

THE JOHN STOW COMMEMORATION ADDRESS, 1973

BY FRANCIS W. STEER, M.A., F.S.A., MALTRAVERS HERALD EXTRAORDINARY

Delivered at the church of St. Andrew Undershaft, 11th April, 1973

The lesson which will be read a little later on explains the reason why we are gathered together in this ancient City church today. We are here to honour the memory of a distinguished citizen of London, a famous man indeed, and one whose particular achievements bear out part of the fourth verse of the lesson. John Stow's knowledge of learning was meet for the people and he was one who was wise and eloquent in his instructions.

It is customary in cathedrals and in the Colleges of our older Universities to have an annual service to commemorate benefactors, but frequently such commemorations have a bias towards material things such as buildings and financial endowments. I am not suggesting that these ought to be forgotten — they are very important. But there are other types of benefaction such as examples of godly living, the provision of comforts for the sick, the elderly and the lonely, the establishment of libraries, the occasional feast where like-minded persons foregather.

We remember with gratitude John Stow, a man of humble birth, a man who achieved eminence by his own endeavours, a man who died in poverty, and the author of a great book called *A Survey of London* which was published in 1598. Thomas Fuller believed that no city in Christendom, Rome alone excepted, had so great a chronicle, and we would not quarrel with that opinion expressed only 57 years after Stow's death.

There have been many learned discourses from this pulpit on John Stow and it is not easy to find a new theme. But I want to try and say something about Stow as a man who demonstrated what scholarship really means; scholarship is the sharing of knowledge for the common good. Each generation owes a debt to those which preceded it, to those who laid foundations, examined and interpreted new sources, considered their findings and published their conclusions. We are fortunate today in having well equipped libraries, enormous collections of carefully catalogued archives, facilities for world-wide travel, the benefit of modern inventions which make life tolerably comfortable, plus the accumulated knowledge of other men's experience. In brief, we have much to be thankful for and which makes the debt to our predecessors all the more heavy.

We can hardly imagine the difficulties under which the Elizabethan historians had to work. John Stow had none of the advantages I have mentioned but he had all the difficulties; the fact that he surmounted them makes him all the more remarkable. Living as he did from about 1525 to 1605, Stow witnessed changes as revolutionary as those which we who have lived through the last half century or more have experienced, but he was a man who, like some in our own time, have maintained high standards of perseverance and scholarship.

Stow features prominently in any investigation of the development of historical studies in the 16th century. The evidence of his sharing of knowledge is abundant. Archbishop Parker borrowed the manuscript of Matthew Paris's Greater History (now a treasure in the British Museum) from Stow. Our London historian helped John Hooker of Exeter, Francis Thynne and Abraham Fleming in preparing the 1586 edition of Holinshed's Chronicles. Stow knew Archbishop Whitgift sufficiently well to dedicate his *Annales* to him and there the historian refers to his great love and entire affection to all good letters in general and to the antiquities in particular. He says—

It is now more than thirtie yeeres (Right reuerende father) since I first addressed all my cares and cogitations to the studie of Histories, and search of Antiquities: the greatest part of which time I haue diligently imployed in collecting such matters of this kingdome, as I thought most worthie to be recommended both to the present and succeeding age.

Stow's ability was manifest when David Powel, the Welsh historian, remarked that Stow deserved commendation for getting together the ancient writers of the histories of this land — he was referring to Stow's generosity in lending him one of the manuscripts of several unpublished chronicles.

All this devoted work on the English chronicles, on Chaucer and on the Survey of London involved great labour; Stow's earlier works were perhaps skeletons of history rather than living history — his real talents did not find full scope until he turned his attention to his native City and here he is seen as the man who knew the value of original records and was not dismayed by the sheer endurance required in searching through archives which were in a state of chaos notwithstanding the efforts of Arthur Agarde, Deputy Chamberlain of the Exchequer, who compiled catalogues of State papers and, like Stow, was one of the earliest members of a society of antiquaries founded, it is believed, by Archbishop Parker in about 1572. Here again we can discern the brotherhood of learning when we recall that Stow, Agarde, Parker, the great Camden, Archbishop Whitgift, John Lord Lumley, Henry Savile, Robert Glover, John Dee and others were contemporaries who could, and did, remember a vanishing, or at least a rapidly changing, England. Of that early society of antiquaries, John Stow was probably the most inconspicuous by birth and position but he was no less equal with the other members and therefore their honoured colleague. The motive of such men was the establishment of facts, which, when all is said and done, is the ultimate purpose of study. This point was made by Matthew Parker when he wrote that it is the law of history that truth is to be preferred to elegance of oratory.

Stow possessed another quality which endears him to me. He was never too shy to admit ignorance; he couldn't know everything and he recognized that to declare an uncertainty as such was a prerequisite in historical writing. He was an acute observer and knew that he had to tramp the muddy streets, the alleys and the waterfront of 16th century London if his record was to be accurate; he had to visit the numerous churches and the Livery Halls; he had to read and consider the writings of others; he had to examine basic sources and to suffer occasional rebuffs such as he met with when he wanted to consult the records of the Vintners' Company.

But Stow was only human and although on good terms with most of his contemporaries was not averse to levelling criticism or indulging in a scholarly wrangle as he did over Richard Grafton's *Abridgement of the Chronicles of England* which appeared in 1562. Although Stow, like other 16th century historians, tended to moralize, he did it with his eyes open. Stow was never violent in matters of religion as were several of his contemporaries; this restraint reflects his ability to write history without too obvious a bias and it must be remembered through what extraordinary times Stow had lived so far as religion was concerned. Neither must we forget that Stow's financial resources were very limited — a fact which was brought home to us by Professor Fisher in his address last year. Poverty can have a marked influence on a man's judgement.

Whatever may be the merits of his other works, we are here today to pay tribute to the historian of London, the greatest City in the world. To be a citizen of London in the fullest sense of the term is a privilege which Stow and many before, and many after him, have been granted. He was admitted to the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors in 1547 and it is appropriate that you, my Lord Mayor, should be accompanied by the First Upper Warden

of the Company to which John Stow belonged. I cannot help thinking how much Stow would have approved of this annual service for he understood, as all of us here understand, the traditions of the City of London which remain unchanged in spirit even if the faces of the streets change with alarming rapidity. Stow noted that the south side of the Chapter House of St. Paul's was being disfigured first by low sheds and then by high houses; we too, have seen some of our City's greatest buildings dwarfed by concrete and glass skyscrapers. The simple fact is that history repeats itself and one generation deplores the actions of another.

This discourse has touched, lightly and inadequately, on several aspects of Stow's life and times. I have mentioned his ability as an historian, the mutual generosity of him and his colleagues and the debt which we owe to the labours of those historians and antiquaries who lived in the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth. Knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines is continually advancing and although we may justly disagree with what our predecessors thought and wrote, we must never be unmindful of the fact that many of them were pioneers, most of them were hard workers and men who sought after truth even if they occasionally lacked critical discrimination.

I began by quoting from the fourth verse of this morning's lesson and I finish with the fourteenth verse with John Stow uppermost in my mind at this moment: The bodies of such men are buried in peace, but their name liveth for evermore.