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POLITICAL THOUGHT IN ENGLAND

By G. P. GOOCH

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POLITICAL
THOUGHT IN
ENGLAND

FROM BACON TO
HALIFAX

BY

G. P. GOOCH

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THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY," "HISTORY AND
HISTORIANS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY,"
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POLITICAL THOUGHT IN ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

I. JAMES I, BACON AND THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

I

IF the sixteenth century was the era of theological controversy, the seventeenth was above all the age of political discussion. The Reformation had broken the traditional European system in pieces, and it was necessary to erect some other structure under the shelter of which men and nations could live in safety. Such shelter was found in the increase of the authority of the temporal ruler; but the exorbitant claims of kings led by an inevitable reaction to the demand for popular rights. If the absolute State was the child and heir of the Reformation, democracy was its residuary legatee. Thinkers from Bacon to Locke, statesmen from James I to Halifax, devoted themselves to working out a new basis for human association in place of the feudal and ecclesiastical principles which had disappeared for ever. Here is the key to the political thought of the seventeenth century.

The power that was lost by the Papacy and the Church was grasped by Henry VIII and held firmly in his strong hands; and in the struggle for national existence which filled the reign of Elizabeth the country was content that its destinies should be controlled by a powerful and popular monarch. "Nothing, no worldly thing under the sun," she declared, "is so dear to me as the love and goodwill of my subjects"; and her people knew that she was speaking the truth. The nation consented to the Tudor despotism; but it was only as champions of the national aspirations, religious and political, that the Tudors were able to exercise an autocratic sway. With the defeat of the Armada the country began to realise that the need for an iron hand had passed, and when the virgin Queen was in her grave new breezes began to blow. Devotion to her had been personal, not official. The individualistic leaven of the Reformation had been silently at work for two generations, and the Puritan sects had convinced themselves that autocracy was incompatible with the religious freedom they claimed for themselves as the highest of earthly privileges. If a conflict was to be avoided between the crown and the people it could only be by the exercise of unusual tact, and by the recognition that the time was ripe for a cautious advance in the direction of political and ecclesiastical liberty. Largely as a result of Tudor policy political power had passed from the nobles to the country gentry and the mercantile classes. The succession was no longer in danger, and the motives for acquiescence in autocracy had disappeared. A wiser ruler than James might have guided the steps of his people along the paths of progress; but he was utterly lacking in the