

## JOHN STOW

An address delivered at the Stow Commemoration at St. Andrew  
Undershaft on 18th May, 1950,

By PROF. J. E. NEALE, M.A., D.LITT., F.B.A.

WE are assembled to keep fresh the memory of one whom King James I described as "a very worthy member of our city of London." John Stow, "the first painful researcher into the reverend antiquities of London," was born in 1525 of citizen parents and forbears. He lived eighty years, his adult life thus stretching through the whole of the long and glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth. He was not educated as a scholar, but was apprenticed to a tailor and, as a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company, pursued that craft, apparently with no great profit and certainly with no distinction. Unfortunately for his pocket, though happily for posterity and for his own immortal fame, he developed a hobby, which by the time he was in his forties had grown into his sole business. John Stow the tailor had become John Stow the antiquary. His own City Company and other enlightened benefactors endowed him with modest pensions; but at the end of his life he had to solicit a royal grant permitting him, in his own person and by deputies, to seek the "kind gratuities" of the public—a charity which was headed by the King, who in his own words began "the largesse for the example of others," and to which, as we know, the parishioners of St. Mary Woolnoth subscribed 7s. 10d. However, we must not allow Victorian ideas of self-help and propriety to turn this incident into too sordid or tragic a picture. A poet, writing a year after Stow's death, set a false note:

Add Stow's late antiquarian pen,  
That annal'd for ungrateful men.  
Next chronicler omit it not,  
His licenc't basons little got;  
Lived poorly where he trophies gave,  
Lies poorly there in noteless grave.

As the monument in this church shows, his grave did not remain nameless; nor, in the larger sense, were his contemporaries or posterity ungrateful. His non-material rewards were enviable—the joy of congenial work, the friendship of many illustrious scholars, the solace of a library, and the knowledge that, at any rate as regards his major book, he was peerless.

Like his great sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, Stow might have described himself as "mere English." We are a historically-minded nation; and to that fact we owe our political maturity and our almost legendary success in making political institutions work. It was in Stow's generation that this trait in our national character became firmly established. Historical reading in Elizabethan England was only surpassed by the reading of the Bible. In no small measure this was due to the nature of our legal system—to the English Common Law which 16th-century England retained when all other countries were succumbing to the sophisticated attractions of the Roman Civil Law. Now, as we are all aware, the English Common Law is based on precedent. It is to be found, not in a written code, but in the legal arguments and judgments of the past. Its study is necessarily antiquarian and historical. Professional lawyers, whose number increased phenomenally in the 16th century, would by themselves have influenced the cultural taste of society. But they were not the only people trained in the law. Secular education was expanding rapidly; the country gentry were invading the universities; and it became the fashion for a gentleman's son to round off his university education by a period of study at the Inns of Court. As a result, the culture of this country was based, not only on the classics as in other lands, but also on English history and antiquities. We can hardly exaggerate the significance of this fashion. "People," wrote Edmund Burke, "will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors." In the parliaments of Stow's days there was plenty of that historical sense. No wonder that his books went through so many editions. And he was only one of a large company of historical writers.

The historical renaissance of the 16th century also owed a great deal to the Reformation, which, by the dispersal of monastic libraries, brought much historical material into lay hands. Stow himself acquired some of these manuscripts and transcribed many others. The stimulus thus provided to antiquarian interests led to the foundation in Queen Elizabeth's reign of a Society of Antiquaries, patronised by Archbishop Parker, which met to hear papers on English antiquities. Stow was a member, and so were many other famous scholars, including William Lambard, whose *Perambulation of Kent* first suggested to Stow the idea of his *Survey of London*, William Camden, whose *Britannia* also influenced him, and Sir Robert

Cotton, whose unrivalled library of manuscripts was later to become the basis of the British Museum. What a goodly fellowship this was; and what pleasure Stow must have found in such company. We possess a brief note of his on which the imagination might play: "1590. The 4 of September, Sir John Leveson, Mr. W. Lambard, and Mr. Leonard did ride to see the monument of Categern, corruptly called Kytts Cotyhouse, I being with them."

The antiquarian movement, in the beginnings of which Stow is a prominent figure, played no small rôle in the constitutional opposition to James I and Charles I. Not a few country gentlemen went to the unutterable tedium of copying out in manuscript all the medieval rolls of parliament, where precedents—which they usually misinterpreted in a most unhistorical fashion—were to be found for quotation against the crown in parliament; and there was also Sir Robert Cotton's library, across the street from St. Stephen's, where additional precedents could be ferretted out by the opposition. Let us not underestimate the service of antiquarianism to British liberty.

The antiquarian cast of Stow's mind was typical of his day, and, as our monumental county histories and the prolific work of our local historical societies show, it has remained through the centuries a typical expression of the English spirit. Stow's historical writings are innocent of philosophy, divorced from the problem of cause and effect, concerned only with a time sequence of facts. And the facts he records often bespeak a naïve, unsophisticated mind in both author and reader. When in his *Annals of England* he reaches his own times and can let his personal discrimination mould the record, public events are jostled and often dwarfed by monstrous births and monstrous beasts, earthquakes and tempests of lightning and thunder. The freezing of the Thames—an impressive event to a London citizen, no doubt, but, to our adult minds, of little or no significance in a national history—brings a story of people playing at football "as boldly as if it had been on the dry land," and of courtiers shooting daily "at pricks" set upon the ice. We are told of a Chancery clerk who wrote on a penny in Latin the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the ten Commandments, two prayers—and other items; mounted his penny on a ring, and presented it, with a magnifying glass, to the Queen. How reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer on a threepenny bit which excited wonder in my boyhood! And how far surpassing! The modern

historian would not wish Stow's *Annals* to be otherwise. We can reconstruct the national story so much better from the State Papers than from anything he might have written; but his naïveties are invaluable.

Stow's masterpiece, the *Survey of London*, is less simple, but equally antiquarian in spirit. While the City was at that time exceptionally large, whether compared with other English or European towns, it was not yet the "Wen" of William Cobbett's day. It was an intimate and integrated community. Its "plumbing" was deplorable, but it was bewitching in its beauty. As Stow takes us on a perambulation, ward by ward, from street to street, noting churches and houses, telling of monuments and epitaphs, commenting on inhabitants and customs, past and present, pouring into his descriptions every relevant fact and fiction that he had gathered from a lifetime of observation and historical reading, what a picture emerges of this city—great heart of greater England! No one could have been more conscious that the present is built upon the past. On those boorish citizens who had effaced the memory of their ancestors by destroying their monuments to make room for their own, he visited the appropriate punishment of excluding them from his record. But all good citizens who through the centuries had of their charity contributed to the wellbeing of the community were admitted to the immortality of his pages. The cumulative effect of his catalogue of benefactions is, I think, one of the most impressive features of the *Survey*. Happy the city that could ceaselessly inspire such benevolence. Happy too that, when Gloriana reigned and Shakespeare wrote and before the Great Fire reduced its beauty to ashes, it could find so erudite, so observant, so devoted a son to erect this inimitable literary monument to its glory.

Let citizens themselves declare  
What dedes theyre mayors have done,  
What benefactors they have had,  
What honor they have wonn.  
And though your selfe a Cytezen  
Regard there lastying fame  
Yet reason is they should reward  
Or recompense the same.

Reason there is why in this year 1950 London's Lord Mayor should regard the lasting fame of John Stow.