

Francis Bacon and the Origins of an Ancient Toast at Gray's Inn

In January 1618, Sir Francis Bacon, already Lord Keeper, became Lord Chancellor, thus setting the seal on his legal career. He was now entitled to an additional £600 per year in salary and the office was conferred for life, though cancelled abruptly when he confessed in 1621 to charges of corruption. On 12th July he was elevated to the peerage as Baron Verulam.

Bacon delighted in extravagant living and princely show. A tally conducted shortly after his appointment as Lord Chancellor reveals that there were well over 120 domestic staff in his household (including 26 waiters), all of whom wore livery bearing his crest (the boar). Since the King was not always in London, the audacious Lord Chancellor often travelled about the capital in some pomp, accompanied by his large retinue. An egregious example of this arose as early as March, three months after his appointment, when rather grandly Bacon proceeded to Cheapside for the sole purpose of visiting shops owned by Sir Baptist Hicks, a wealthy mercer, and Edward Barnes to purchase Italian silks and velvets, drawing considerable public mockery of his vanity.

On 2nd February 1618, Candlemas Day, Bacon dined at Gray's Inn to enjoy the Revels when, as Ben Jonson wrote, 'the gown and cap is off and the Lord of Liberty reigns'. The Revels were part of the Festival of the Prince of Purpoole, often lasting three months beginning at Christmas, that featured plays, masques, pageantry, music, dancing, feasting and general merrymaking. The entertainment that Friday night would have included drinking the health of the Prince of Purpoole (usually a student elected Lord of Misrule for the duration of the Festival) but at some point it is possible Bacon and the gentlemen of Gray's Inn (and any Ladies present) might also have toasted the 'Pious, Glorious and Immortal Memory of Good Queen Bess'.

Over centuries, perhaps for more than 400 years, members of the Inn have drunk this traditional Gray's Inn toast countless times in Hall, now largely confined to a Grand Night. We know whom it salutes but its origins are lost in antiquity. That the toast must postdate the death of the first Elizabeth in 1603 is obvious, but can we fix a possible beginning

thereafter for its first tribute and identify its begetter?

Nearly 90 years ago, Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton, Resident Bencher at the Inn, suggested a solution in an article in *Graya* that was both convincing and characteristically brief. His theory is adopted here with gratitude and elaborated because it deserves wider currency today. I hope too that the background may endow future toasts with greater meaning.

Master Barton relied on Francis Bacon's memorial eulogy to the Queen entitled 'In felicem memoriam Elizabethae Reginae' for his view that it is to Bacon that we owe the origin of the toast. The eulogy was written in Latin in 1608 and is divided into 34 numbered pages, each of only a few lines, and it paints a detailed picture of the Queen's piety, glory and immortality.

1 Piety

This is largely covered at page 23 and translates thus:

'In her religion she was pious, constant, moderate and could not away with [abide] innovations; her piety chiefly appeared in her works and actions, but it was also seen in her ordinary course, and conversation of her life; she was seldom absent from prayers in her closet, or at sermons and solemn service abroad; diligent in reading the scriptures, well versed in the Fathers and above all St Augustine.'

2 Glory

The tract abounds with many examples of Elizabeth's Glory, but let pages 13 and 14 serve for this attribute dealing with the Spanish Armada. We are told that, notwithstanding the Queen was a woman of peace:

'... [yet] there was no fuel for wanting for a war (amongst others) ... as that memorable event' – the attempt at invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588 – 'well declared, which for the happiness thereof surpassed all actions of our age; for when that Navy called Invincible whose sales swelled with pride and secure of victory, had entered the narrow Seas, to the fear and astonishment of Europe; it neither took a cock-boat at Sea nor burnt a Cottage at Land, nor once touched upon the Coasts but was miserably scattered and put to flight, and

at last dashed upon against the Rocks, whilst peace remained in her confines and no commotion was seen in the Land.'

So the Queen's glory beat off the Armada without firing a shot in anger at sea, whilst on land the rhythm of life pursued its peaceful course without interruption. Not altogether true, of course, but then this is a paean of praise!

3 Immortality

Whilst the whole eulogy justifies the monarch's immortality, pages 15 and 16 perhaps make the best argument for it that is even more remarkable when looked at now four centuries after the death of the Queen:

'It is not also unworthy to mark the quality of those times wherein she flourished, for some ages fall out to be so barbarous and silly, that it were no harder to rule a Nation of men than to lead a flock of sheep, but she was eminent in learned and refined times wherein it was not easie to excel without singular parts of Nature, habituation of Vertue, and extraordinary indowments of Wit and Temper.'

In short, the Queen more than held her own in an age that was distinguished by some of the greatest men of that or any time.

If it is accepted then that this is, or might be, the foundation of the Gray's Inn tribute, how did it become a toast? Here Master Barton relies on a passage in a letter written by Bacon discussing 'In felicem memoriam ...' The recipient is Bacon's close friend, frequent lodger at his Gray's Inn home, and regular correspondent, Sir Tobie Mathew, who was admitted at Gray's Inn in May 1599, was an MP, courtier, diplomat and later Roman Catholic priest. In the letter, Bacon expresses a desire that the essence of what he had written might be made 'permanent in future ages'. This makes clear that Bacon was thinking deeply about how this might be achieved in some tangible form.

It is significant that in October 1608, as Master Barton points out, Bacon became Treasurer of Gray's Inn, only a few months after the letter to Tobie Mathew was written. And so began Bacon's long period of nearly nine years as Head of the Inn (1608–1617), presiding over its administration and influencing all matters affecting the Society, which would have included entertainment at the Inn and the custom of dining.

Master Barton ends his piece:

‘Is it not possible, nay is it not probable, that it was during this period, and under Francis Bacon’s presidency, that the Society began to honour at their table the “pious, glorious and immortal memory” of their departed Patroness?’

And, yes, to that say I – in the 400th anniversary year of Bacon becoming Lord Chancellor.

Master Timothy Shuttleworth

