

STOW COMMEMORATION, APRIL 6TH, 1925.

ADDRESS BY

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WHEN I spoke in this place on a like occasion three years ago I dwelt on the special quality of Stow's work and on the motives which inspired him. To-day, I desire rather to speak of him as a man. There is good reason so to do since he was born in the summer of 1525 and therefore we celebrate this year the fourth centenary of his birth. John Stow had nothing to advantage him in life, being by descent and training a sober modest citizen of no great aspirations. He had not any exceptional gift of genius, but nature had endowed him with an infinite industry and an unwearying capacity for taking pains. These qualities which stood him so well in his later work must have enabled him to prosper in his original calling. It was assuredly not as one who had failed that he was prompted in early middle life to abandon his own peculiar gains and devote himself to the pursuit of learning. However diligent he may have been in his calling, he had never been so absorbed in his worldly affairs that he had not time to turn his eyes elsewhere. Yet the circumstances of his youth were such that we cannot suppose *him to have had more than a fair education*. Thus he is a conspicuous instance of the self-taught man, who by sheer industry has been able to triumph over his original disabilities. That he was not free from the defects inevitable in one who has been compelled to find out the way for himself made him perchance a little easy in his own credulity and a little difficult in his censure of credulity in others.

He accepted with ready faith the story of how the devil had appeared at St. Michael Cornhill: were not the marks of his claws still there for all to see! Yet he had a fine scorn for fables of other folk's telling, especially if that other chanced to be Richard Grafton, who had been so daft as to omit from his chronicle all mention of Didantius and two other kings of Britain. Time mellowed his judgement and experience tempered his criticisms. If nevertheless he grew to be somewhat over-conscious of his own deserts, and disposed to be querulous over the scant recognition which in some quarters they had obtained, subsequent ages have justified him and brought him a reputation beyond his dreams.

For that reputation I found the explanation in the essential truthfulness of his work, and the purposeful spirit which inspired it throughout. It is natural that these qualities which made the writer should reflect the character of the man. The Survey of London was no mere compilation and no book ever more impressed with the personality of its writer. Stow claimed, with justice, to have set down nothing from malice, fear or favour. If, when he alludes, as he sometimes does to the gloomy circumstances of his private life, a touch of bitterness appears, it was not without excuse. Between him and his ignorant mechanic brother there could have been no bond of sympathy, and the offence if unforgiven had perhaps been too oft repeated to be forgivable. Yet he was happy in his wife and children, and in the many friendships of his later years we find his true character revealed. John Stow, who could win and retain the esteem and well-liking of men so diverse as Archbishop Parker, Henry Savile, William Lambarde, William Camden and Ben Jonson, cannot have been wanting in qualities of the heart as well as of the head. To Savile he was 'my good old friend,' and to Ben Jonson, who admired his monstrous observations, he could turn a jest on the score of his own poverty. No doubt the generous temper which made him always ready to assist others out of the store of

his learning helped to establish his friendships. But it was the memory of the merry old man of a pleasant and cheerful countenance, very sober, mild and courteous to all, that endeared him to those who knew him. Between that innate kindness of spirit and the burning zeal for truth and just-dealing which inflamed him there was no real contradiction. To-day the sombre background which darkened his earlier years has dropped away, and we find the old man in his single-minded devotions to the purpose of his life entirely lovable.

If we esteem John Stow for the worthy substance of what he wrote, we cannot fail also to regard him for the manner of his writing and for the loving care with which he dwelt on the story of things that were dear to him, and still must be dear to us. He loved to praise famous men and rejoiced in the history of their good deeds. For all things reverent and old he had a singular affection; for customs hallowed by antiquity, for time-worn buildings grown doubly beautiful in age, for the memory of the blessed dead who had lived worthily and in their piety had adorned the churches where they once had worshipped. Here we are met to-day in his own church, where he attended as a parishioner for thirty years, and where his monument has been for ten times as long a conspicuous and treasured ornament.

Stow has told us how, not long before he was born, his fair and beautiful parish church had been new builded, every man putting to his helping hand, some with their purses and others with their bodies. It was no doubt with a special pride that he recorded the share that had been taken in the work by a notable member of his own well-loved company of the Merchant Taylors. It was Stephen Jennings, merchant taylor and sometime Mayor of London, who caused at his charges to be builded the whole north side of the great middle aisle, both of the body and choir, as appeared by his arms graven on every pillar. By Jennings also was the north aisle roofed and ceiled, and the whole south side glazed, as shown

by his arms in every window. The work was not completed when Jennings died in 1524, and was finished by his executors, of whom John Kirkbie and John Garland were also merchant taylors, and Nicholas Levison a mercer. The arms of these men and of others also who contributed to the rebuilding of the church are still to be seen in the windows. To-day, alas, they are verging on decay, and are like to be lost altogether unless timely care is soon taken. To us there comes a double call to preserve them from destruction. To restore them in this fourth centenary of his birth would be a fitting tribute to the memory of John Stow. To suffer these priceless monuments of antiquity which he knew so well to perish would be a lasting reproach. I cannot believe that the people of St. Andrew Undershaft, or the citizens of London will fail to avoid the possibility of such a mischance. The work of restoration has been already too long delayed. The cost will be no small thing. But the need is urgent. The occasion is timely: it cannot, it must not, be let slide.
