

STOW COMMEMORATION, 8 APRIL, 1924.

ADDRESS BY

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"He sayth of it, as Pilat sayd : What I have written, I have written."

ONCE again with all due reverence we are met together to render homage to that illustrious ancestor whose mortal remains three hundred and nineteen years ago to-day were deposited in this the Parish Church of St. Andrew Under-shaft.

Fortunate must one have been if only to have been born, to have lived, and to have died at such a time as he, a time when national consciousness was awakening and a realization of national aspiration was foreseen. At a tender age Stow, born in 1525, saw the Great Reformation sweep over the land; he witnessed ancient institutions uprooted and old buildings falling to decay, while tradition itself he found to be in danger of passing into forgetfulness. Before he had completed his life's task, King Henry VIII had been succeeded at length by his daughter, the great Elizabeth, who in turn had given place to an offspring of the Queen of Scots. Lingering mediaevalism had vanished before the New Learning, the Spanish Terror had been exorcised at the defeat of the Armada, peace had supervened, and England had found herself. Mighty events indeed had stirred the country to its depths; but it was left to a merchant-taylor to discover the time and the opportunity to gather and piece together the threads of the history of his native City and, in 1598, at the age of seventy-three, to publish *A Survey of London*, the book upon which, for all time, his fame so securely rests. With marvellous detachment from

the great intellectual activities of his age, he pursued with dogged perseverance the course which he had marked out for himself, and before his death, in 1605, he had established his position as annalist, chronicler, and historian. That he was not infallible is but proclaiming him to be human; that he was conservative is to recognize his assiduity in the preservation of ancient memory; that he might have written of this or that is but to acknowledge how much we delight in what in fact he has transcribed for our edification.

Of Stow's early education we have little or no direct information. After a period of apprenticeship terminating at the age of twenty-four, he was admitted to the freedom of the Merchant Taylors' Company, and for long worked at his craft. Yet during this period he published, in 1565, a *Summary of English Chronicles*, many editions of which he lived to see through the Press. In this the midway of his life "he put away needle and thread" and devoted himself to the fuller preparation of his *Annals of England*, ever hoping to secure a competent livelihood in literature. And all the time he was obtaining material for his great work, tramping Ward by Ward, Street by Street, and tracking down incident or recording conversation for inclusion within his *Survey*.

Although resident in the City and primarily concerned with its history and institutions, his outlook was by no means narrow. His catholicity and breadth of vision is well exemplified by an introduction into the *Survey* of a brief account of Sergeants' Inn, the Inns of Court, and Inns of Chancery as they appeared in his day. "There is in and about this City," says Stow, "a whole University, as it were, of students, practisers, or pleaders and judges of the laws of this realm." Think what an account we might have had if Stow had been a member of an Inn of Court, and how much information we might now be possessing concerning the early doings of the lawyers and their origin, information still so sadly lacking! In addition to his telling us what was

reported by Linsted, alias Fowle, last prior of S. Mary Overies Church in Southwark, concerning the origin of London Bridge, he might have set down the conversations which he had had with the Master of the Temple before the time when the King annexed the overlordship of the property of the Knights-Hospitaller situated on the Banks of the Thames. He might have narrated for our benefit something of the dramatic activities of the Gentlemen of the Inns of Court during his lifetime, and of the interest that his gracious sovereign Queen Elizabeth had evinced in the doings of the strolling player, and of the hostility of the Corporation of London to the Proclamations of the Privy Council in affairs histrionic. Such thoughts as these make us pause and ask whether even now there is any one who is collecting current talk anent transient institutions, and is writing down the chit-chat of the hour disdained by literature but destined to be of invaluable service three centuries hence. But "what might have been done," however seductive a study, recedes as we consider what was accomplished by the industry of that single individual whom to day, with the Chief Magistrate of the greatest city of the world at our head, it is our privilege specially to commemorate.

That the information which Stow supplied was first hand is many times borne in upon us. Thus as a young man, Stow saw at Aldgate Well the execution of the Baylife of Romfort—"I heard the words of the prisoner, for he was executed upon the pavement of my door where I then kept house." Again, when writing of his parish church and of the sermon he heard at Paul's Cross in 1549, Stow adds: "I saw the effect that followed," how the shaft or may-pole which for thirty two years had rested under the eaves of houses and had given the name "Under Shaft" to the church was taken down by the neighbours and sawn into pieces. "Thus was this Idol (as he [the preacher] termed it) mangled and after burned."

From the "Well within Aldgate" he seems, not long after

the year 1570, to have proceeded to a house near the Leadenhall, a house which his biographer, Mr. Chas. L. Kingsford, thinks may be capable of identification. Is it not possible, we ask, for a tablet to be placed upon that house or upon Aldgate Pump to remind passers-by of their indebtedness to their renowned fellow citizen?

In spite of a long and painstaking career in the service of his fellows, Stow's eventual lot was sad. Nowadays, when we are thinking upon those who have enriched the community by their study and literary diligence and have neglected worldly advantage, we esteem ourselves fortunate in finding their names included in the Civil Pension List, and we supplement State aid by further endeavour. But not so formerly. Of all eleemosynary aid the most curious was surely that rendered by King James. His Majesty signalized the first year of his reign by issuing letters-patent under the Great Seal authorizing Stow and his deputies to collect voluntary contributions and kind gratuities. But even this assistance, such as it was—this proud position of Chartered Mendicant—the old man was not long to enjoy. At the age of fourscore years “that truly worthy, laborious, and excellent Antiquary John Stow” quitted the scenes of his labours, and on the 8th April, 1605, was here laid to rest. For all time, we would like to have added, but the grave-wrecker has to be reckoned with. Maitland tells us that the “Repository” was “spoiled of his injured remains by certain men in the year 1732 who removed his corpse to make room for another.” The monument, however, which at the charges of his wife, Elizabeth was set up near his grave, is happily still with us. As we file meditatively before the cenotaph of him who appears seated at his study-table with pen in hand we may lift our eyes to the inscription which so befittingly crowns the edifice. There, in a sentence, is conjured up what Stow conceived to be his duty, an utterance maybe of the man himself remembered after death by a faithful admirer: *Aut scribenda agere aut legenda scribere—*

To do what is meet to be recorded or to write what is worthy to be read.

He always protested, says his continuator, Howes, never to have written anything either for malice, fear, or favour, nor to seek his own particular gain and vainglory; and that his only pains and care was to write truth. And Manningham, in his Diary, under date 1602, records what Stow told him concerning the *Survey*: "He sayth of it, as Pilat sayd: What I have written, I have written, and thinkes himself worthie of that title for his paynes [*Antiquarius Angliae*], for he hath noe gaines by his travaile."

Messages such as these strike vividly across the centuries and bring us once again face to face with the man who, single-handed and regardless of self-interest, bequeathed to all true lovers of London that heritage, rich as it is rare, which is to be found between the covers of Stow's *Survey of London*.
