JOHN STOW AND THE LEGENDARY HISTORY OF LONDON

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AN ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE JOHN STOW MEMORIAL SERVICE, ST ANDREW UNDERSHAFT, 17 APRIL 1996

John Stow was born in 1525; at the age of 22 he was admitted to the freedom of the Merchant Taylors' Company. Yet we remember him today not as a tailor, but as an historian – for from the 1560s until his death in 1605 he devoted most of his energy to historical research and historical writing.

In 1565 he first published his *Summarie of Englyshse Chronicles* – which followed the traditional form of London chronicles in comprising separate entries for each year, headed by the names of the Mayor and the Sheriffs. By 1592 this had developed into what he called *Annales* – still a chronological account of the history of England, but with the narrative flowing freely from year to year.

Then in 1598 came something new and very different – his *Survey of London*, an exercise in what he termed 'chorography' and we today might call historical topography, or topographical history. The word *chorography* had been used a few years earlier by Stow's friend William Camden to describe his own great historical work published in Latin under the title *Britannia*. Stow's *Survey* was not narrative history, not a story of kings, lawcodes and battles, but a street by street description of the London of his time, serving as a framework for the history of individual buildings and institutions.

Like a modern historian Stow turned to original records and documents for his material; but he was not in any real sense a modern historian. Like his younger contemporary Camden, Stow was working within a well-established tradition of Tudor historical writing – a tradition that centred on the so-called 'British History'. The British History was a strange construct that began in the attempts of 9th-century Welsh writers to establish a believable origin for their own people, and to create an historical framework for the lives of legendary heroes like King Arthur. It was greatly developed in the 1130s by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of the Kings of Britain*, and was accepted by most later medieval writers as the basis of their accounts of the early history of Britain before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons.

It described the arrival of a group of exiled Trojans on an island at the edge of the world which they called *Britain* after their leader Brutus – the founding of the city of New Troy on the site of what was to become London – the reigns of Brutus's descendants – the coming of the Romans and the Saxons – and the glorious but ill-fated reign of King Arthur. Tudor historians, writing under the rule of a dynasty that traced its ancestry back to King Arthur and through him to the Trojan Brutus, were naturally reluctant to dispute the reality of this account. So, in his *Annales* in 1592, Stow devoted the first 63 pages to what is little more than an uncritical summary of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* from the arrival of Brutus and his Trojans in 1108 BC to the death of the Welsh king Cadwallader in AD 685, though not without some attempts to correlate it with accounts by Julius Caesar and other Roman authors.

William Camden had been less willing to include the traditional story in his *Britannia* in 1586. He pointed out the inconsistencies between it and what Greek and Roman authors had to say about Britain – though he admitted it was probably vain 'to struggle against an opinion commonly and long since received'; 'let every man judge as it pleaseth him' he concluded.

Thus it was perhaps with Camden's encouragement that John Stow, when he came to write the introduction to his *Survey of London*, took a stand against the traditional story. No longer would he accept that the Trojan Brutus had founded a capital city beside the Thames and called it *Troia Nova* ('New Troy') or *Trinovantum*, or that the later King Lud had rebuilt it with fine walls and gates

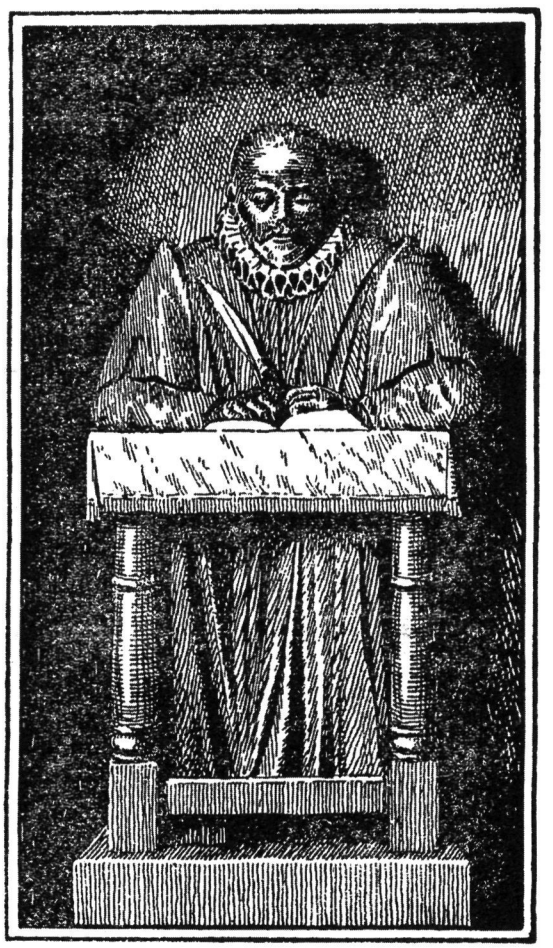

Fig 1. The monument to John Stow in St Andrew Undershaft, erected by his widow and designed by Nicholas Johnson

and renamed it *Lud's Town*, or London. Stow quoted the Roman author Livy to the effect that historians can be 'pardoned for interlacing divine matters with human to make the first foundation of cities more honourable' – clearly in Stow's opinion the story of New Troy was just such a fictional conflation of divine and human.

He drew on the writings of Julius Caesar to demolish the traditional history. Caesar had written that when he came to Britain the Britons had no walled cities – if he was right Lud's town with its magnificent walls and gates could not have existed at that time. And when Caesar wrote in Latin of *civitas Trinovantum* he did *not* mean 'the city of Trinovantum', as Geoffrey of Monmouth and others had explained it, but rather the 'nation' or 'tribe' of the Trinovantes, a Celtic people that he encountered north of the Thames. Stow seems to have been the first writer to point out the significance of this misinterpretation of the Latin word *civitas*.

When Stow turned to his account of the buildings and streets of London he was equally ready to question the more obvious fables – though willing where necessary to confess his uncertainty. About Billingsgate and its supposed foundation by a British king called Belinus he at first merely expressed some doubt before returning to the subject later and dismissing the story of Belinus outright as legend. For the name 'Ludgate' he suggested a number of plausible explanations, but refused to accept the traditional story that the gate was built by and named after King Lud – though he noted that a new statue representing Lud had been erected on the gate tower just a few years before he wrote.

And he turned an equally questioning eye on other local legends and pieces of folklore that had grown up in London during the Middle Ages and after.

For example, the brass plate in St Peter's church on Cornhill that claimed that the church had been founded as a cathedral for the first archbishop of London was, he said, based on no known authority; the archbishop in question could not be proved to have existed; the brass plate itself was, in Stow's time, relatively modern. The Tower of London was *not* built by Julius Caesar (a popular story known to William Shakespeare); Stow quoted contemporary records to prove that building works had begun in the reign of William I. The pole, 40ft long, that was preserved in Gerard's Hall near Bread Street as the staff of Gerard the Giant was probably, Stow suggested, a disused maypole like that which once stood outside St Andrew Undershaft. And the giant's bone displayed in the church of St Lawrence Jewry was, he considered, possibly that of an elephant!

In one case, that of a supposed Roman temple on the site of St Paul's Cathedral, Stow was quite willing to dispute the matter with his old friend William Camden, who had proved rather too ready to rely on some extremely shaky and circumstantial evidence to support his own view that the goddess Diana had once been worshipped there. Though tempted to accept that there might have been a temple, perhaps dedicated to Jupiter, Stow neatly demolished the weakest of Camden's arguments.

To our modern eyes, John Stow has faults as an historian. He certainly sometimes misunderstood or misused his sources. But he represents a new type of history – a history that took contemporary records as its source and was not ready to rely on argument from authority. The texts of earlier historians could, and should, be questioned and compared with other forms of evidence.

It is a lesson that modern historians should bear in mind. What even the most learned and distinguished historian has written about the past is not to be mistaken for the truth. It may seem to be vain, as Camden put it, 'to struggle against an opinion commonly and long since received'. But the life and works of John Stow demonstrate that it is upon such struggles that advances in our knowledge of the past must be founded.

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John Stow's chief historical works:

Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles (London 1565, and new editions up to 1590)

The Chronicle of England (London 1580)

The Annales of England (London 1592, 1601, 1605)

A Survey of London (London 1598, 1603)

The Everyman's Library edition of the *Survey* (London 1912, revised and reprinted several times since) is of the fuller 1603 text, as is the current publication by Alan Sutton (Stroud 1994); the definitive two-volume edition, edited and annotated by C L Kingsford (Oxford 1908) consists of the 1603 text with notes of variations found in the first, 1598, edition. All three contain useful summaries of Stow's life and work.

William Camden's comments on the traditional British History are quoted above from the first English edition of his *Britannia,* translated by Philemon Holland under the title *Britain, or a Chorographicall Description of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London 1610).

Geoffrey of Monmouth *The History of the Kings of Britain,* translated by Lewis Thorpe, is published in Penguin Books (Harmondsworth 1966). An extensive study of Geoffrey's sources and methods is that by J S P Tatlock, *The Legendary History of England* (University of California Press, Berkeley 1950).

The standard account of the rise and fall of the 'British History' can be found in T D Kendrick *British Antiquity* (London 1950).

For some aspects of the legendary history of London see also J Clark:

'Trinovantum – the evolution of a legend' *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981) 135–51

'New Troy to lake village – the legend of prehistoric London' *London Archaeol* 4.11 (1983) 292–96

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