The English antiquarian, John Leland, once wrote that it would be “easier to collect all the leaves of the Sibyls” than all the manuscripts containing works by Roger Bacon.¹ This rich inheritance is by no means exhausted, and has already enabled scholars to uncover the nature of Bacon’s thought and influence across a wide range of disciplines.² Yet the paucity of extant references to him by his contemporaries has meant that our sense of Bacon as a personality and an actor in the affairs of his age is extremely circumscribed. His role in his own society has been established more by tracing the presence and development of his ideas through various texts than by the study of any direct allusions to him in the works of others. The current view rests largely on the reading of two sorts of evidence. One is his own writings, chiefly the scattering of autobiographical remarks and his comments on individuals and current affairs. The other is the bald report in a fourteenth-century chronicle which states that some of his ideas had been condemned by the Franciscan order. The effect of these readings has been to create a persistent, but rather narrow sketch of Bacon. He has been represented as a great thinker, but one notable for his bitterness, aggression, isolation and even eccentricity.³ It is possible that this image has blinded us to the implications of contradictory evidence: Bacon’s own references to friends and collaborators; indications of esteem within the order; official approval of his work in high political and ecclesiastical circles. In the case of a figure as central to our understanding of the thirteenth century as Bacon, more care needs

² The range is best indicated by the essays in Jeremiah Hackett (ed.), Roger Bacon and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays (Leiden, 1997).
³ The idea of Bacon as a solitary and isolated victim of the ignorance of his age has its roots in the anti-papal sentiment of the Reformation, reinforced during the crises of the nineteenth century. See Amanda Power, “A Mirror for Every Age: the Reputation of Roger Bacon,” English Historical Review, 121.492 (2006), 657–92.
to be taken over this issue. As Momigliano noted in another context: “The lack of attention to, or the lack of information about, the way of life of an individual...does of course produce problems for the evaluation of the group to which the individual belonged.”

In what follows, I should like to re-examine the extant references to Bacon by name, and to propose that he may have been admired by at least some of his contemporaries for precisely the qualities that—amid the alien values of modernity—we have assumed caused him to stand in some disrepute. In particular, it will be suggested that he was appreciated for his intense zeal for reform, which required harsh criticism of his society, and his detailed knowledge of methods for employing the “power of wisdom” in the service of the Church.

The old debate over the putative condemnation of Roger Bacon has been renewed in recent decades. The only evidence for the condemnation is a brief paragraph in the *Chronica XXIV generalium ordinis minorum*, completed between 1369 and 1374. It reports that in ca. 1278, Jerome of Ascoli, Minister General of the Franciscan order: “after consultation with many brothers, condemned and reproved the teaching of Brother Roger Bacon of England, a master of sacred theology, because it contained some suspected novelties. On account of these novelties the same Roger was condemned to prison.” The rest of the order was instructed to avoid his teachings and the Pope was informed. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this paragraph has affected historical perceptions of Bacon more than all of his writings considered together. Although no direct supporting evidence for its claims has ever come to light, historians have, with some exceptions, been remarkably willing to accept the substance of its testimony. There has been much speculation about the aspects of Bacon’s thought or personality that might have provoked such a condemnation. Various possibilities have been suggested, many of which focus on Bacon’s

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