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Nathaniel Bacon: A Forerunner of the Revolution?

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As early as the end of the seventeenth century, some sort of local government had taken shape in the English colonies of America. In fact, barely one hundred years after the foundation of Jamestown, the settlers already enjoyed relative autonomy; because of the distance between London and Virginia, long delays were necessary and it made sense that local affairs should be treated by a local government. The colonies were thus "largely self-governing not because they were too proud to submit to dictation but because the mother country was too far away to govern them effectively."[1] The general pattern was more or less the same in all colonies (except Connecticut and Rhode Island, which had a special status and were completely self-governing) and to a large extent reproduced the English institutions:

- a governor, coming from England and appointed by the King (or the proprietor), representing the crown.
- a council, composed of local people, generally of the wealthier class, also appointed (*not* elected); it was a sort of upper chamber, playing a role similar to that of the House of Lords.
- and a local assembly, elected by white male adults meeting property qualifications (owning some land, *i.e.* a relatively large proportion of the population); this assembly was more representative of local interests — a counterpart of the House of Commons.

During the colonial period, conflicts naturally often arose between the colonies and the mother country on various issues. But there were also frequent conflicts within the American local institutions, conflicts opposing the governor (who stood for English interests and generally had a sort of "global" view of things) and the assemblies (more concerned with immediate local questions and in a way more "limited" in their approach). One of the most famous examples of such opposition was Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. It was in fact just one of those numerous instances of the rivalries between an English-born governor and Virginian interests — but perhaps because of the date (exactly one hundred years before Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence) it has often been given a more profound significance. Our aim will be to examine the elements that turned young councillor Bacon's resistance to Governor Berkeley's authority into a myth which was to be so whole-heartedly adopted by American people.

Bacon's Rebellion was the direct consequence of Indian troubles. The year before it started, an expedition had been sent out in September 1675 by Virginia and Maryland against the Susquehannocks; the whites killed five Susquehannock chiefs who had come to them for a parley. This naturally led to retaliations. As the settlers complained about insecurity, in March 1676, six

[1] John A. Garraty, *The American Nation* (New York: 1983 [1966]), p. 27.

months later, Governor William Berkeley had to call a meeting of the assembly at Jamestown. The orders from London were to maintain peace at all costs, but under the pressure of public opinion the governor arranged for the raising of troops to assure defence against Indian attacks and the building of forts on the Frontier. Such policy however seemed to some people rather unaggressive against the hated natives, and the discontented frontiersmen rallied under the leadership of young Nathaniel Bacon to fight the Indians, whether alliances had been concluded or not, and whatever the position of the old governor.

In May, Governor Berkeley and three hundred men started marching against Bacon's rebellious group, who then slaughtered the Occaneechees after taking temporary refuge with them. Yet when Berkeley found himself confronted to a far larger group than he had anticipated (several hundred men), he was awed by this mob and gave way: he reluctantly made Bacon commander-in-chief of the forces against the Indians, agreeing to justify his actions to the King; on June 25th, he also signed all the bills passed by the assembly, and which are traditionally known as "Bacon's Laws." Bacon went on leading indiscriminate actions against the Indians; he thus raided the Pamunkeys, a quiet people who had long been connected with the English. Berkeley then pulled himself together and denounced the permit as extorted; Bacon and his followers rose against him, drove him from Jamestown and burnt the town (September 1676). Bacon however died suddenly a month later of "lice and flux" and the rebellion collapsed for want of able leadership. The rebels were tried; although London offered pardon, Berkeley had over twenty of them hanged for treason. For that he was recalled to England and sharply rebuked by the King; Charles II was reported to have declared: "That old fool has hanged more men in that naked country than I have done for the murder of my father."[2] The heart-broken governor died the year after, an embittered old man, while a peace treaty was signed with the Indians that had been under attack during the rebellion.

The striking opposition which existed between the two figures that dominated the episode may partly explain the mythification of Bacon's Rebellion. They could be contrasted in every respect, and depending on which aspect was given more importance (Indian policy or political reform), the resistance of the councillor to the governor could be seen as the revolt of youth *vs.* age, the frontiersman *vs.* the colonial Establishment, the spirit of democracy *vs.* privileges and conservatism.

At the time of the events, Sir William Berkeley was nearly seventy. A veteran of the English Civil War on the Cavaliers' side and of Virginia's Indian wars, he was extremely popular, a favourite of the King as well as the "Darling of the People" of Virginia.[3] He had been appointed governor of the colony in 1641 and had been in charge almost continuously, except for the period 1652–1659 during

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[2] T. M. [Thomas Mathew], "The Beginning, Progress and Conclusion of Bacons Rebellion in Virginia in the Years 1675 and 1676" (1705), in *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675–-1690*, ed. by Charles Mc Lean Andrews (New York: 1915), p. 40.

[3] Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel* (Chapel Hill: 1957), p. 17.

Cromwell's Commonwealth, always remaining faithfully devoted to the Stuarts. In 1676, he was an elderly man trying to maintain order with the Indians, always calling for moderation; he avoided hasty decisions and asked for a careful investigation of the incidents before resorting to repression against tribes with whom peace treaties had previously been concluded. He was above all concerned with the welfare of the colony and often sacrificed his own interest for the general good; hence the great popularity he enjoyed among the population of Virginia.

Nathaniel Bacon was a cousin of the governor, forty-five years younger since he was born in 1647. Educated at Cambridge, he had to leave the university after two and a half years; his tutor explained he was a gentleman of "very good parts, and a quick wit," but "impatient of labour, and indeed his temper will not admit long study."[4] The spoilt child of a well-off English squire, he proved extravagant and constantly caused his father worries, marrying without permission and getting involved in fraud. His father finally decided to send him to the New World. In 1674, Nathaniel Bacon arrived in Virginia and was warmly welcomed by Sir William Berkeley who helped him to establish himself on a plantation on the Frontier, according to his wishes, and also granted him a commission to trade with the Indians; he equally appointed him to the council of state in 1675 — a great honour, although he seldom attended the meetings. Young Bacon was described as being of medium height, slender, with black hair,

> and of an ominous, pensive, melancholly Aspect, of a pestilent and prevalent Logical discourse tending to atheisme in most companyes, not given to much talke, or to make suddain replyes, of a most imperious and dangerous hidden Pride of heart, despising the wisest of his neighbours for their Ignorance, and very ambitious and arrogant.[5]

A glimpse at a handbook of local history used in the schools of Henrico County (Richmond, Va.) in recent years shows the tendency to idealisation in the mere evocation of Bacon's appearance and personality: "He was tall and slender, and had an abundance of black hair. The expression of his face was thoughtful and determined. He had a quick temper, a commanding manner, and great ability as a speaker." More than that, the authors add that "he was not a member of the selfish group of men whom Berkeley had gathered about him. Bacon had an open mind"[6]… an assertion which rather sounds like wishful thinking!

One of the origins of the romantic vision of the episode may be traced to a play written a few years after the revolt by an English playwright and novelist of the Restoration period, Mrs Aphra Behn. The text, *The Widow Ranter, or, the History of Bacon in Virginia*, was discovered after her death and performed in 1690. The product of a wild imagination, the play has not much to do with

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4 John Ray to Peter Courthope of Danny, from Friston Hall [1662?] in *Further Correspondence of John Ray*, ed. by Robert W. T. Gunther (London: 1928), n° 19.

5 Commissioners' "Narrative" [1677] in *Narratives of the Insurrections*, ed. by Charles Mc Lean Andrews, p. 110.

6 Jones and Poole Simkins, *Virginia: History, Government, Geography* (New York: 1964 [1957]), p. 118.

historical events, but the opposition between a cowardly, despotic, old villain (Berkeley) and the attractive, dashing, romantic young hero (Bacon) provided perfect contrast and all the necessary ingredients of adventure, love and violence for popular drama.

The opposition was not just that of age and character; many historians have seen it as an example of the gap between the frontiersmen and the Establishment of eastern planters. As Garraty pointed out, "despite western growth, there had been no election in Virginia since 1662, and a clique in the entourage of the royal governor, Sir William Berkeley, held most of the government jobs in the colony."[7] The power being held by eastern planters, western interests were thus more or less underestimated. Although he belonged to the planter class, Bacon had chosen to live on the Frontier, and therefore was concerned by western issues; above all, he had the frontiersman's aggressiveness towards the Indians. He did not share the fine distinctions established by the governor between the various Indian tribes — some being allies of the whites. For Bacon as for most Westerners, all Indians were savages representing a potential danger as well as a hindrance in the westward movement: "Bacon's followers showed no disposition to distinguish Indians as friends or enemies; they made indiscriminate war on all natives."[8] The Occaneechees for instance had long been allied with the English and took part in the fur trade with them; and as far as the peaceful Pamunkeys were concerned, their lands had been secured to them by a treaty in 1646. It was quite normal that Governor Berkeley should have been angry at Bacon's raids against them: not only were they morally unjustified, they also seriously endangered a precarious peace and ran the risk of causing a coalition of all Indian tribes against the treacherous whites.

Besides that aggressive, indiscriminate attitude toward the Indians, Bacon also represented the Frontier distrust of the Tidewater planters. Some historians have explained the rebellion as "a revolt of the lower classes of whites against the aristocratic families who governed Virginia," as "the cause of the poor against the rich, of the humble folk against the grandees."[9] Yet there were large owners and small owners equally on each side; and Bacon himself had a large plantation. What seems more significant is the location of wealth rather than its importance: those who opposed the governor generally owned land in the backcountry whereas most of his supporters were Tidewater people.

There is no doubt that Berkeley, partly because of his age, partly because of his experience of the English Civil War, was determined not to tolerate any opposition and could be considered rather authoritative. Fearing insurrection, especially among Westerners, and scrupulously enforcing the King's orders, he wanted to control expansion and "seemed to have set up a political machine which was managing affairs for the benefit of a special group. Small farmers and

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7 John A. Garraty, *The American Nation*, p. 53.

8 Nancy Oestreich Lurie, "Indian Cultural Adjustment to European Civilization", in *Seventeenth Century America*, ed. by James Morton Smith (New York: 1972), p. 54.

9 John Fiske, *Old Virginia and her Neighbours* (Boston: 1897), ch. II, p. 104.

planters complained that taxation was excessive and unfairly distributed."[10] This however was not a particular case: most governors in the colonies tried to get the support of the elite by granting them special favours and appointments: "the provincial councils became the political strongholds of the wealthiest, while the assemblies were usually controlled by the well-to-do."[11] Yet some historians believed the aim of Bacon and his followers was not just to fight the Indians with more pugnacity, but also to get reforms from the governor. As we said earlier, no elections had taken place for fourteen years and it was the immediate consequence of the rebellion to bring about new elections and new laws, known as "Bacon's laws," tending to increase popular control over local government. Again the role of Bacon as reformer should be carefully evaluated. W. E. Washburn, examining the acts in detail, comes to the conclusion that "all of Bacon's demands were concerned with carrying out his project against the Indians without interference. He made no demands for political reform."[12] Besides, most of the bills were drawn while he was absent from the assembly. For T. J. Wertenbaker on the contrary, the role played by Bacon was significant and he concluded lyrically that "in its essential features Bacon's Rebellion was a wind of democracy blowing from the west, a wind that was to come again and again as the frontier receded."[13]

The symbol springing from such interpretation is of course an attractive one, and the image of Bacon as the "torchbearer of the Revolution"[14] is one of the die-hard myths in Virginia. The romantic novel in ante-bellum Virginia also brought its contribution to the legend of Bacon as a defender of the oppressed. A century and a half after the Rebellion, William Alexander Caruthers wrote *Cavaliers of Virginia* (1834),[15] a historical romance dealing with those events. Again Bacon is described as a romantic hero, "an orphan and an outcast", with "handsome, commanding features" and "a somewhat precocious maturity."[16] But he and his friends are also disciples of John Locke, ready to fight in order "to protect their lives and property, which they now felt, if they had never before known, was an inalienable right."[17] And Caruthers develops the significance he attributes to Bacon's action;

> Here was sown the first germ of the American revolution. Men have read the able arguments — the thrilling declamations, the logical defence of natural and primitive rights, which the men of '76 put forth to the world, with wonder at the seeming intuitive wisdom that

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10 Henry Steele Commager and Allan Nevins (ed.), *The Heritage of America* (Boston: 1949 [1939]), p. 53.

11 Charles Sellers and Henry May, *A Synopsis of American History* (Chicago, 1969 [1963]), p. 36.

12 Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel*, p. 60.

13 Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, "The First Americans", in, *A History of American Life*, 12 vol., ed. by Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox, vol. II, p. 308.

14 Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Torchbearer of the Revolution: the Story of Bacon's Rebellion and its Leader* (Princeton: 1940).

15 William Alexander Caruthers, *Cavaliers of Virginia*, 2 vol. (New York: 1968 [1834]).

16 *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 16.

17 *Ibid.,* vol. II, p. 50.

> burst so suddenly upon the world at the very exigency which called it into action. But in our humble opinion, the inception of these noble sentiments was of much earlier date —their development not so miraculous as we would like to flatter ourselves. Exactly one hundred years before the American revolution, there was a Virginian revolution based upon precisely similar principles.[18]

Such idealisation appealed to the common mind and developed in Virginian popular tradition. The plaque placed in 1904 in the court room of the Gloucester County Court House is a good example of the symbolic meaning later attributed to the rebel. It mentions him as "the Washington of his day, popular and patriotic, whose magnanimity strongly contrasts with Berkeley's malignity. A soldier, a statesman, a Saint."[19] More recently, the schoolchildren of Henrico County could read the following lines about Bacon in their history handbooks:

> He will be remembered as a patriot. He was a man of wealth and courage who gave his fortune and his life to protect the rights of the people against tyranny. He attempted to gain the liberties Virginians won a hundred years later, in 1776.[20]

Such judgements naturally satisfy childish oversimplification and the American tendency to consider history as a TV serial opposing a despotic, hypocritical, cruel character to a young, attractive hero prompted by the love of liberty and dying for a Cause that was won later by his 1776 followers. As we have seen, the reasons for the rebellion were both more complex and less glorious, and all wrongs cannot be attributed to the governor — far from it — but his age as well as his functions did not play in his favour in the eyes of posterity. Besides, it is obvious that the Revolutionary era certainly distorted any kind of objectivity about Bacon's Rebellion: for the new-born nation, the English governor could only appear as the representative of a hated authority and be given the part of the villain, the two periods becoming somehow superposed in the subconscious of American people.

It is no wonder then that the character of Bacon should have appealed to Americans, and more specifically Virginians, after the Revolution and after the Civil War. Provided one did not inquire too closely into facts or motives, his resistance to the governor could be read as the expression of all myths dear to Southerners. It could be interpreted as the conflict between youth and age, west and east, democracy and conservatism, justice and despotism, freedom and authoritarianism, local rights and centralisation. Bacon could all at once appear as the champion of democracy, the forerunner of the spirit of 1776, as well as the Southern fire-eater, the romantic Rebel of the War Between the States. Thus a limited uprising was turned by later historical events and nineteenth century sentimentalism into a mythical example of resistance, an "intellectual construction fusing concept and emotion into an image."[21]

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18 *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 50–51.

19 Gloucester County Court Common Law Order Book, n° 2, p. 370.

20 Jones and Poole Simkins, *Virginia: History, Government, Geography*, p. 127.

21 Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: 1950), p. V.