JOHN STOW

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John Stow, tailor of Lime-street, in this parish, who is buried in this church and whom today, 370 years after his death, we still celebrate, was the publisher and abridger of many English chronicles, the collector and preserver of many historical MSS which might otherwise have perished. In his lifetime, and immediately afterwards, his chronicles were widely read, and his collection of MSS — 'Stow's storehouse' as it was known — was often raided by his fellow antiquaries. But his lasting fame was achieved by one work first published in 1598, when he was 73 years old: his *Survey of London*. It is thanks to this work that he is still remembered, and even still read. Only a few weeks ago I read his *Survey* through. I followed him with pleasure as he 'perambulated', always on foot — he went everywhere on foot, for his means did not allow him to ride — from ward to ward, recounting the character, and the history, of every gate and bridge, every conduit and watergate, church, prison and hall of his native city. For Stow, who is the first, is also the most intimate of the 'chorographers' of London, the worthy rival of 'my loving friend Mr. Camden', the chorographer of Britain, and of 'that learned gentleman William Lambarde esquire', whose *Perambulation of Kent*, published in 1576, was the inspiration and model of his *Survey*.

Camden, Lambarde, Stow . . . these are the famous names, but we could easily extend the list. Is there not also Humfrey Llwyd's *Breviary of Britain* and *Description of the Isle of Man;* John Norden's *Speculum Britanniae*, his projected 'surveys', or 'chorographical descriptions', of the counties of England; and Richard Carew's *Survey of Cornwall*, and many others after them? 'Surveys', 'chorographies' and 'perambulations' were the order of the day under Queen Elizabeth and James I. So, for that matter, were that other literary *genre* in which Stow so successfully specialised: *Chronicles*, *Annals* and *Summaries*.

Why did Elizabethan England suddenly produce this crop of antiquaries? The answer is not far to seek. It stands out clearly in the lives of nearly all of them. In the long reign of Queen Elizabeth, Englishmen 'discovered' England — its topography, its history; and they discovered it with zeal and urgency because they had seen how, in the brief reign of her brother Edward VI, it had almost been lost.

Consider the life of John Stow. He was born in 1525, in the piping times of the young Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey. How stable England seemed then! How magnificently the cardinal lived, in splendour 'passing all other subjects of his time', with 400 servants daily attending in his house, besides 'his servants' servants, which were many'. But then, while Stow was still a child, came the fall of the cardinal, the rule of Thomas Cromwell, the Reformation. Stow could see, in London, the dissolution of the monastic houses: indeed, the Reformation came very close to him, for his father, Thomas Stow, a tallow-chandler, lived in Throgmorton Street, and one of his neighbours was Thomas Cromwell himself, who built himself a large house there and designed, around it, an ample pleasure garden. One morning Thomas Stow woke up to find how that design had been realised. Half his own garden had been sliced off, his summerhouse had been dug up and moved back 22 feet on rollers, and a high brick wall marked the new frontier. When he protested to the surveyor, the only answer was 'that their master Sir Thomas told them so to do'. To add insult to injury,

Stow's rent, unlike his garden, remained undiminished. 'Thus much', he comments, 'of mine own knowledge have I thought good to note, that the sudden rising of some men causeth them in some matters to forget themselves': A text which may still be applied to our modern developers.

Thomas Cromwell at least controlled his Reformation. His dissolution of monasteries was a planned, constructive nationalisation. If he dissolved abbeys, it was to found new bishoprics. He would have preserved the charitable and educational functions of the old foundations. He himself, in his grandeur, imitated the munificence of the old nobility, who 'lived together in good amity with the citizens' and 'gave great relief to the poor'. 'I myself', Stow records, 'in that declining time of charity, have oft seen, at the Lord Cromwell's gate in London, more than 200 persons served twice every day with bread, meat and drink sufficient; for he observed that ancient and charitable custom, as all prelates, noblemen or men of honour and worship, his predecessors, had done before him'.

But every revolution has its own momentum, and when the strong hand slackens or is removed, the pace quickens, even to destruction. Stow was 15 when Cromwell fell, 22 when Henry VIII died; and in the minority of Edward VI he saw Reformation turned into revolution: the uncontrolled rapacity of a new class of 'suddenly risen' men, the senseless destruction of corporate property and institutions, a breach in the orderly continuity of history. As church property was seized, church records were destroyed. Libraries. schools, charities, collapsed with the institutions which had maintained them. And the intellectuals of the time, the radical reformers who demanded a clean break with the past, rejoiced in the destruction. The learning of the past, they said was, 'duncery'; the records of the past were irrelevant to their brave new world; the monuments of the past were idols, to be smashed, or at least defaced.

It was the sight of this indescriminate destruction that determined men of Stow's temper and Stow's generation. Outraged by such vandalism, which could only have happened in a society that had become indifferent to its own history, they resolved to remind Englishmen of their heritage and, by reminding them, to preserve it before it should be destroyed. This meant that they must also preach a doctrine. The doctrine was the continuity of English history, or English institutions, and, particularly, — since that was the battleground — of the English church. Against those terrible reformers who would destroy the whole substance of the English episcopal Church, as an inseparable branch of the corrupt, antichristian Church of Rome, they insisted that the Church of England was historically independent, that its origins preceded the corruptions of Rome, and that reformation entailed not a wholesale repudiation of the native past, but a return to it, by the removal of those spurious charms recently borrowed from the painted harlot on the Seven Hills. This had been the policy of Henry VIII: why should it not be continued under his children?

The founder of this school of conservative, protestant, English antiquaries was John Leland, the chaplain of Henry VIII, whom that king, the greatest royal patron of learning in our history, made, in 1533, his 'Antiquary Royal': the first and only holder of that post. As such, Leland was sent to search for English antiquities in the libraries of all English cathedrals, abbeys and colleges; and for the rest of the King's life he travelled all over England compiling that great register of its historical documents, his *Itinerary*. He was the first of our 'perambulators'; but his perambulations, which yielded a rich harvest for the King's library and for his own successors, soon drove him into a deep depression. He saw everywhere the destruction of

records which, single-handed, he could not stay. When the King died and the pace of destruction quickened, his mind, by overwork, became unhinged; and by 1550 he was incurably insane. Fortunately his records were preserved. They were preserved, used and transcribed by his disciples: Camden and Stow.

Throughout the middle years of the 16th century, the destruction went on. Church property was gobbled up. The Bishops' houses in London were pulled down by new owners. Statues, stained-glass windows, monuments, tombs, were smashed as 'idols'. Libraries — including Duke Humfrey's Library at Oxford — were scattered. In 1556 John Dee, philosopher, mathematician, magician and antiquary, petitioned Queen Mary to establish a royal library to save the records of the past. Failing, he set out to save them himself. By his own efforts he built up, in his house at Mortlake, the greatest private library in England: a library of books and manuscripts saved, by his exertions, from destruction.

Then, three years later, with the new reign, came a remarkable change. At the beginning of her reign, Queen Elizabeth settled the English Church on a firm basis: Protestant, episcopalian, traditional, claiming an independent pedigree from apostolic times. At the same time she put out a proclamation forbidding the defacement of monuments. Her new minister, William Cecil, afterwards Lord Burghley, and her new archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, offered themselves as patrons of historical study to vindicate the continuity of English institutions. So — surprisingly enough — did the new great favourite, Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, the heir of the greatest and most ruthless of the Edwardian developers. Between them, these great men were the patrons of all the antiquaries of the new reign: Camden, Lambarde, Norden, Dee, Stow.

Such was the background of Stow's career as an antiquary. He was not an isolated scholar› he was one of a generation: a generation committed to the intellectual re-validation of the English heritage. All of them set out, by personal investigation, to rediscover and document that heritage. Some of them — the giants like Leland and Camden — 'perambulated' all Britain. Others, like Lambarde and Carew, concentrated on their own counties. Stow, tied by his modest trade to London, concentrated on his native city. But the inspiration of all was the same. It was not mere antiquarianism, the self-indulgence of leisured scholars. It was antiquarianism with a purpose: the restoration of England's consciousness of its own history.

Often, in his *Survey*, Stow reveals that purpose, that inspiration. For instance, there is the continuity and independence of the Church of England. Romanist writers deduced the Church of England from St. Augustine of Canterbury, the missionary of Pope Gregory the Great who, in 597 A.D., converted the Saxon king of Kent. They had the Venerable Bede for their warrant: Bede, whose *History* the Roman Catholic archdeacon, Thomas Stapleton, had translated in the reign of Mary, the Catholic queen. The Elizabethans avoided that trap: they traced the English episcopal church back to the legendary British King Lucius who was converted in apostolic times, before the usurpations of the bishop of Rome. The parish church of St. Peter upon Cornhill, says Stow, was built under King Lucius, by Thean the first archbishop of London, with 'the aid of Ciran, chief butler to King Lucius'; and Thean's successor Eluanus added a library 'and converted many of the Druids, learned men in the pagan law, to Christianity'. That put St. Augustine of Canterbury in his place. But alas, this library, which still existed in the time of Henry VIII, 'well furnished of books' and 'repaired with brick by the executors of Sir John Crosby, alderman', was now, like so many other church libraries, scattered and 'those books be gone'.

Then there were those dreadful iconoclasts, the Edwardian defacers of monuments. How Stow hated them! He is reminded of them when he comes to Ludgate, built (as he assures us) by King Lud in 66 A.D., restored in stone by King John out of the rifled fabric of rich Jewish houses, and adorned, under Henry III, with statues of King Lud and other old British kings. But 'these images of kings', Stow tells us, 'in the reign of Edward VI, had their heads smitten off and were otherwise defaced by such as judged every image to be an idol'. Happily, after being patched up under Mary, they had all been completly renewed when the gate itself was restored in 1586, and the image of H. M. Queen Elizabeth had been added on the other side. But even under Elizabeth, fanatics did not cease from troubling: witness the assaults in 1581 on the great cross at Cheapside, the last of Queen Eleanor's crosses before Charing Cross. Happily, the Queen's government stood firm, and in the 1603 edition of the *Survey* Stow was able to record that Cheapside Cross had now been restored. Restored, it was to brave the Puritans for another 45 years: then, in the course of the Revolution, they would pull it finally down.

Stow felt very strongly about this Puritan vandalism. In every city church he records the 'monuments defaced' and the 'monuments not defaced', lest the iconoclasts should escape censure, or boast of victory. In the same spirit, Camden would catalogue the monuments of Westminister Abbey, and John Weever, a generation later, would record the *Ancient Funeral Monuments* of England — just in time, before the second act of the tragedy. But Stow, in his catalogues, was careful (as he afterwards told a friend) to omit all mention of certain more recent tombs, being of men 'who have been the defacers of the monuments of others, and so worthy to be deprived of that memory whereof they have injuriously robbed others'.

For Stow was not a man who forgot or forgave. Antiquaries, after all, are not designed to forget. Their function is to remember those little details which time and human indifference would otherwise wash away. Did not one of his contempories, the Welsh Catholic antiquary Richard Verstegen, another *protégé* of William Cecil, — indeed, the, man who persuaded Cecil to glorify his pedigree, and change the spelling of his name, in order to claim descent from the Roman family of the Cecilii — entitle his book *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence?* So we should not be surprised if the life of Stow, like that of many other antiquaries—like his Oxford successors Anthony Wood and Thomas Hearne—contains many a private animosity, jealously remembered. On these, in a commemorative sermon, it would be tactless to dwell. Therefore I shall pass over the running battle with his rival antiquary Richard Grafton concerning their respective *Chronicles*. But a knowledge of one quarrel is necessary if we are to extract the full relish from some of the more arcane antiquarian asides of John Stow's *Survey*.

I refer to the long feud with his younger brother Thomas: a deplorable story. John Stow did not approve of Mrs. Thomas Stow, and was imprudent enough, one day in 1568, to lament to his old mother that Thomas should be matched with an harlot. Thomas Stow extracted this detail from the garrulous old lady, and the fat was in the fire. Conciliatory embassies, gifts of strawberries, pots of cream, sociable pints of ale, all were unavailing and Thomas Stow even denounced his brother to the authorities for a grave political offence: for possessing seditious documents — in particular, a manifesto by the Duke of Alba, the Spanish governor of the Netherlands, which the government had tried to suppress. John Stow survived this denunciation and, thirty years later, in his *Survey* he had his revenge. He there had occasion to refer to William FitzOsbert, a historical charcater who anyway have must been distasteful to him, for he was 'a seditious tailor'. In 1196, Stow tells us, FitzOsbert, having seized, fortified and defended the steeple of Bow against the legal authority of King

Richard Coeur de Lion, was finally taken and hanged at Smithfield, 'where, because his followers came not to deliver him, he forsook Mary's son, as he termed Christ our Saviour, and called upon the Devil to help and deliver him. Such was the end of this deceiver, a man of evil life, a secret murderer, a filthy fornicator, a polluter of concubines, and amongst other his detestable facts, a false accuser of his elder brother, who had in his youth brought him up in learning and done many things for his preferment'. In the margin of the printed text Stow added 'God amend, or shortly send such an end to such false brethren'; and in the MS he went further: 'Such a brother have I, God make him penitent'.

The angularities of Stow's character are no doubt, in part, occupational — and we should remember that the occupation of an antiquary was more dangerous then than now. To possess a library of recondite books was as sinister, in an illiterate age, as to conduct scientific experiments in a pre-scientific age; and Stow, like his friend John Dee, was suspect on both counts: he was accused of alchemy as well as antiquarianism. Against such dangers a scholar needed powerful patrons. Fortunately, in Cecil and Leicester — and particularly 'my especial benefactor, archbishop Parker', who 'animated me in the course of these studies' — Stow had such patrons. They stood him in good stead in the great crisis which seems to have begun with Thomas Stow's denunciation of him in 1569. For after clearing himself before the Lord Mayor on the charge of possessing seditious documents, he found himself denounced to the Privy Council on a new charge of possessing dangerous books of superstition.

In consequence of this charge, Stow's house was searched. The Bishop of London, the sour puritan Edmund Grindal, sent his chaplains to investigate, and they duly reported a number of 'unlawful books' which plainly declared their owner 'to be a great favourer of papistry': books such as Stapleton's translation of Bede, old English chronicles 'both in parchment and in paper', books of physic, surgery and herbs, and 'old fantastical popish books printed in the old time'. Fortunately Stow survived this examination too. Bishop Grindal it was who would ultimately get the boot. The Queen and Cecil would not tolerate his encouragement of puritan 'prophesyings'.

However, thirty years later, Stow's powerful protectors were all dead, and he might well feel less secure. He might reflect on the misfortunes of John Dee, who was accused of black arts, whose wonderful library at Mortlake had been pillaged and scattered by a right-thinking mob, and who was himself in disfavour at court. In Stow's last days, even history was coming to be suspect. Queen Elizabeth, in her old age, was very sensitive about her deposed predecessor Richard II — 'I am Richard II, know ye not that?' she would say to Lambarde, — and King James, who was not at all sure that history supported his doctrine of the divine right of Kings, caused the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries, which Archbishop Parker had initiated and of which Camden, Lambarde and Stow were members, to be wound up.

Perhaps King James was right. Certainly the opponents of Stuart claims found support in the work of the great Jacobean antiquaries, with their emphasis on the historic rights of the subject, the corrective institutions of the Middle Ages. But these were a different species of scholar from the innocent, self-taught tailor who saw London's past not as an armoury of political rights but as a colourful pageant of civic life. Stow was a nostalgic, not a political antiquary. He loved the past, perhaps more than the present, as he loved the old English poets — Lydgate, Gower, Hoccleve, and above all Chaucer, whom he edited — rather than Spenser or Shakespeare, whom he never mentions. He loved to remember the London of his earlier years, before the developers got at it, before the population explosion of the 16th century. He loved to recall old buildings that had gone, old customs that had been discontinued —

'mayings and May-games', like 'the triumphant setting up of the great shaft (a principal maypole in Cornhill, before the parish church of St. Andrew, therefore called Undershaft)', which was discontinued after the anti-immigrant riots of 'Evil May-day' in 1517. And when his own memory gave out, he would question ancient inhabitants — he found one who could remember Richard III — and make the dry bones of his old chronicles live again. His politics were simple and sound: sedition was always wrong. His references to the Peasants' Revolt of Wat Tyler, 'a presumptuous rebel', in 1381, or to the 'seditious stirs', 'the great and heinous enterprises', of the ex-Lord Mayor John Northampton in 1382, or to Jack Cade's revolt in 1449, leave no doubt about that. And then, apart from the seditious tailor of 1196, there was the seditious curate of 1549, who brings us back, once again, to Stow's own life and this, his own church.

This curate — he was Stephen, the curate of St. Catherine Cree — flourished (need one say?) in the heady days of Edward VI, and Stow remembered how, in his own presence, this radical preacher had proposed the most outrageous novelties, changing everything: the days of the week, the feasts of the Church, the names of London churches. He had even seen him, 'forsaking the pulpit of his said parish church, preach out of a high elm-tree in the midst of the churchyard' — I am glad that practice is no longer in fashion, although even the future archbishop Parker, in this same year 1549, had been forced to preach out of a tree to the Norfolk rebels — 'and then, entering the church, forsaking the altar, to have sung his high mass in English, upon a tomb of the dead, towards the North'. Finally, horror of horrors, Stow heard this dreadful curate preach at Paul's cross and declare that the great shaft of St. Andrew Undershaft 'was made an idol'; 'and I saw the effect that followed', for that very afternoon a crowd, 'after they had well dined, to make themselves strong, gathered more help, and with great labour raising the shaft from the hooks whereon it had rested two-and-thirty years' — i.e. since Evil May-day in 1517, — 'they sawed it in pieces', and every man carried away his share as a trophy. 'Thus was his idol, as he termed it, mangled and afterwards burned'.

The shocking career of Stephen, the radical curate did not end there. Soon afterwards he denounced the bailiff of Romford, 'a man very well beloved', and caused him to be unjustly hanged. Stow himself heard the condemned man's last protestation of innocence, 'for he was executed upon the pavement of my door, where I then kept house'. After which the curate, 'to avoid reproach of the people, left the city and was never heard of since'. And so may all with-it parsons pass into well-merited oblivion except in so far as their follies are held up to just execration by right-minded chroniclers, commemorated, with annual tributes of affection, in their parish churches.