

STOW COMMEMORATION  
AT ST. ANDREW UNDERSHAFT, LONDON,  
ON FRIDAY, 16TH APRIL, 1948

ADDRESS BY DR. J. F. NICHOLS, F.S.A.

THE Lord Mayor and the Sheriffs, attended by the State Officials, were received at the Church of St. Andrew Undershaft by the Lord Bishop of Kensington, the Revd. T. Barfett and the Church Wardens. The Lesson was read by William Wheatley, M.A., Honorary Director of the Society's Meetings, and the customary procession was made to Stow's tomb, where the Lord Mayor placed a new quill-pen in the hand of Stow's effigy, and presented the old one in a case and a prize copy of his Survey to the winner of the Essay Competition. After the Service the Bishop, Dr. Nichols, Mr. Wheatley and the Chairman of the Council lunched with the Lord Mayor at the Mansion House.

*Domine dirige nos!*

"The motto of the Aspiration of the City of London first appears in the frontispiece of the 4th edition of the Survey of London which was published in 1633. It may, therefore, be properly quoted as an introduction to this short address.

John Stow, citizen and merchant taylor, lived between the years 1525 and 1605, and, for the greater part of that time worked in the neighbourhood of this Church in which we are gathered to-day to honour his memory. The Church was building during his own early childhood. Is it too fanciful to suggest that it still aptly expresses in its design and architectural features the character of his age? Spacious it was, dignified and solid, proud of its past and conscious of future possibility and determined to meet all trials and opportunities with courage and resource. That age saw great changes, social, economic, and political; it was of immense importance to our City and our Country, and the peculiar value of Stow's work lies, as I need not remind this audience, in the accurate and painstaking record he made of what he had himself observed.

Ten years ago when I was honoured by the invitation to give this address I was able to say something about Stow as the

chronicler: on this occasion I propose to speak of him as a man, a Londoner like ourselves.

It would be idle to deny that there have been historians of London greater than Stow, more learned, more acute, more profound, more scientific in their methods of research, but there has been none whose memory is cherished with greater warmth of affection, a warmth reserved for such undying characters as Samuel Pepys, Doctor Johnson, Charles Lamb, Charles Dickens, Londoners whose individual qualities, and failings, make us immediately conscious of a fellow-feeling—a bond of common humanity.

We can appreciate his passionate curiosity for knowledge that would give him an understanding of the world around him. Deprived of the benefits of an academic training he devoted to the studies that attracted him, at first his leisure, and later time that more prudently, in a wordly sense, might have been devoted to his business. These studies were not historical: his earliest interests and activities were in the fields of divinity, astrology, and English poetry and he showed some antipathy to historical studies, 'he never esteemed history were it offered never so freely,' but he had an overmastering zeal for truth and was first led to the writing of history by his efforts to expose the inaccuracies of a vain and careless contemporary.

He had his own vanity, too, a pride and conceit of his own painfully acquired learning as of the craftsman proud of his skill, by no means an ignoble thing. He could be quarrelsome and disputatious, but he was always honest and sincere, never vindictive, or malicious in his criticism. He did not scruple to condemn the evil-doers, particularly those who ruined charitable foundations by misappropriation, or more commonly by neglect, or those whose impiety disturbed the tombs of the dead.

He was conservative-minded, generally preferring the old to the new: his own age he condemned as 'the most scoffing, carping, disrespectful and unthankful age that ever was,' but that was at a time of special provocation. He deplored the passing of the long bow and the practice of archery as buildings encroached on the pleasant open spaces then to be seen within the walls and immediately outside the City. His apprehensions as to the dangers from wheeled traffic might have a modern sound were they not expressed in terms appropriate to his age  
' . . . the world runs on wheels with many whose parents were content to go on foot. . . . The Coachman rides behind

the horses heels, lasheth them and looketh not behind; the draymen sitteth and sleepeth on his dray, and letteth his horse lead him home.'

So, too, there were problems of housing and of providing for immigrants, but Stow was both generous and discerning and roundly asserted, 'The great influx of foreigners and the freedom of traffic and commerce was the main cause of our increase of wealth.'

Future historians are going to be confronted with a truly terrifying mass of materials in their attempts to unravel the story of our own age. What would they not be ready to give for a clear, accurate, personal record written by some discerning contemporary such as Stow was in his day. Let us hope that this crowded and hurried age may leave at least one diarist or chronicler of his character.

Stow had to endure many trying and humiliating experiences in his domestic life, but he bore these sordid afflictions with remarkable patience and fortitude. He had his compensations for he enjoyed the close personal friendship of several of the most eminent men of his time. Companionable he certainly was, fond of the robust fun and heart good humour exhibited in the simple sports and pastimes of his days. Curiously he makes no mention of the greatest of his contemporaries, Shakespeare, although we know that he was friendly with Ben Jonson; and he has but few references to those intrepid mariners who were giving so heroic a character to the Elizabethan age. This may, perhaps, serve as a salutary reminder that much that is of supreme importance in our own age may be almost unheeded.

The outstanding quality of his work is his vast industry. Some dozen issues were made during his lifetime of his Summary of English Chronicles and his Abridged Summary, and each was most carefully revised and amended. So also there were four editions of his Chronicles and Annals, and two of his Survey of London. Nor should we omit to mention his edition of Chaucer's writings, his works on genealogy, his treatise on the City's Court of Requests, his three 15th century chronicles, the compilations he made of ecclesiastical foundations which provided the basis of Dugdale's great work, or the very valuable collection he made of MS. materials which otherwise must have been lost for all time.

For us, however, it is his Survey of London that remains his greatest work, for it is in this that Stow so fully reveals himself.

He was immensely proud of his City, of the characters and achievements of its citizens, of its history, its traditions, and its institutions. Let us not fail to pay tribute to his real piety. Indeed the first reason he assigns for the writing of history is to put on record God's mercies to mankind.

'Forasmuch as all gifts and graces proceed only from God and that His mercy and benefits have daily increased more and more . . . I have here thought fit to set down the invention of divers things in this latter age.'

No historian has ever had a greater sense of the dignity and importance of his task. The ceremony in which we take part to-day, simple, but given significance and dignity by the attendance in State of the Lord Mayor, would have delighted him, not from any gratification of self-pride but because of its assurance that those things that meant so much to him still hold meaning for us to-day.

*Non nobis Domine sed nomini tuo da gloriam."*