

An Unrecorded Letter of Sir Francis Bacon, to New College, 12 April 1617

New College Archives holds two letters of the great statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626). The first letter is part of NCA 9483, a collection of autograph letters of monarchs and statesmen, from Henry VII and Henry VIII to Napoleon Bonaparte and George Washington. This collection has long been known to contain, for instance, a passport under the sign-manual of Elizabeth I for the poet and courtier Philip Sidney to travel abroad for two years, in order to learn languages.

The Bacon item is a letter addressed to Arthur Lake as Bishop of Bath and Wells, and dated 19 April 1617, a point at which Lake was still Warden of New College. It concerns arbitration in a cause concerning a lease of lands belonging to John Isbury's almshouses at Lambourn, in West Berkshire.¹

The second letter in the archives appears to be unknown to modern scholars, however, and dates from the same year. Bacon was nearing the height of his political career in 1617, when he was appointed to the office of Lord Keeper. He had been courting this honour for some time: his predecessor, Thomas Egerton, Lord Ellesmere, had been ill since early 1616, and the opportunistic Bacon had been fidgeting around the ailing baron. At last, on 3 March 1617, Ellesmere surrendered the great seal to the king in person, and died less than a fortnight later. In the interim, on 7 March, Bacon succeeded him in office. Still mounting on the wheel of fortune, Bacon became Lord Chancellor on 7 January 1618 and was soon ennobled as Baron Verulam of Verulam. In 1621 he was impeached and disgraced.

No doubt many people and institutions wanted to congratulate Bacon in 1617. The University of Cambridge wrote to Bacon, and he replied in fulsome terms on 12 April; the University of Oxford wrote likewise, and he replied again on the same day. Oxford had perhaps a little more need to be reassured, as Bacon was a Cambridge man, and had sat as the MP for that university in the Addled Parliament of 1614. This explains his reassuring tones to Oxford: 'for the equality you write of, I shall by the grace of God, far as may concern me, hold the balance as equally between the two universities, as I shall hold the balance of other justice between party and party'.²

It seems however that New College decided to write separately to the new Lord Chancellor. NCA 957 is a quarto volume of Orders of the Warden and Thirteen, a set of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century *acta* of what was in effect the executive council of the college at the time. The majority of entries are licenses permitting absence, signed by the Warden and the thirteen senior fellows. There are other entries, for instance on the statutory right for certain fellows to study astronomy, permissions granted to fellows wishing to transfer to the medical faculty, or permissions for fellows to leave the college for the sake of what were possibly job interviews.

The manuscript also contains scribal copies of official correspondence. One such example is Francis Bacon's reply to the college's congratulatory letter, which must have been sent sometime between 7 March and 12 April. This does not survive in the college, but it was copied into this register (reading retrograde, p. 39). It is a short letter, but pretends to some sincerity, Bacon signing with his new title of 'Cs', the abbreviation for *Custos sigilli*:

¹ It is noted under the reference bcn0957 by The Francis Bacon Correspondence Project: <<http://www.livesandletters.ac.uk/bacon/baconindex.html>>. The Sidney passport was first announced by John Buxton and Bent Juel-Jensen in *The Library* 25 (1970), pp. 42-46.

² James Spedding, *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, 7 vols. (London, 1861-1874), vi, 165-65.

To the Warden and fellows of New Colledg in Oxford ./

I did easily perceave by the mannor of your Lettre, that it was not the lott of the Chauncelors place, nor the tradition from B^b. Wiccham that indicted that letter from you, but a great deale of good affection towards my self, w^{ch} bindeth me to you so much the more, and maketh the Patronage and good will w^{ch} I bear towards you far more then formall and in that degree I pray you to clayme it and vse it and so with my very hartly thancks I com~~m~~end you to Gods goodness

Your Loving and assured frend

Gorhamber
Aprill 12. 1617

Fr: Bacon Cs ./

William Poole
Fellow Librarian