

STOW MEMORIAL LECTURE

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JOHN STOW was born in 1525, the year that saw Wolsey at the height of his power, and the publication of Tyndale's English version of the New Testament. He was a true Londoner by descent; both his father and grandfather had been tallow chandlers, and had supplied oil and candles for the lighting of the Church of St. Michael, Cornhill, where also his great-grandparents were buried. He himself was apprenticed to a tailor, and was admitted to the freedom of the Merchant Taylors in 1547—the year in which the boy king, Edward VI, succeeded his father Henry VIII. For another twenty years he followed his trade, certainly not without success, for he was enabled to collect a store of costly books of the kind that delighted him. His interests were truly catholic, comprehending divinity, astrology and poetry, as well as history. His studies of Chaucer are gratefully remembered by students of literature, and we owe to him the preservation of many precious manuscripts, including materials for monastic history which must otherwise have been irretrievably lost. But his inclinations were finally turned towards the study of the past: he abandoned a secure livelihood and devoted himself completely to travel and study, moving into a house on the north side of the highway leading from Leadenhall to Aldgate, now Leadenhall Street, but a few yards west of this church. "It hath cost me," he writes of his *Summary* in 1598, "many a weary mile's travel, many a hard-earned penny and pound, and many a cold winter night's study." He

assisted Matthew Parker in the editing of several mediæval chronicles, and published two considerable works—*A Summary of English Chronicles* and the *Annals of England*; he did indeed prepare a much larger work, a *History of this Island*, but this was never actually printed; another unpublished work, *Fundationes Ecclesiarum*, was almost certainly drawn on very largely by Dugdale for his monumental work on English monasteries, the *Monasticon Anglicanum*. The work for which we most honour him to-day, however, is his great *Survey of London and Westminster*, which was first published in 1598, and of which a second edition was issued in 1603. He was engaged in the preparation of a third and greatly enlarged edition at the time of his death in 1605, the year of the Gunpowder Plot. "He had no gains by his travail," as he himself admitted, and he was certainly in straitened circumstances during his declining years, although held in honour by his own Company—the Merchant Taylors, by his fellow citizens, and even by his Sovereign. The monument of marble and alabaster which is the object of our pilgrimage to-day was erected by his widow, and restored by the Merchant Taylors Company on the three hundredth anniversary of his death. His body, alas, is no longer there, for it was most impiously removed in 1732. He is shown seated among his books writing, and his epitaph bears a neatly-turned Latin phrase which may be rendered: "Either do what is worthy to be written, or write what is worthy to be read."

Stow lived then throughout the great formative period in the history of this country and of this City, the period that included the vast changes resulting from the spoliation of the religious houses by Henry VIII, the destruction of the altars under Edward VI, the Marian persecutions, and the settlement effected by Elizabeth, when a new spirit of enterprise and adventure, providentially allied to that ordered liberty we believe

to be characteristic of English life and institutions, brought abounding prosperity to London and the kingdom. England during this time passed from the Middle Ages into the full light of the Renaissance. Stow was an observant witness of these changes, and although he preserves a discreet reticence in matters of politics and religion, he delights in making a record of those historical and topographical details that interested him. It is this faculty of minute observation, and graphic description of detail, that gives its peculiar value to his *Survey*, which is as instinct with life as are the diaries of Evelyn or Pepys.

Stow saw, and deplored, the decay of archery, the introduction of wheeled coaches and the consequent traffic problems, the changes of fashion that brought in silk stockings and perfumery, and that made it necessary for a royal proclamation to protest against the long rapiers and deep starched ruffs of the town gallants; he had marvelled to see pirates going to the gallows at Wapping in Venetian breeches of crimson taffeta, or with coloured velvet doublets decorated with great gold buttons. He writes of the great increase in traffic and commerce, of the great influx of foreigners and of "the great and wondrous enlarging of the suburbs and skirts of the City."

As a boy he had fetched many a halfpennyworth of milk, "hot from the kine," from a farm belonging to the Nunnery of the Minorettes, on the site of Goodman's Fields, so called from the prosperous dairyman whose son let the lands and "lived like a gentleman thereby." He had seen the scholars of the London schools competing in learned rivalry on St. Bartholomew's Eve at Smithfield, and watched the merry jousting at the Quintain set up on Cornhill. He remembered how St. Anthony's pigs, with bells tied to their necks, roamed the City without hurt, feeding on the garbage in the streets until fat enough to be taken for the use of the hospital. He had seen the Prior of Holy Trinity

ride in state "with the Maior and his Brethren the Aldermen" wearing a "scarlet, or other levery, as they used." Later, he witnessed the dissolution of that great monastic establishment and its conversion into the splendid town house of a Lord Chancellor. He had noticed the effect of the new preaching at St. Paul's Cross against superstition and paganism, and had seen its influence on the people of this parish who lifted the great shaft, or Maypole, the "Idoll" as it had been termed, from its hooks under the pentices of the houses in Shaft Alley, and sawed it into pieces.

When he was six years old his father's house in Throgmorton Street had been bodily shifted, without any warning being given or permission sought, to improve the garden of Thomas Cromwell's house, and he cannot withhold the indignant comment—"the suddaine rising of some men causeth them to forget themselves"; but he also records that he had seen two hundred poor persons served twice daily with bread and meat and drink at Lord Cromwell's gate. In 1549 he had seen the Bailiff of Romford executed on the pavement outside his shop, close by Aldgate Pump, for his supposed share in Ket's Rising, and he had witnessed the strange scene at the execution of the Duke of Somerset in 1552, when, for some unexplained reason, the populace stampeded in panic.

He never became a liveryman, but when members of his Company served as Mayor he attended the pageant on Lord Mayor's Day as a "Whiffler" in the escort. He took his share, too, in more serious civic duties, serving as an ale conner in 1584, as a juror for gaol delivery of the prisoners in the Bread Street Counter in 1552, and in 1585 as a collector of his ward for the charges for a muster of 4,000 men for the Queen's service.

What Stow saw, he recorded with painstaking thoroughness and fidelity. "In hystories," he says in the preface to his *Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles*

in 1565, "the chief thyng that is to be desyred is truthe."

"Of smoothe and flatteryng speche remember to take hede;
For trouthe in playn wordes may be tolde; of craft a lye hath nede."

He was not a great literary stylist, not perhaps a great scholar as that word is sometimes understood, but he had a great love for his native City, a real pride in its history and its greatness, and his honesty and industry have given us a great masterpiece—a priceless storehouse of topographical material. It is but proper that we should pay some tribute to the man himself. We see in him a man of deep sincerity and integrity, of extreme industry and conscientiousness, pursuing his labour with unflagging strength of purpose, who bore his afflictions—disappointment, treachery, sordid domestic squabbles, poverty and ill-health, with manly fortitude. Nor was he without a deep spirit of real piety.

"For as much as all gifts and graces proceed only from God, and that His mercy and benefits have daily increased more and more, whereof every man is bound in religious duties to acknowledge every particular"—thus he prefaces in his *Annals* a review of the reign of Elizabeth. In speaking of bull baiting on Sundays he gives "a friendly warning to such as more delight themselves in the cruelty of beasts, than in the works of mercy, the fruits of a true professed faith, which ought to be the Sabbath Day's exercise."

Small wonder that such a man should have numbered among his friends that stalwart champion of true religion and sound learning, Archbishop Parker, who introduced him to the newly-formed Society of Antiquaries, to whose learned deliberations he communicated some notes on the origin of sterling money. William Lambarde, author of the *Perambulation of Kent*, was

“his loving friend”; Henry Savile was his “good old friend”; and he was on affectionate terms with many of the leading antiquaries and literary men of his day—William Camden, Headmaster of Westminster School and Clarenceux King-of-Arms, author of the famous *Britannia*; Ralph Holinshed, whose *History of England* furnished the materials for Shakespeare’s historical plays; Richard Hakluyt, the geographer, whose *Voyages* form the true epic of Elizabeth’s reign, and whom he supplied with notes on the voyages of the Cabots; John Foxe, the martyrologist; Thomas Speght, the editor of Chaucer; and Ben Jonson, the dramatist.

To quote once more from his epitaph: “He wrote excellently and deserved well both his own and subsequent ages.” We do well to honour his memory to-day, and in doing so, we bring honour to ourselves and, with your presence here to-day, my Lord Mayor, to the City he loved.