

Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626)

Known primarily for the section on Salomons House, the supposed blueprint for the Royal Society, *New Atlantis* is one of only two fictional texts written by Sir Francis Bacon (1563-1626), natural philosopher and statesman, and occupies a precarious position in his canon. While in many ways a 'utopian' text similar to Andreae's *Christianopolis*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, and More's *Utopia* (to which it cheekily refers), it simultaneously subverts, manipulates and pulls itself clear of such generic bindings.

Appearing unheralded at the back of *Sylva sylvarum* (1626), a sort of compendium of natural historical experiments and observations published a few short months after Bacon's death, *New Atlantis* lacks definitive evidence of authorial intention. All material relating to the circumstances surrounding its composition (scholarly estimations range from 1613 to 1625), publication, purpose and meaning stem from its editor, William Rawley, latterly Bacon's chaplain, secretary and amanuensis: it is not mentioned in Bacon's works or letters. Rawley does, however, give two versions of its status: one accompanying the original vernacular edition, another the Latin translation which appeared in *Operum moralium et civilium tomus* (1638). In his rather sketchy letter To The Reader, Rawley refers to it as a 'fable', noting that Bacon intended (but failed) to incorporate a series of laws to form 'the *best State or Mould of a Common-wealth*' (*New Atlantis*, a2r) connecting it squarely to both More's *Utopia* and Plato's *Republic* and finishes the text with the words 'The rest was not perfected'. We have nothing but Rawley's word for this, however.

Beginning like a typical travel narrative, *New Atlantis* could have been taken straight from Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations* (1599/1600):

WEE sayled from *Peru*, (wher wee had continued by the space of one whole yeare,) for *China* and *Iapan*, by the South Sea; taking with vs Victuals for twelue Moneths. (a3r)

First becalmed, then lost in an 'vtterly vnknowne' (a3r) part of the South Sea, the crew finally abandon all hope of survival. It is then that the island of Bensalem (which translates as son of peace) reveals itself. The sailors rejoice, praise God, and make for land. Their reception is cordial but firm, and the Bensalemites question them on their religion. Assured that no blood has been shed by the crew for forty days, they transfer the sailors to the Strangers House, where they are quarantined for a further three days before being given limited licence to remain on the island.

Part hospital, part quarantine, part guest house, Strangers House has lain unoccupied for thirty seven years, as the island is so rarely discovered, and here the sailors get their first taste of Bensalemite food, described as 'right good Viands, both for Bread, and Meate: Better then any *Collegiate* Diett, that I haue knowne in *Europe*' (b1v) The superiority of all things Bensalemite is a recurring theme throughout *New Atlantis*, and descriptions regularly mix the 'exotic' with the closer to home: the Governor of the House of Strangers, from whom they learn of the island's spiritual and temporal history, is described as 'clothed in Blew [...] saue that his Turban was white, with a small

red Crosse on the Topp. He had also a Tippet of fine Linnen' (b2r).

The Governor, a Christian Priest '*by vocation*', explains the terms of the sailors' licence to remain before answering the narrator's question regarding the island's conversion to Christianity by stating that it was '*About twenty Yeares after the Ascension of our SAVIOVR*' (b3v). A pillar of light appeared off the east coast which no boat could approach. A 'wise man' from Salomons House, the island's 'scientific' institute, however, certified it as a miracle, upon which his boat was allowed to move closer: an early connection between religious devotion and natural philosophy. The wise man approaches to find an ark of cedar which opens to reveal '*a Booke, and a Letter*' (b4r). The letter, from Saint Bartholomew, states that God's providence has guided the ark and brings salvation, while the book

contained all the Canonick Bookes of the Old and New Testament, according as you haue them; (For we know well what the Churches with you receiue;) And the Apocalypse it selfe; And some other Bookes of the New Testament, which were not at that time written (b4r)

This statement is typical of *New Atlantis*, as it demonstrates the superior knowledge of the Bensalemites, who '*know well most part of the Habitable World, and are our selues vnknowne*', and also the nature of their scriptures – given directly to the Bensalemites rather than mediated through the apostles in the Western tradition. Furthermore, they come pre-translated, as '*There was also in both these writings, as well the Booke, as the Letter, wrought a great Miracle, Conforme to that of the Apostles, in the Originall Gift of Tongues*' (b4v). Bensalemite Christianity is perfect, unriven by controversy, and truly *sola scriptura*. Indeed, Christianity is the driving force behind the islanders' activities, and much of the reason why the sailors are greeted so warmly.

The Governor follows his spiritual history with a temporal history, accentuating Bensalem's longevity, as three thousand years previously,

This Island, (as appeareth by faithfull Registers of those times) had then fiftene hundred strong Ships, of great content. Of all this, there is with you sparing Memory, or none; But we haue large Knowledge thereof (c1v)

This is but one of many references to unbroken record-keeping on the island, asserting Bensalem's superior 'tradition' over that of the Europeans while simultaneously allowing for a culture within which Baconian natural history might be carried out. Bensalem, explains the Governor, avoided the fate of the other great nations of that time because King Solamona framed a series of rules which effectively hid the island from the view of the rest of the world, protecting it from malign influences. This, combined with a policy of assimilating those rare visitors who happen across the island, meant that

in so many Ages since the Prohibition, wee haue memory not of one Shipp that euer returned, and but of thirteene Persons only, at seuerall times, that chose to returne in our

Bottomes. What those few that returned may haue reported abroad I know not. But you must thinke, Whatsoever they haue said, could bee taken where they came, but for a Dreame (c3v)

The narrator then details the social make-up of the island, firstly through an explanation of a ritual called the Feast of the Family, a great honour accorded to 'any Man, that shall liue to see thirty Persons, descended of his Body, aliue together, and all aboute 3. yeares old' (d1r) and secondly through his discourse with Joabin, a Jewish merchant who explains the Bensalemite marriage customs (gently poking fun at More's *Utopia*), before he is '*commanded away in hast*', returning only to inform the narrator that '*one of the Fathers of Salomons House, will be here this day Seuennight: Wee haue seene none of them this Dozen Yeares. His Comming is in State; But the Cause of his coming is secret*' (d4v).

The narrator is duly given an audience with the father (though not until over a page is spent describing his splendid attire and glorious retinue - the Bensalemites place great store, it seems, by their mode of dress, using it to communicate both status and function), who gives the narrator '*the greatest Jewell I haue [...] a Relation of the true State of Salomons House* (e2r). For the majority of commentators this descriptive narrative is the focal point of *New Atlantis*: indeed, Rawley's letter To The Reader states

THis Fable my Lord deuised, to the end that He might exhibite therein, a Modell or Description of a Colledge, instituted for the Interpreting of Nature, and the Producing of Great and Marueilous Works for the Benefit of Men; Vnder the Name of Salomons House, or the Colledge of the Sixe Dayes Works (a2r)

While keen that his natural historical project be carried out, Bacon saw that it was 'plainly a work for a king or pope, or some college or order' (*LL*, VII, p. 533) and the dedicatory letter which accompanied the *Instauratio magna* of 1620 – Bacon's magnum opus which included *Novum organum* – was essentially an extended plea for James to provide suitable finance. It may be that the founding of Salomons House was a coded criticism of James's refusal to cough up the cash – James considered himself a new Solomon. The Governor of the House of Strangers noted that

amongst the Excellent Acts of that King, one aboute all hath the preheminance. It was the Erection, and Institution of an Order, or Society, which wee call Salomons House; The Noblest Foundation, (as wee thinke,) that euer was vpon the Earth; And the Lanthorne of this Kingdome. It is dedicated to the Study of the Works, and Creatures of God (c4r)

The father states that '*The End of our Foundation is the Knowledge of Causes, and Secrett Motions of Things; And the Enlarging of the bounds of Humane Empire, to the Effecting of all Things possible*' (e2r), echoing the rhetoric of Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* and *Novum organum*. He then lists the various experiments and trials undertaken by the brothers of Salomons House, the advances in plant and animal husbandry, food manufacture, munitions, the prolongation of life, and so on. In doing so, the father accentuates not only the ongoing nature of the research, the time it has

taken and its success, but its application to actual problems – this is operative, not speculative power.

As with Bacon's own programme, Salomons House relied on the gathering of information over long periods of time, something allowed for by Solamona's wisdom in assuring Bensalem's temporal stability. The institute was tightly organised, with information collected according to the Baconian natural historical principles elucidated over the course of his works, not least the *Parasceve* of 1620, by several dedicated groups.

The first, often mistaken for intellectual thieves, were the merchants of light: a group of twelve '*that Sayle into Forraine Countries*' to collect '*the Bookes, and Abstracts, and Patternes of Experiments of all other Parts*' (f4r). The raw information is organised by groups of three: the Depredatours collect the experiments in books; the Mystery-Men collect the experiments of the mechanical arts; the Pioners or Miners try new experiments. Then the Compilers '*Drawe the Experiments of the Former Foure into Titles, and Tables, to giue the better light, for the drawing of Obseruations and Axiomes out of them*' (f4v), before the Dowry-men investigate these experiments for things of use. The whole body meets to consider all that has been collected, before the Lamps direct new, more penetrating experiments, the Inoculatours carry out these experiments, and the Interpreters of Nature '*raise the former Discoueries by Experiments, into Greater Obseruations, Axiomes, and Aphorismes*' (g1r).

Having explained the workings, the rationale, and the successes of Salomons House, the father does something very strange, something which has gone un-noticed by critics who obsess over the final, editorial insertion of 'The rest was not perfected':

And when Hee had sayd this, Hee stood vp: And I, as I had beene taught, kneeled downe, and He layd his Right Hand vpon my Head, and said; G O D *Blesse thee, my Sonne; And G O D blesse this Relation, which I haue made. I giue thee leaue to Publish it; for the Good of other Nations; For wee here are in GODS Bosome, a Land vnknowne.* And so hee left mee; Hauing assigned a Valew of about two Thousand Duckets, for a Bounty to mee and my Fellowes. For they giue great Largesses, where they come, vpon all occasions (g2r)

The narrator essentially becomes the mouthpiece of the father, an act which harks back to Bacon's first piece of fictional writing, the *Redargutio philosophiarum*, in which the narrator recounts a speech given by 'a man of peaceful and serene air, save that his face had become habituated to the expression of pity' (Farrington, p. 104) a description pre-figuring that of the father of Salomons House, 'a *Man* of middle Stature, and Age, comely of Person, and had an Aspect as if he pittied Men' (e1r).

After publication, *New Atlantis* was regularly appropriated, with a continuation being published in 1660 by 'R. H.' (who some take to be Robert Hooke), an explicitly Rosicrucian version appearing in John Heydon's *Holy Guide* (1662), and Thomas Bushell stating that he would leave 'after my debts paid a magnificent Monument in memory of my most deserving Master, by finishing his

SOLOMONS House in all its dimensions, and with all the accommodations and endowments thereof, according to his Lordships own Heroick *Idea*' (Bushell, A3r). Naturally, Bushell failed to create the research institute in the flesh, but the idea was powerful enough for Samuel Hartlib to invite Comenius to England in 1641 to begin the 'construction' of the 'Invisible College', based on Salomons House, while Joseph Glanvill called Bacon's fictional institution a '*Prophetick Scheam of the ROYAL SOCIETY*' (Glanvill, c1v).

A rich and rewarding text whose influence on the 'scientific' endeavours of the following centuries is, like much of Bacon's oeuvre, underappreciated, *New Atlantis* bears several generic 'utopian' features, while neatly encapsulating Bacon's ideas on religion, natural philosophy, morality, and history. Even the 'new' in the title reflects Bacon's iconoclasm and desire to overthrow lazy dependence on received authority, and replace it with a natural philosophical authority as delineated in his *Novum organum*, itself an appropriation of the *Organum* of Aristotle, Bacon's *bête noir*. In *New Atlantis*, Bacon simply wished to show how mankind could 'make it new'.

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