

### Book Reviews

DAPHNE DU MAURIER, *The winding stair. Francis Bacon, his rise and fall*, London, Gollancz, 1976, pp. 245, illus., £6.50.

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To the scientist and physician Francis Bacon evokes thoughts of such philosophical works as *The advancement of learning* and *Instauratio Magna* which provided the theoretical framework for the rise of the empirical method in Commonwealth and Restoration England. Lawyers, on the other hand, remember his *Elements of the Common Law of England*, and historians might recall his *History of the reign of Henry VII*: he also wrote extensively on politics and theology.

Although Daphne du Maurier makes only passing references to Bacon's writings, her book is none the less interesting: she presents a delightfully lucid account of his life and times with his slow, steady rise to eminence and sudden tragic fall at the height of his career.

This fascinating story begins in 1601 when Bacon was forty years old, a bencher of Gray's Inn and Learned Counsel to Elizabeth I with a seat in Parliament. But his fortunes were at a low ebb. His brother's friend and patron, the Earl of Essex, had just been executed after Francis had spoken for the Crown at his trial: he was subsequently commanded to publish an account of his lordship's treachery. Then his brother Anthony died heavily in debt; and the empty rooms of his family mansion, Gorhambury at St. Albans, echoed to the laments of his demented mother; the only young woman whom he had hoped to marry, Elizabeth Hatton, had chosen his rival at the bar, the wealthy Attorney General, Sir Edmund Coke. Bacon had narrowly escaped arrest for debt; and had fallen from favour at Court for opposing the Royal subsidies. But he managed to ward off his creditors until his fortunes revived. He was knighted at the coronation of James I; and his financial prospects improved in 1603 on his engagement to eleven-year-old Alice Barnham, daughter of a wealthy London Alderman who had settled £6,000 cash and an annual income of £300 on her marriage three years later. Thereafter Bacon steadily ascended the winding stairs of success: he became Solicitor General in 1607; Attorney General in 1613; Lord Keeper of the Great Seal in 1617; and finally Lord Chancellor of England, Baron Verulam and Viscount St. Albans. But at the zenith of his career two former suitors accused him of taking money for furthering their interests and Bacon was charged with bribery and corruption. He pleaded guilty, renounced his defence and placed himself upon the "Grace and mercy of your Lordships". He was fined £40,000, briefly imprisoned in the Tower, and declared incapable of holding office. Bacon's fall was posterity's gain as he had ample time to devote to his writings until his death in 1626 aged sixty-five years.

Daphne du Maurier's account of Bacon's many-sided career is immensely readable, and may be recommended as a prelude to the study of his writings. She provides an epilogue, a bibliography and an appendix listing his essays. But a second appendix giving eighteen plays of Shakespeare published in 1623 is somewhat superfluous as Miss du Maurier sees Bacon's hand in them, although her evidence is slight and unconvincing.