JOHN STOW AS AN HISTORIAN

A COMMEMORATION ADDRESS

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We are gathered here to do honour to a modest and sober Elizabethan, a good historian, and a devoted citizen of London. It is good for us that we should do so — and pay tribute to real and permanent values in a shifting and shiftless age. Who now remembers most of the glittering and gilded figures who attracted so much attention in their time? — John Stow has lasted longer and garnered more enduring respect.

The Elizabethan age saw the beginning of the modern writing of history, as it saw the beginnings of the marvellous achievements of this small country in the four centuries to come — achievements in so many fields: at sea, in the oceanic voyages, colonisation, the creation of an empire; in literature, drama, the arts and sciences; commerce, industry. All the result of initiative and hard work — a splendid arc of achievement spanning modern history — of which we are now seeing the end.

John Stow was one of the best historians of that age; indefatigable in the trouble he took, thorough and conscientious, accurate — above all things devoted to truth — unlike our television historians today. He said: "in histories the chief thing that is to be desired is the truth" — that indeed is the whole point of history; these gentry today would do well to fix this as a motto above their glib typewriters and try to adhere to it.

John Stow did throughout a lifetime of hard work. He began, as perhaps a young man should, more interested in poetry, and later made useful contributions to the study of Chaucer, best of our medieval poets, also a citizen of London. He admitted that then he hadn't "esteemed history, were it offered never so freely." But as he grew older he corrected that and graduated to our delightful science — history is the proper interest of mature minds. That he should *write* history was suggested to him by that cultivated Renaissance prince, the Queen's favourite, Leicester — though he collaborated more closely with good Archbishop Parker, a more respectable figure.

Shortly on coming before the public as an author, there followed a feud with another historian — not unknown in the profession today, for, as we know, *odium theologicum* is nothing compared with *odium archaeologicum*. The chronicler Grafton, also a citizen of London, jeered at Stow's addiction to old ways and "superstitious fables foolishly Stowed together." Stow replied, in Elizabethan fashion, by deriding the empty, echoing *tuns* and fruitless *grafts* of his adversary, Grafton. He has had the last word with posterity, for he was a better historian, worked harder, and produced the goods. His *Summary* of English Chronicles was a best-seller — and this does not give unadulterated pleasure to one's colleagues; edition after edition was called for, so that his dedication of the book is to successive Lord Mayors, with aldermen and commonalty, over the years.

But in the Elizabethan age you did not make money by writing books, and Stow was always poor. He earned his living for thirty years as a tailor, and then the Merchant Taylors gave him a diminutive pension — though, a mere historian, he was never admitted to the

Livery. He writes of his popular book, the *Summary:* "it hath cost me many a weary mile's travel, many a hard-earned penny and pound, and many a cold winter night's study." But this was in no complaining spirit, for he was a merry old fellow, very pleasant and cheerful; I'll bet he enjoyed those winter nights' study — it was all a labour of love — and his foot-slogging kept him healthy to the end, a ripe old age, working joyfully to the last. It is true that in his last years he had to appeal to charity, but that may be partly that he spent too much money on books — it has been known. Once, when walking with Ben Jonson, they met two cripples begging; Stow asked them what they would take to admit him to their order.

Something very Elizabethan about him was the ambition, the sheer scale of his intended enterprise — it is so like the grandeur of their aims, the expanding horizons that led them on. How inspiring it must have been to live then! — everything bore one up, everything encouraged effort, instead of dragging one down, nothing to inspire one, nothing to encourage, nothing but what creates contempt on every hand.

Edmund Spenser wrote six books of the *Faerie Queene*, the great poem of the age, but he intended twelve; he was only forty-six when he died. Sir Philip Sidney, who was only thirty-two, never finished the *Arcadia*. Sir Walter Ralegh's *History of the World* did not get much beyond the Roman Republic; Richard Hooker did not live to complete his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Similarly, Stow never published his vast intended *History of this Island*, of which his fat volumes are in a sense parts:

> Lie heavy on him, earth, for he
> Laid many a heavy pile on thee.

But altogether, not a bad record for a working tailor! — of course, there were not wanting people to say that his volumes were "*stitched* together".

Actually they were written in good straightforward prose, like the stout broadcloth of the garments he fashioned, and described by his later editor: "Expect no filed phrases, inkhorn terms, uncouth words nor fantastic speeches, but good plain English without affectation, rightly befitting chronology. If Cicero's eloquence, Plato's oratory, or Virgil's lofty verse be thy chief desire, Paul's churchyard is now plenteously furnished to satisfy thee."

Stow's *Annals*, with the increments added for the years as they passed, constituted his weightiest contribution, and the age considered it his most important. No doubt Stow thought so himself. It would not be the only time an author has been mistaken about his own work, and a book he undertook just for pleasure — as it were with his left hand — turned out the best, the book by which he lives to posterity. If Renan's recommendation be true, that one should write only about what one loves, then Stow's *Survey of London* is the book by which he lives for us still. He was born to write *that* book — others could write chronicles and text-books; only Stow could have written the *Survey;* he was in love with the subject. He had the right temperament for writing it; every parish, every street, every church, house and object of any interest was alive to him, with its memories and associations. And he had a most observant eye — he missed nothing, except, alas, the theatres of which, as a sober citizen, he disapproved. (So did the Lord Mayor and Corporation; they were always trying to suppress the theatres, when nobody was looking. Think of it, if the Lord Mayor and aldermen had had their way, there would have been no Shakespearean drama! Only the personal protection of the Queen saved it — one of her many contributions to the age, so rightly called by *her* name).

In dedicating his *Survey* to the Lord Mayor, Commonalty and Citizens, Stow described it as "the discovery of London, my native soil and country." It is as much a voyage of discovery, if by foot, as Francis Drake's or any other of the famous voyages of discovery by sea, setting sail from the port of London. (By the way, he tells us just where Drake lived in the City: in the great house in Downgate Street called the Arbour, "lately builded by Sir Thomas Pullison, Mayor," but this was after Drake made fortune and fame by his voyage round the world). The book is wonderfully alive: this is Shakespeare's London brought before our eyes, with its gardens and green spaces filling up with tenements, with increased prosperity and population; with the water being brought into the city, the new conduits going up, the swift water-channels and runnels; the transformation of so many churches to secular uses; the different characters of the wards still marked, the noise and hammering of the brass-founders, candlestick-makers and copper-workers in Lothbury; the bustle of trades, the clatter of signs, the busy, mercurial life of citizens, so vividly evoked about the same time at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

I cannot go in detail into the book here, though it is precisely in its authentic evocative detail that the value of the book consists — unlike the generalities of sociologists, or the theories of historians anxious to be "with it". That great physiologist, Sir Charles Sherrington, tells us that "a fact does not decay"; theories do, and no one is so quickly out of date as those anxious to be "with it". John Stow, indeed, was very anxious *not* to be "with it" — the phrase itself is already out of date — that is why he has lasted. And he was very independent-minded; he didn't mince his words about the great — he was positively rude about the Queen's father, Henry VIII, for example, whom he disliked and disapproved of. (He turned after his Yorkist grandfather, Edward IV, not in the least after his Tudor and Lancastrian side).

London at that time was engulfed in the process of emerging from the Middle Ages. The Reformation meant a vast destruction of monasteries and churches, of which the city had had far too many. This went to Stow's heart, as it would have to mine, had I been living then. He bitterly deplored the destruction of monuments and brasses in the churches, as did another inhabitant at the time:

> When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced
> The rich, proud cost of outworn buried age;
> When sometimes lofty towers I see down-razed,
> And brass eternal slave to mortal rage . . .

Stow always lets us know about the towers down-razed, the monuments destroyed, the brasses ripped up. On the other hand, he does not fail to let us know the immense outpouring of charity on the part of London merchants, their works of philanthropy, the almshouses founded in almost every parish, the hospitals put on a stronger footing, the schools started. To this day the general public is unaware of the incredible achievement of the Elizabethan merchants of London in schools, almshouses, benefactions, not only or even mostly in London, but in practically every county, all over the country. It was, quite simply, one of the grandest achievements of the age, along with everything else; it was one of the biggest, most constant and determined efforts. You don't hear about it from ordinary historians; they haven't the imagination, or perhaps the magnanimity, to appreciate it. But Stow saw to it that, at least in London, their charities should not be forgotten.

Since we do not have time to perambulate about the city with him, let us recall briefly the places where we know Shakespeare was living at the time. In the earlier 1590's he was

living in the parish of St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, for he failed to pay his assessment of tax there — a congenial, not to say endearing, failing. Stow has a full description of these whereabouts, so familiar to the dramatist and so convenient for the earlier theatres beyond the gate in the fields of Shoreditch, where the theatre-folk and writers for them hung out. Stow describes Crosby Place, where Richard III had resided at the time of his *coup d'état*, and of course it features in the play: a monument of the past familiar to everybody. In the church the great merchant Sir Thomas Gresham had been recently buried under his fine tomb; his house he bequeathed for his foundation of Gresham College. Several ranges of almshouses had recently been set up by the generosity of Gresham, Sir Andrew Judd and his daughter, the wife of Customer Smith.

At the time Shakespeare wrote the French scenes in *Henry V*, about 1600, he was lodging in Cripplegate ward in the household of the French Mountjoys, headdress-maker to the Queen. With Stow, go down Wood Street, "there lower down in Silver Street, till ye come to the east end of St. Olave's church on the south side, and so to Monkswell Street on the north." The house stood at the corner of Silver Street and Monkswell Street; in fact we have a tiny manuscript drawing of it, with its shop's-pentice in front; the whole area obliterated by the barbarians in the blitz of 1941. Of Shakespeare's parish church here, St. Olave's, Stow tells us that it was "a small thing, and without any noteworthy monuments." A few years later, in the summer of 1607, there was buried in St. Giles' Cripplegate the base-born child of Shakespeare's youngest brother, Edmund, another actor. Edmund was himself buried the last day of that year in St. Saviour's, now Southwark Cathedral, aged only twenty-six, "with a forenoon knell of the great bell."

A few years previously, about 1599, William had a spell on Bankside, about the time James Burbage was transferring his theatre from Shoreditch to build the new Globe on the South Bank. At the end of his life Shakespeare owned a half-share in the gate-house going into Blackfriars, very convenient for the theatre within, of which he was part-owner. Stow has a full description of the precinct, which, since the destruction of the monastery, had filled up with an interesting variety of inhabitants, from grandees like Robert Cecil's troublesome aunt, Lady Russell, to foreign craftsmen, jewellers, printers like Shakespeare's schoolfellow, Richard Field, who printed his *Venus and Adonis* there.

Our one regret, our one legitimate criticism of Stow, is that his mind was so set on relics of the past that he neglected some of the amenities of the present — one cannot see him attending the theatre, for example. Twice the Fishmongers get a wigging for being so ignorant of their antiquities as not to know why or when they were joined in amity with the Goldsmiths; and when they repaired the monument of Sir William Walworth, the Mayor who struck down Wat Tyler, "for lack of knowledge they followed a fabulous book" and inscribed Jack Straw. Evidently they should have consulted John Stow.

Indeed, we should continue to consult him; with him to guide us we can hardly go wrong about Shakespeare's London. And beneath the facts and the sober prose of the historian, we sense the life: the games between the scholars of St. Bartholomew's and St. Anthony's, dancing for garlands in the streets, running at the quintain on Cornhill, out into the fields that lay all round for May morning, garnishing the doors with boughs and flowers for Midsummer, decking the churches with green at Christmas; we seem to hear the bells of St. Peter's Cornhill, that were the fairest ring of six bells in all England.

And so we bring old John Stow home to his resting-place here in St. Andrew Undershaft. We are right not to forget him, for, in the end, he was a good man.