

**FRANCIS BACON, HIS
LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY.
PART I: BACON'S LIFE**

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Francis Bacon, his life and philosophy. Part I: Bacon's life by John Nichol

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JOHN NICHOL

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PART I: BACON'S LIFE**

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FRANCIS BACON

HIS LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY

BY

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PART I.

BACON'S LIFE

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE materials for the whole of Bacon's period are to be found in the work of that most brilliant author, Mr Froude, and in the pages of the fairest of living historians, Professor S. R. Gardiner. My obligations to the latter are even greater than may be inferred from my numerous acknowledgments. His Life of Bacon in the 'Dictionary of National Biography,' confirming in almost every point my previous view, would have left me little to add had it not been obviously cramped in space. The scattered comments in his 'History' only require to be brought together to convey the most adequate representation yet offered to us of the great man's career. With this exception, Bacon's biography has been hitherto written by rival partisans. The duel between Mr Montague and Lord Macaulay has been renewed between Mr Spedding, inveterately bent on believing the best, and Dr Abbott, equally determined to believe the worst of the subject of their opposite portraits.

Spedding's great work, the result of a life's devoted research, remains the source from which all commentators must draw their information; but few will wade through such a mass of material set forth with so little art. Mr Spedding's plan of arranging events, as in an annual register, under the years in which they happened, detracts from the interest if not from the value of his labours. He has left a quarry from which others must hew. I have made it a rule to discuss the questions with which Bacon's public life was concerned, less according to date than to the issues at stake, and to treat them with a view to their proportionate consequence. The prominence here given to the trial¹ of Essex slightly departs from this rule; but it may be defended as having hitherto been, in the minds of most readers, an *instantia crucis*. Dr Abbott having devoted a whole volume to the subject, returns to it in his larger work, conspicuous alike for its erudition and skill, but laying its author open to the remark that it is easy, in essence, to falsify facts by exclusively dwelling on the worst lights thrown on them. Maintaining Tyrone's conditions to be forged, and the confession of Essex to be a cowardly perjury, Dr Abbot refines the treason of the Earl down to an insane freak.

Bacon has been made the sport of antitheses; and the pedagogic zest for taking great men as texts, has never

¹ The substance of my treatment of this question appeared in a review of the first two volumes of Spedding's 'Life and Letters,' which I contributed in 1861 to the former 'Daily News.'

been more misplaced than when, in his case, substituted for criticism. The truth between the excesses of adulatory and iconoclastic zeal, is to be found in carefully considering the circumstances of the age in which Bacon lived—an age so wonderful because at once so magnificent and so mean.

The only claim that a historian or biographer can legitimately put forward, on introducing his readers to any doubtful question, is that they should regard it as an open one. Distance helps to make us impartial; but it would be hard to say what lapse of time frees our sentences from the chance of reversion. Prevalent opinion has always weight; but it loses authority when we can explain it by reference to collateral causes. If we can account for the formation of erroneous views, the tendency to stereotype them accounts for their continuance. It was natural that the courtiers of the Restoration should stigmatise Cromwell with the hypocrisy that clung to his name up to the date of Carlyle's vindication. Similarly, the fact that Bacon, during his life, took the unpopular side of several questions, that he was disgraced for an offence now severely judged, and died when there was no one adequate and willing to defend him, is enough to explain the character condensed in Pope's memorable line, expanded in Macaulay's Essay, reiterated in Lord Campbell's summary, and assumed by Kuno Fischer as, in some measure, a basis for his review of the Baconian philosophy.

Had Bacon finished his essay on "Fame," he might

have found instances in which Death did not "extinguish Envy." "Hero-worship," the partiality of a friendship established, across the gulf, between the great minds of the past and their living admirers, has occasionally sought to gild his weakness; but his name has been more frequently handled by those who love to contrast, than by those who strive in vain to identify, mental and moral excellence. We cannot be enthusiastic about Bacon as we are about Sidney, Raleigh, Greville, and others of the more personally fascinating figures of the age; but we can be just. Pope, Macaulay, Abbott, even Dean Church, and M. de Rémusat in his pre-eminently incisive outline of the philosopher's politics and the politician's philosophy, are unjust.

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