeking to establish a constitution for the state, areas in which he was close observer and active participator, not only did the verdict of immediate events pronounce against him, he was also to some extent his own detractor – again, so it would appear, in the cause of intended and projected exploits in natural philosophy. He refrained from placing his contributions in other fields unequivocally inside his *Great Instauration*, thus helping to promote questionable conclusions on the matter. On the one hand he described the *Great Instauration* as a ‘total reconstruction of sciences, arts and *all human knowledge*’ (emphasis added), ‘raised upon the proper foundations’.⁴ He had already told Lord Burleigh in 1592 that he took *all* (emphasis added) knowledge as his province.⁵ On the other hand, as for instance in correspondence with Bishop Lancelot Andrewes⁶ or in a letter to the Venetian Fr Fulgentius,⁷ he said or clearly implied that *The History of the Reign of King Henry the 7th*, *De Sapientia Veterum*, *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients*, and his essays, were outside not inside the *Great Instauration*.

In order to clarify this matter it is necessary to recall other things Bacon said and also other things he did. He said that he knew his way, but not his position. He did not know how far he had got. Concluding *Thema Coeli* – Theory of the Heaven – he wrote: ‘Nevertheless I repeat once more that I do not mean to bind myself to these; for in them as in other things I am certain of my way, but not certain of my position.’⁸ He also said, writing to Sir Toby Mathew in 1610, that ‘My great work goeth forward; and after my manner, I alter ever when I add, so that nothing is finished till all be finished.’⁹ Additions brought alterations: alterations carried additions. *The Advancement of Learning*, first published in 1605, was in due course added to, and made part of, the *Great Instauration*. When thus added to the *Great Instauration*, and when republished in 1623, it presented alterations in its contents. But even before alterations and additions were made, the 1605 version lamented the deficiency in civil history writing under which England – and also Scotland – suffered, and urged the need to remedy this. Here Bacon recommended a period which it was especially desirable to cover,

this being the stretch of time running from the Union of the Roses to the Union of the Crowns.¹⁰ But in statements he makes elsewhere it is plain that in the years preceding the appearance of the first *Advancement* it was this period of events which he had chosen and marked out for a work in civil history writing from his own pen. In 1623, by which time *Advancement* in its second version was explicitly part of the *Great Instauration*, both the description of this deficient condition in civil history writing, the plea for remedy, together with the special recommendation regarding the series of events to be dealt with, were repeated unchanged save that they appeared in Latin.

With respect to additions, *Advancement's* version of 1623 included pieces out of *De Sapientia Veterum*. Representing the argument of that book, three fables with his interpretation of them were imported, 'one taken from things Natural, one from things Political, and one from things Moral'.¹¹ *Advancement's* version of 1623 contained also two pieces which he styled 'examples of summary treatises'. One of these, entitled *Of the Extension of Empire*, was later republished as an essay in the 1625 collection. There is nothing about the extracts from *De Sapientia Veterum* and nothing about the example of a treatise later appearing as an essay which entitles them to this favoured treatment and to inclusion in the *Great Instauration* which excludes the rest of *De Sapientia Veterum* and the rest of the essays. The second example of a treatise, published in the second *Advancement*, is entitled *Of Universal Justice or the Fountains of Equity, by Aphorisms*. But there is nothing in the contents of this piece, that is to say in its argument and procedure, which entitles it to be thus set apart from Bacon's numerous other exercises when in office in matters of law. The same applies to the content, argument and procedure of the treatise's twin, which was devoted to the topic of extension of empire, whether this piece appears in *Advancement* or as an essay. In content, argument, and procedure, as is true in the case of other essays, it is solid with, and indistinguishable from Bacon's numerous other exercises – including the never-abandoned and interconnected elements of his grand strategy. Not 'analogous to' or 'comparable with', but 'at the very least organically connected with' is the better way of describing the relationship between the grand strategy and the *Great Instauration*. The two stand distinct, it is evident. Nevertheless, they relate together inseparably.

Regarding the *Essays*, Bacon at a late date told Bishop Lancelot

Andrewes in a letter: 'As for my *Essays*, and some other particulars of that nature, I count them but as the recreations of my other studies, and in that sort propose to continue them.'¹² Contents of the *Essays*, as we shall see, relate unmistakably to 'other studies'.¹³ Furthermore, on this topic of 'recreations' Bacon in a much earlier letter had explained to the bishop: 'I hasten not to publish; perishing I would prevent. For with me it is thus, and I think with all men in my case; if I bind myself to an argument, it loadeth my mind; but if I rid my mind of the present cogitation, it is rather a recreation. This hath put me into these miscellanies, which I purpose to suppress, if God give me leave to write a just and perfect volume of philosophy, which I go on with though slowly.'¹⁴ On this argument everything he wrote was a 'recreation', and by the same token an essay, since in the process of writing he was clearing his head by unburdening his mind.

Bacon bequeathed a situation which has encouraged while not justifying posterity's misunderstanding. Nor is this the sum of the matter. In addition, as will be seen, in the course of the text of *Novum Organum* he played down his contributions to learning other than in natural philosophy. As for posterity, men in their turn have often either neglected the work he did in areas other than those of the sciences of nature, apart from the essays; or, apart from the essays, been unsympathetic. His history – that of the reign of King Henry VII – has been decried as containing mistakes in plenty. Needless to say, his trial and dismissal as Chancellor and his needlessly total submission scarcely enhanced his subsequent standing. But even had he died holding his high office it is doubtful that he would have fared better at the hands of posterity. For many in later times have dismissed his standpoints regarding the political constitution of the state in England – and specially those regarding the relation therewith of the laws. His conclusions in this sphere, namely that in matters of state as interpreted by government, *salus populi suprema lex*; and that when such emergencies occur procedures and rules at Common Law in their strictness do not apply for men who invoke them, were not peculiar to himself. Unlike his positions in the sciences of nature these conclusions were shared by others both before and also in his own times. In his case they were the upshot of deep study and reflection. Bacon pre-enacted in his own days the story of his later repute, such pre-enactment being illustrated with a singular exactitude in the case of the essays. For of these he himself

correctly wrote that they ‘of all my other works have been most current’.¹⁵ The statement is as true today as when he made it.

Equally conveniently he showed himself aware not only of the difficulties he himself must face in the things he was trying to do, but also of the hazards which would confront those in later times who attempted to assess his efforts and understand the positions he achieved. In his doctrine about idols of the mind he warned against over-confidence, his own and other men’s, in the matter of intellectual perspectives. ‘Historical context’, passively incurred or thoughtlessly imbibed rather than as far as possible sorted, sifted and chosen, is precisely what he was talking about – with conspicuous originality – in his treatment of idols of the mind. Human individuals, he wrote, are ‘circumscribed by place and time’.¹⁶ Place and time condition the ways in which they confront and perceive reality. But he also taught that place and time can be transcended by human individuals. In extremist context doctrine this is denied. The idols cease to be idols. Instead they become the normality and the mediocrity which constitute, so it is implied, the history of mankind.

Writing of idols Bacon explained that one of them is rooted in ‘every man’s individual nature and custom. Although our persons live in the view of heaven, yet our spirits are included in the caves of our own complexions and customs, which minister unto us infinite errors and vain opinions if they be not recalled to examination.’¹⁷ However, ‘the idols of the market-place are [the] most troublesome; which have crept into the understanding through the tacit agreement of men concerning the imposition of words and names’.¹⁸ These idols are ‘formed by the intercourse and association of men with each other, which I call idols of the Market Place, on account of the commerce and consort of men there’.¹⁹

The context doctrine subscribed to by latter-day historians is self-defeating. If uncritically accepted, it must follow that they should themselves shut up shop and retire from business. For they in their turn can scarcely hope to escape the consequences of being prisoners both of themselves and of the times they work in. In fact they persevere. When not carried to extremes their teaching, whether applied to men in the past or to their own endeavours, is the half of a truth. The other not less indispensable half is that men like Bacon help to make their times or those that follow. They do this by trying in conscious choices and deliberate efforts to transcend their times.