

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

THE NEW ATLANTIS (1626)

Sir Francis Bacon

Science, Common Sense, and the Novel The *New Atlantis* is a fictional novel published posthumously in 1626, and written by Sir Francis Bacon, whose essays have appeared at another point in this encyclopedia. It will be recalled that the trademark of his thinking, was, like that of Montaigne, 'common sense,' a sensible man's reason addressed to everyday problems. Yet Montaigne's pursuit is different. He explores hidden corners of human behavior (and misbehavior) bordering on issues of what we would call psychology or sociology. In addition to the systematic application of common sense, which he shared with Montaigne, Bacon tends to fully exercise the new understandings of physical science, boldly advancing into empirical thought and, say, in the direction of the work of Descartes, laying out mathematical coordinates against which to track the complex expressions of nature, and God its maker.

The New World Like Montaigne (and Sir Thomas More, and Thomas Campanella) Bacon was fascinated with the new world of undiscovered places and people, and with the invigoration available from reviewing those reported or imaginable extensions of the human setting. It had been almost one hundred fifty years, at the time of publication of *The New Atlantis*, since the Americas had been opened to western travelers, and the complex and splendid worlds of Aztec and Maya culture had seduced western explorers and gold rushers into horizons never imagined even in the buxious Renaissance societies from which cultural missionaries were rapidly scattering out. To this commercial and expropriative drive, which was turning the Renaissance into the playingfield of 'early modern man,' Bacon brought an imagination of a *new scientific society*, which his mind was able to extrapolate from the data of prior travelers and explorers.

Plato Tracing from the ancient Platonic legend, of a lost continent of Atlantis, Bacon imagined out an ancient culture, far older by several thousand years than his own, to which a fictive voyage could bring yields of new understanding for the modern man of his own time. This utopian novel—for the brief, incomplete work takes its place in Western literary history too—was virtually contemporary with such soon to be runaway popular texts as *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, sharers in the early sentimental naivete of the romantic adventure. A tale gets spun, in these proto novels, in which the new world meets the archaic world, and is astonished to find itself anticipated and more, elaborated from the far side. That is, the archaic turned inside out into the contemporary, of Bacon's own age, takes first place in the story told here.

The New Atlantis tale itself The tale that Bacon spins is hardly a 'tale,' rather an 'account,' for it consists largely in straight narration, during the course of which a band of inquisitive searchers recount their encounter with an archaic but ever so interestingly modern kingdom of ocean dwellers. The novel commences with the discovery of a mythical island, Bensalem, discovered by a shipwrecked crew west of Peru. The minimal plot advances through encounters with dominant Figures of Bensalem, then with the striking feature of the island culture, with its state sponsored research projects, which revolved around the fertile margins of Salomon's House, the knowledge and planning headquarters of Bensalem. After arrangements have been made, for a generous period of time on the island, The Dean of the College continues to expound, to the western travelers, the degrees and kinds of knowledge that accumulate around the research facilities of Bensalem. The reader will hardly need reminding that the text of this narration barely transforms its material with imagination, and hews to 'the facts.' Hence, perhaps, the description of this work as an 'account.'

The Dean's Discourse The Dean advances a voluble description of the origins of Christianity on Bensalem, and an account of the miracles that accompanied the advent of the New Religion, accompanied as it was by miraculous appearances, vertical columns of water over the surface of the ocean, other signs of the unique power of St. Bartholomew, Bensalem's patron saint. The perfect chastity

of the Bensalem community is the finest testimony to this powerful Christian stamp on the people of the community

Breadth of Science In the last third of *The New Atlantis* Bacon provides his ocean Dean with the perspective of that scientific organization by which, in the study of nature, the scientists of Salomon's house coordinate their classifications of the nature which God has so bountifully offered us. (We might seem to be looking at a Linnaean classification, passed under the lens of God's examination.) One gradually realizes, in the course of this direct lesson in research structure and policy, that the research aims of our own present social policy, are being creatively anticipated by Renaissance social analysts. As these principles of inquiry are effectively put into practice, among the directors of the Solomon's house project, we see that an overall view of the purposes and aims of scientific research is an omnipresent element of the Bensalem analysis of society. 'The end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible.'

Merchants of Light The tale reminds us of our own day, when a great culture is thirsty for knowledge of how to develop with powerful and hard wrung skills, wrung from the experience of another great culture—I think of the tens of thousands of Chinese students in the United States-, annually returning home, after graduation, with new 'data' and 'info systems' picked up out of the brain trusts of American State University classrooms. In a similar light, and presciently anticipant, Bacon sees to it that the professionals of Solomon's House go out on knowledge collecting missions to other civilized zones of their known archaic culture world. From there they return with the fruits of others' learnings, bought cheap. For the benefit of their guests they carefully characterize the kinds of missionaries they send out from their island kingdom.

Depredators, Mystery Men, Pioneers, Compilers, Dowry Men Three men go out on mission annually, from the House of Solomon, to gather records (anonymously) of experiments, which are found in all manner of imported books and texts. These men are called *depredators*.

Three men go out annually to gather the experiments that have taken place elsewhere in the liberal arts and the mechanical arts, respectively. These are called *mystery men*.

Certain men go out to try out new experiments that they think of value. These men are called *pioneers* because they free wheel on the margins of science, and invent freely--using the materials of the natural world.

Three men go out every year—they are called *compilers*—to collect previous data extractions, in order to render them ready to process, analyze, and engrave the knowledge already deposited in the vaults of the island kingdom. Pre computer, essentially, the society of Bacon has gone far toward understanding the drives for computation in the formation of a modern society.

Dowry men are sent out in trios, annually, to canvas the potential benefits, for their society, of the medicinal discoveries made possible by earlier expeditions. They are guardians of the welfare of their own native land, and we can under-hear Bacon calling out for the attentions of his own essentially still mediaeval version of agricultural society.

Discovery, Fiction, and the Organic One will have observed that the major figures of this narration—the Dean of the House of Solomon, the circulating figures and explainers from within the system of the House of Solomon; or among the quite anonymous crew of sailors from the archaic Atlantic world who first establish rowboat level contact with westerners, that these archaic but admirable figures are pretty much cardboard copies of the ideas they express. The visitors are in a constant state of awed pause, curious for everything they hear, and of course properly respectful. The genre of the novel has here the foundation of its developmental history, as does the genre of testifying to the surprising breadth and surprising customs of people in hitherto unfamiliar lands.

Literary history The New Atlantis is a harbinger of many soon to be created fictional hits like *Pamela* (1740) or *Clarissa* (1748), both by Samuel Richardson, which stress the social underpinnings of recognizable emotional lives, or, even earlier in the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or *Moll Flanders* (1722), both of which still display something of the artificial jointedness we note in *The New Atlantis* and in its portrayal of organic characters. The textual passage needed, to slip from the mindset of Bacon over into that of Defoe, is like any major cultural shift in sensibilities, not to be stormed, but to be released. One is reminded of an old discussion of Homer's capacity, or lack of same, to present his major characters as full bodied, rather than as assemblages of parts which need to be recreated or rejoined from inside them. Bacon is arguably starting from that same kind of literary historical challenge; how to make whole characters out of words.

Bacon the Moralist For the most part, as we know, Bacon was not on the path to fictions. His world as a moralist dominated his common sense understanding of what works in life, and on that course, the path of the scholar of society, seeking for improved human adjustments to life as it is, Bacon carved out a unique place as a social visionary, which is where we find him in *The New Atlantis* as well as in his *Essays*. His model of a self-conscious polity, planning out its step by step development, is great contribution to the growing science of social policy.

Study guide

Among the traits of the modern consciousness in its early Renaissance form, is the inclination to investigate, inquire, and soon to experiment. The Middle Ages were not without their experience of all these traits—cf. Lynn Thorndike on the development of science in the Middle Ages, or the life in science of Roger Bacon—and Sir Francis Bacon leads the anglophone awakening to the newly discovered wonders of the natural world.

Like Montaigne, Bacon finds his voice in the essay. That fresh form opens the way to supple and bold investigation. In his own essays Bacon does not explore unique scientific alleys of discovery, but he proclaims readiness for concrete scientific action. He is a ground breaker. But for which actual pathways within what we now call science, does Bacon especially lead the way? Would it be for hard science, or for the science of social structure? (The latter, perhaps, when it comes to the speculations that fill *The New Atlantis*?).

The essays of Bacon and Montaigne are fitting zones for the study of the 'making of the modern mind.' Have we forerunners to the essay in Roman and Greek culture? The Greeks moved naturally into display literature—dramas, epics, lyrics, even philosophy—but not reflective writings in which, so to speak, a mind investigates a topic, turns it over and looks at it from different angles, and draws conclusions from the investigation. In Rome one might think of the letters or Pliny and Cicero, or on moralistic-discursive pieces like Cicero's 'essays *De Senectute*, *On Old Age*, or 'On Friendship' It is true that we speak of Cicero's *Essays*, but do we mean 'essay,' here, in the same sense as in Bacon or Montaigne? *This would be a practical form of an essay you, dear student, should write.* You will find, as you explore this topic, that you are onto a key inquiry into what characterizes the modern mind at work—its self-reflective investigations.