

JOHN STOW

An address delivered at the Stow Commemoration at St. Andrew
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ON 10th December, 1663, Samuel Pepys went out on a book-buying expedition to his bookseller in Paul's Church Yard, and was, as usual, perplexed between the claims of virtue and the claims of pleasure. He turned over a number of books, and finally compromised. He bought Fuller's *Worthies*, Butler's *Hudibras*, and a few "little books" of less reputation, and so home. But he did, at any rate, pause over one big book, Stow's *London*, and even was tempted to buy it.

It is a sign of the times in which we live to-day that the name of John Stow has meaning only to the comparatively few who share his own passion for the history of that great city of which he was so loyal a citizen, or for those records of the past which illuminate the present, and lend to the society of which we are members the august sanction of ancient tradition. The "little books" are having their day. And the big books are increasingly forgotten and set aside, including, alas, the Bible.

Stow was more widely known in his own day, and had his friends then as now among his fellow-antiquaries in London and Middlesex, and also among men of fame in the active history of England. He was indeed a most respected member of a numerous literary and intellectual circle, and was held in high repute among them. In 1594, Michael Drayton, a great poet now coming into his own again, recorded his dependence upon

some especial collections, gathered by the industrious labours of John Stow, a diligent Chronographer of our time. A man very honest, exceedingly painful, and rich in the antiquities of this Isle.

Sir George Buc, man of action, Master of the Revels, and historian of Richard III, learned in conversation with Stow that he had spoken with ancient men who had seen the king, and who could affirm that his only deformity was his low stature, otherwise a comely man.

It was a two-way traffic, moreover. Stow's *Annals* are enriched by gifts from his friends. Sir George Buc contributed a full story of the Cadiz Voyage of 1596, in which he fought himself. William Segar wrote Stow's account of the great embassy from Elizabeth to Henry IV of France, which Segar accompanied as Somerset Herald. It is a significant feature of Elizabeth's England that men of action, and men of thought and letters, were so closely linked together, and moved in each other's spheres. A great passage in Raleigh's *History of the World*, commenting upon the wars of Rome and Carthage, illustrates his doctrine of sea-power, as true to-day as then, by a narrative of his own attack upon the island of Fayal in 1597, in which he was Vice-Admiral. "I landed these English in Fayal myself." A Chancery suit I have found reports the writing by Drake of an account of his own last voyage on board his flagship in which he died off the West Indies. But his journal was lost, and never reached Stow, or us, a lamentable loss.

There is nothing strange in this community of interests between antiquaries and chroniclers, and soldiers, sailors and statesmen, nor is there any unfitness in speaking of it from the pulpit of a great City church. For it is, in its fashion, a reflection of the Christian outlook upon human life on earth, the very basis of the Christian society of Elizabethan England. If the antiquaries sought the fullest records of the past, it was a search for the foundations of the present, and for guidance to living men. If the chroniclers reported the present, and the men of action their own deeds, it was to inform posterity and to abide their judgment. The present stands at the bar of two juries, the past and the future. The society of to-day is the guardian of an ancient trust, and is trustee for society to come. The life of man is seen *sub specie eternitatis*. Even as the soul of each man is immortal, so is the society of man, beyond the end of the world, when all will be merged into that eternal society of heaven which is its final purpose. It is fitting therefore that this commemoration of the life and labours of London's greatest antiquary should be dignified by the presence of the Lord Mayor of London and of a Bishop of the Church of Christ.

What a miserable ambition it is that would erase our past from our life and our memory, and so impoverish immeasurably the present and the future of human society! The brave

new world of materialistic philosophy would deprive not only society, but individual man too, of all significance and of honour. We can see no beauty or rightness in a society of anonymous men, units in an arithmetical total, devoid of personal responsibility. John Stow, a right Elizabethan Englishman, was *himself*, in his own right, hitched his waggon to his own particular star, and judged for himself. So doing, he came to bitter poverty, but also to fame.

I will not say that we can always agree with his judgments, which sometimes clung too closely to tradition. He was very severe upon Sir Thomas Lodge, father of the poet, and Lord Mayor in 1562:

Sir Thomas Lodge, being Mayor of London, wore a beard, and was the first that (being Mayor of London) ever wore any, the which was thought to many people very strange, to leave the comely ancient custom of shaving their beards.

But fashions change, as we may see from the bearded effigy of Stow himself. What we may not with safety change is the English tradition of a man's right and duty to speak for himself. Let me close with a monumental judgment which I have found among the archives of the Court of the Drapers' Company of London. In 1520, they were invited, then ordered, by Henry VIII to contribute five ships towards a voyage to America, for the foundation of a new kingdom there, long before Virginia was thought of. It was to be led by Sebastian Cabot. But Sebastian, they learned, was no safe guide. He had never sailed there before. And they refused, braving Henry's wrath, and gave the king their reasons:

For it is said among mariners in an old proverb, he sails not surely that sails by another man's compass.

The moral is sadly plain in these present days, when men are encouraged to escape from the burden of personal responsibilities, and to sail by other men's compasses. And, once again, this is a profoundly Christian moral. What true antiquary but will hear in this sturdy voice from the past the vindication of his calling? It is, as Stow would put it, an incitement to virtue, and a matter worthy of immortality. Truly, it is the authentic voice of Stow's London, for which he had no small right to speak.