

In the centuries since his death in 1626, Francis Bacon has been perceived and studied as a promoter and prophet of the philosophy of science – natural science. Certainly Bacon proclaimed that he could and would fill the vacuum which he saw existing in the study of nature; but he also saw himself as a clarifier and promoter of what he called ‘policy’, that is, the study and improvement of the structure and function of civil states including the new British state established by the Union of 1603.

In this major new study Mr Wormald shows that Bacon was concerned equally with knowledge of the world of nature and with that of policy. There was indeed a dilemma, about which Bacon was explicit. He resolved it by attending assiduously to both fields, arguing that he would perform in policy in ways which would help progress in knowledge of nature. In his teaching, in his practice, and in the end as things turned out in terms of what was actually achieved, the junction between the two enterprises was effected by his work in history – first in civil history, but also in natural history. His proposed metaphysics of nature, which would reveal the ‘real truth’ about it, came to nothing: it was his conception and practice of history which provided the answer to his strivings to advance not only policy but also, and in addition, natural philosophy. In thus stressing the inspiration which history provided even for Bacon’s study of nature, Mr Wormald here provides a fundamental reappraisal.

Cambridge University Press

0521307732 - Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626 - B. H. G. Wormald

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Coll. Div. Pet. Acad. Cantabr.



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0521307732 - Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626 - B. H. G. Wormald

Frontmatter/Prelims

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Wormald, B. H. G. (Brian Harvey Goodwin)

Francis Bacon: history, politics and science, 1561-1626.

(Cambridge studies in the history and theory of politics)

- i. English philosophy. Bacon, Francis, Viscount St Albans 1561-1626
 - i. Title
 - 192

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Wormald, B. H. G.

Francis Bacon: history, politics and science, 1561-1626/B. H. G.
Wormald.

- p. cm. - (Cambridge studies in the history and theory of politics)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-30773-2

- i. Bacon, Francis, 1561-1626. i. Title. ii. Series.

B1198. w67 1991

192 - dc20 90-20211 CIP

ISBN 0 521 30773 2 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Cambridge University Press

0521307732 - Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626 - B. H. G. Wormald

Frontmatter/Prelims

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Ἔστω δ' ὧν μηδὲν ἀπείρητον
αὐτόματον γὰρ οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ
πείρης πάντα ἀνθρώποισι φιλέει
γίνεσθαι

Herodotus, vii, 9

Let nothing then be untried; for nothing
is accomplished by its own self, but
all things are usually achieved by men
through endeavours.

Transl. HENRY CARY, 1854

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Acknowledgments

In this study, consuming ten years of a lifetime, I acknowledge indebtedness to *The Works of Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam, Viscount St Alban, and Lord High Chancellor of England*; published in London in fourteen volumes between 1857 and 1874 inclusive. These were collected and edited by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath. The first seven volumes consist of (A) Works, Philosophical, Literary and Professional; the second seven volumes consist of (B) The Letters and the Life including occasional works. In notes I shall refer respectively to (A) or to (B), giving volume and page. I am also indebted to *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon, an Essay on its development from 1603 to 1609 with new Translation of Fundamental Texts*, Benjamin Farrington, Liverpool 1964. In my notes I shall refer to Farrington, giving page. I am also indebted to *The Discourses of Niccolo Machiavelli*, translated from the Italian with an Introduction and Notes by Leslie J. Walker; New Introduction and Appendices by Cecil H. Clough, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1975. In my notes I shall refer to *Discourses*, giving chapter, section and page.

I extend grateful thanks to my editor at the Cambridge University Press, William Davies, for his encouragement and patience; to Hugh Kearney, who read and criticized the work in typescript; to Hazel Dunn who has produced the typescript; to Maurice Cowling who has provided faithful support; to Nancy-Jane Thompson for assistance and support; and to Susan Beer for copy editing.