

JOHN STOW

Commemoration address by Professor Valerie Pearl delivered at St. Andrew Undershaft, April 11, 1979.

It has been recorded for the past century and a half that there has been held in many of the intervening years in this church a commemoration of that great citizen of London, John Stow, tailor and historian, who was buried here on April 8, 1605. Stow was a man of two lives – a working tailor of very modest means (he never entered the Livery of his Company and he petitioned for a pension in his old age) – and a historian, literary editor and chronicler of events who mixed on equal terms with the greatest scholars of his age, men like Camden who accepted him as one of their own.

Was there a conflict between the workshop and the study? Stow does not tell us. In all his voluminous notes and writings he does not mention the everyday aspects of his trade. I have found only one small reference to the price of cloth and there is very much less detail than one would expect of the history of his own company, the Merchant Taylors'.

Evidence of a conflict comes indirectly. Self-educated men, such as Stow, are apt to be self-conscious both about their hard-won knowledge and their position among an intellectual elite. Moreover, members of the class from which they have sprung often do not quite know how to make them out. Stow's literary, antiquarian and historical studies seem to have upset his neighbours and even members of his family. One neighbour created a disturbance by shouting 'prick-louse knave' at him (a special insult reserved for tailors), drove away his apprentice and later incited a drunk to come to his shop and call him a vile name which Stow cannot bring himself to repeat. It could not have been good for trade.

Yet Stow was not a litigious or irascible man. A contemporary described him as 'of a pleasant and cheerful countenance . . . very sober, mild and courteous to any that required his instructions'.

Stow never made money by his trade or by his studies. His life as a tailor must have been not unlike those of the mass of small tradesmen who lived in a time of great change and acute paradox. We can see him as one of the many who hovered between two poles: pious, yet critical of priests (Stow, himself investigated for pro-Catholic tendencies, tells of the righteous punishment he saw meted out to a lecherous cleric, and he writes with scorn of a priest who sold a church's brasses). The paradox of the times appears in other ways. Men were ready to accommodate themselves to the new religion, yet looked over their shoulders at the possible return of the old (fearful of 'after-claps', as Stow puts it), accepting the fixed order of society as natural but also finding it proper for some to get on and move up the social ladder (although Stow had two minds about that and cannot conceal his joy when one such slips down again), firmly opposed to sedition and tumult but jealous of the rights and privileges of a citizen and, as Stow does, ready even to applaud some direct action – a near riot against the enclosure of Moorfields, successful in its aims but contained before it went too far.

In the last we have a key to these apparent contradictions. Londoners who were essentially conservative and undesirous of violent change saw going on all round them the signs of vast upheavals in urban living and in religion. In Stow's lifetime, London's

population trebled in size, the church was nationalised and one third of its lands and property confiscated. Inflation, fears of rebellion, foreign wars and years of dearth were common. Yet most of the internal features of city government survived unchanged. Some modern historians have dwelt on the crime, overcrowding, disease and poverty of these years. I think that some of them have exaggerated the criminality and the disorder because they fail to give enough weight to the forces making for stability in the metropolis. London remained an orderly city, its small tradesmen and artisans, the majority of the population, a demanding but contented class providing their privileges were not disturbed, participating in their own local government (call it 'parish pump politics' if you like) to a remarkable degree.

Such ordinary citizens were intensely proud of their city and very conscious of old ways and customs which were dying out or which they had heard about (for remember, many were newcomers). They listened with sympathy to sermons admonishing them for un-puritan modes of behaviour – and then took part in such un-puritan celebrations as dancing round the Maypole. They collected funds, made plans and left money to aid the poorest citizens – and recalled the days not long since when the church and monasteries and bountiful magnates had provided indiscriminate handouts. They enjoyed the many holidays and street celebrations which were still a common but already declining feature of London life – and regretted, or some of them regretted, the absences from profitable work and trade which they entailed; they delighted in the fields and walks that lay just outside the walls, a countryside which some even then saw as destined to disappear – and yet at the same time took pride in the growth of the great city.

We will find in Stow's *Survey of London* many echoes of these apparently paradoxical thoughts of the common citizens, undertones to his chronicles of the history and description of London which express his social and political outlook. Let me take three aspects of Stow which are not always alluded to and which show how much more he is than an antiquarian researcher of monuments and epitaphs.

Look first at Stow as the protector of the environment, to use our modern term. He showers praise on livery companies who repair the walls and is glad to see them display their coats of arms at such places. He cannot pass by one of the city conduits without telling us (we may pardon the exaggeration) that anciently every street and lane had fair wells brimming up from fresh springs. He deploras the state of the town ditch and recalls the living memory of men who fished in it when it was 200 feet wide, but now it is part filthy channel, part building land let out by profiteers. The Fleet River he complains, has become a dyke, and the fifteenth (the 1s. 4d. in the pound rate) ordered by the Common Council for its cleansing has been utterly wasted. He exposes the 'enormity', as he calls them, of purprestures – obstructions or illegal building on the highways, and draws the attention of the Lord Mayor and Corporation to a recent book on the subject by a friend of his – but doubts whether they have even bothered to read it.

Stow fulminates against the builders of summer houses as he terms them – we would call them garden pavilions – decorated with fanciful towers and turrets like pageant architecture. They were built for show and pleasure, he notes disapprovingly, unlike the citizens of old who built hospitals and almshouses. He is concerned about the growth of traffic and the carelessness of drivers: carts are driven dangerously, draymen asleep, leaving their horses to lead them home; new-fangled coaches which should by law be led by hand (but the law is not kept) have vastly increased, an unwelcome introduction from

Germany, he notes. Moreover, the new ways are undermining class distinctions. 'The world runs on wheels,' he says, 'with many whose parents were glad to go on foot.' Some of Stow's sharpest asides are reserved for builders of tall houses, who are suggested to have met with divine retribution. One such was punished for having erected a high tower which overlooked his neighbours. He was subsequently so tormented with gout that he was unable to feed himself and had to be carried about, much less climb his folly. Stow on tall buildings strikes a note which we will find topical, alas. A high house built next to St. Paul's hides its 'beautiful side' view he tells us. Strangely topical too is his concern for city dwellers faced with urban rebuilding and renewal. One of the ornaments of Elizabethan London was the Royal Exchange of Sir Thomas Gresham built on land given by the city. Stow describes the Exchange admiringly but one can detect a note of criticism in his report that eighty households were displaced to make room for it and that in the pulling down of their homes some persons were badly hurt. But it would be wrong to see Stow as one who saw good only in the environment of the past. He tells us, for instance, how much he admires Goldsmiths' Row in Cheapside, its fronts splendidly embellished with wooden carvings, which had been newly restored and gilded.

I have spoken of Stow as a protector of the environment. May I now offer a glimpse of him as a protector of the poor and the advocate of communal activity in the city. It is a stand which aligns him in this one respect with a famous group of radical preachers and politicians, the 'party' of social reformers known as 'Commonwealth men.' Like them and so many social reformers of the day he was particularly concerned about the state of prisons and of prisoners on whose behalf he is more than an armchair friend. Stow himself re-engraved and set up on Ludgate an old but badly placed copper plate which recorded a bequest in aid of prisoners made by a former Lord Mayor. He condemns the infamous practice of farming out the keepership of gaols and gives his own personal experience as a member of a jury to enquire into abuses in prisons: in the Bread Street Compter he found thieves and strumpets being lodged for 4d. a night to keep them safe from searches by the watch. The prison keeper, snug with his profit, could not be touched because of his lease but Stow had the satisfaction of seeing the gaol closed.

Everywhere he applauds the building of almshouses but sadly notes that many bequests are not carried out by executors. In a marginal note on almshouses left to the Drapers' with provision for free rent and food, he adds that the Company has 'unlawfully sold these tenements and garden plots and the poor be wronged,' reminding the authorities that according to the terms of the will the property should now go to the city. He is always enthusiastic about the bringing of water to the town either by public action or private bequest. Such efforts, he says on one occasion, enable 'the poor to drink, the rich to dress their meats,' a nice distinction even if it is not as ironical as it sounds today. Stow's love for communal effort is frequently expressed. He describes the undertakings owned by the city, chiefly to provide essential commodities to relieve the poor in times of dearth: its cornmills, the garners or storehouses which held stocks of wheat supplied by the livery companies at low prices in times of scarcity, the municipal ovens for baking bread for the poor – and even, briefly, a municipal brewery. There are other traditional communal enterprises which are taken for granted by Stow, ancient institutions found in many great European cities: the cleansing of the streets, the assize which attempted to maintain a fair price for basic commodities, the controls of standards and weights, and the provision and supervision of markets. One much more recent institution in London,

the compulsory rating of households to relieve the poor, is also accepted as a normal practice but it is never far from Stow's thoughts that a more harmonious order has passed – a time when the church and private citizens appeared to be closer to the poor.

Stow is also very much a man of his time, a typical Englishman and Londoner who does not like paying local taxes and who does not much care for foreigners. While citizens are overburdened, stranger aliens do not pay their proper share of the rates for the poor, he complains. He tells us approvingly of a petition for Leadenhall market to continue in municipal ownership as it had been traditionally and not let out to private entrepreneurs. He condemns again and again the displacement of cheap or free housing, such as homes for bedridden people in Houndsditch whose 'homely cottages' were pulled down by those like gunmakers who lacked 'room' rather 'than rent' as he puts it, or by others who sought 'fair houses for pleasure'. Stow is no idoliser of the poor, however. He condemns humble almsmen who exploit the housing shortage and let their charitably endowed houses at great rents, and he says that it is only the poverty of the common people not their holiness that prevents them drinking to excess. He is no admirer of people who move out of their station, although as we have seen his own social position as a small tailor turned historian was not without its difficulties. One of his caustic asides refers to a farmer's son who now aspires to live like a gentleman, unlike the man's father, Stow recalls, who often supplied him in his youth with three pints of milk for a penny 'always hot from the kine'.

Such nostalgic regrets for the past are frequent and are part of his philosophy of concern for the poor and in favour of communal endeavour. In this he was not alone, of course. We need to appreciate the considerable degree of public enterprise and municipal control which existed in sixteenth-century London. Part of it harked back to the ethics and practices of medieval society, part to munificent private bequests to aid the poor which, failing subsequent proper administration or even individual will to carry them on, came into the hands of the Corporation or of the Companies – the only bodies able to maintain them in the spirit in which they had been given – charitable foundations acquired by the city in a fit of absent-mindedness, so to speak. But some municipal undertakings were founded in a remarkable manifestation of co-operative endeavour, part of the ideology of the Commonwealth group which emerged in this period and to which I referred earlier.

I have spoken of two less familiar aspects of Stow. I will close on a better known topic – Stow as urban historian. It has become fashionable nowadays among some historians of the town to think of him as a fuddy-duddy antiquarian, a collector and preserver of ancient tit-bits, more concerned with the past than the present. This is to see him out of his context. Stow fulfils rigorous conditions in the discipline of his art. As a historian, he exhibits care in his methods of work, his evidence is selected to provide the aptest demonstration and he is usually critical of his sources whether they are ancient chronicles and records or the testimonies (and fables) of living contemporaries: witness his sceptical interrogation of an ostler in an inn which possessed a pole some 40 foot long said to have once been a giant's walking stick – Stow remarks that it was probably a disused maypole. Scepticism was not the only weapon in his armoury. It has been said that an essential piece of equipment for a local historian is a stout pair of boots. Stow must have worn out many a pair or their equivalent for he went everywhere about the city on foot (he was too

poor to ride a horse anyway) measuring, recording changes, questioning, observing and making notes for his life's work.

Above all, Stow writes as a historian imbued with a moral purpose. This is particularly seen in the *Survey of London* which is our first town history of a modern kind. It is much more than a descriptive perambulation of the city. The work contains a sharp denunciation of some of the social changes in city life brought about by the Reformation. It is also a philosophical exploration of city topography. Much as a modern urban historian might do, Stow examines the structural features of the town, tracing their growth and development – the political boundaries, important buildings, amenities, markets, traffic, bridges, gates, water supply and cleansing, schools, charities, churches, customs, ceremonies, trades in their localities, in short all the features that make up a living community.

It cannot be claimed that Stow was a great conceptual historian but in this quality of trying to penetrate the nature of the great town, he was a true pioneer. One can recognise this quality in his decision to add to his work two contributions of great interest. One was an account by William FitzStephen, a 'description of London' written in 1174, which served Stow as a text throughout his survey to indicate the changes which had taken place in the intervening four centuries. The other is a prescient essay on the characteristics and benefits of urban civilisation entitled 'An Apology of the City of London', written around 1580 by an unknown author whose name Stow does not reveal. The essay is remarkable for its examination of social mobility between town and country and for what modern historians would term the class structure of London and the problems of social control. Stow as he ceaselessly walked and watched in his beloved city must have had mixed thoughts about one thrust of the author's thesis, for it is written as a counterblast to those who feared that London was growing too fast, a view which Stow shared. Nevertheless, he had the good sense and objectivity to print it in his *Survey* and that fact too tells us something of his quality as a historian who always sought the truth.