

Professor Peter Elder

*Armenian Studies and Research: Problems and Needs, June 11, 1955. Edited transcription of recording.*

I wish to bring you the greetings of my University. These greetings are not routine nor conventional, nor selfish. They are rather warm and earnest, full of hope. President Pusey is, as you know, a humanist, and, I hope, so am I. Therefore, we believe in what you believe in. So, I do bring you our best wishes and greetings.

From rather painful experiences in teaching, I have learned, or at least usually I remember that I've learned, that a man always talks about what he knows something about, and a boy talks about what he doesn't know anything about. Accordingly, I shall not talk to you about Armenia. But the very fact that almost no knowledge about Armenia has trickled down to a layman like myself, perhaps, points out as luridly and specifically as anything could, the great need indeed for the Chair and the studies you propose.

Let me digress for one moment. It seems to me that the way to study the venerable and worthwhile culture and the history, is to start at the top with scholars, groping and digging in a rather remote and rather lonely fashion, trying, through archeology of the word and of the thing to learn what they can about a culture ... I think you will agree with me that it is a rare scholar that can write an appealing book for laymen. Therefore, we need several stages, do we not? But the way to begin is to begin at the top, in a library with equipment and with scholars, not begin at the bottom with lurid, sensational, and mostly incorrect popular versions. If you ever can found your Chair, a man like myself, I predict, 25 years from now, will know something about Armenia.

Speaking of ignorance about Armenia, I consulted quite a number of my colleagues to see what they knew about Armenia (I except Professor Frye), and I really grew awfully tired of hearing the standard reply about Mt. Ararat, and almost immediately, my colleague would almost inevitably turn as quickly as he could with any decency, to his own field of study. One of them proposed quite seriously that I should discuss something called Arminian theology, or as some call it, heresy. I can't discuss Arminian theology because I don't really know much about that, but what I do know tells me that it was

produced in Holland in reply to Calvinism.

I say, therefore, that I am going to talk to you about something I know something about. The fact is I really don't know much about the subject I'm going to talk about, and that is the Graduate School in relation to your proposal. As a matter of fact, I am going to go into this job on the first of July, and about four months ago I decided I ought to try to learn something about it. I think this is a typical Harvardian process, to put a man into something for which he apparently has no qualifications. As you look at the series of Harvard presidents each one is a living denial of his predecessor. It gives us that elasticity for which we are famous in New Haven.

Let me tell you briefly what I think a Graduate School is about. Put it very simply, the function of a graduate school is to help in every possible way the acquisition of more knowledge. That knowledge is not limited in time, nor country. It should be knowledge about things that are important. It should go back as far as it can go. Some people will call that knowledge "truth." I won't. It may or may not be connected with the use or the application of it. More often than not, a graduate school does not concern itself with the use of the knowledge it acquires. And this, I think you will agree, is probably a good thing. If a graduate school does not try to apply its knowledge, but if it simply concerns itself in the acquiring of the knowledge, then it can maintain a certain chastity, and purity. Now, as I look at this Graduate School, or any graduate school, three things seem to be of paramount importance and these three, we here at Harvard care about intensely and passionately. These are the variety of the subjects in which you offer instruction and in which you encourage research; the second is the quality of the faculty; the third is the quality of your students. Those are the basic things. Let me talk for a moment about those three. First, variety of subject: the Graduate School must offer, must it not, subjects without regard to their immediate utilitarian value. I myself as a professor of Greek and Latin, am a walking embodiment of that. I am sure you would agree that I am a great deal more important than a nuclear physicist and do less harm and more spiritual good. Let me illustrate with the field of history. A good University, a first rate one, isn't going to limit its instruction of history to American history or the history of Western Europe. No

indeed, on the contrary. We are going to pursue Ancient Greek history, the history of Iran, Arabia, and, I hope, Armenia.

The same thing is true of language, is it not? We will always have a Chair of Sanskrit. By my own experience, they have been socially acceptable in the Western world for a great many centuries and that is probably why and how I am paid. The same thing has not, to be frank, has not been true of Armenia. And all the more credit to you ... Your Country, your race, has an important and a very proud history. Therefore, that must come into the variety of instruction we offer.

Let me turn to the second topic, and this is one which Prof. Frye and I and Prof. Jakobson can talk now because we've passed through ... to become a permanent appointment of Harvard. And this I would like to talk to you about for a moment as it will concern you who will hold the Chair. Let me say we do it in this way. The President of the University appoints a Committee on every single pertinent appointment. Most of that Committee consists of experts from outside of Harvard. There can, therefore, be no local politicking, of which, I assure you there would be and could be a good deal within that sainted academic ivory tower...The best man certainly isn't going to necessarily come from Harvard, or necessarily from the United States. We range all over the World. If there is nobody fit for a Chair, then nobody is appointed at that time. This is the way we do things and I say this to you because it ought to reassure you that...the man to hold the Chair of Armenian will, I hope, and I am sure, be the very best possible man. Let me be really commercial and brazen about this. You will ask me how can we get the best man. I think we can get him because of our prestige, and because of the amount of money that we will spend.

I'd like to turn to the last topic of all. For me this is a very important topic and one about which I have to come to a decision, and that is what about our graduate students? This is a very serious matter...What are we going to do as a University? I think the answer is that we must not increase in number, but increase in the quality of people we take in. We don't have the physical plant, laboratories and libraries, the dormitories, the eating places, we don't have them here. And short of expanding into the MTA, I just don't

know where we'd put these things. Besides that, let me say something that may not have occurred to you: it is not easy at all to get first class faculty members. Therefore, it seems to me that our job here in our Graduate School is to be much more selective even than we have been. Take the very best people and nobody but them, as students. Train them up to the PhD and send them out to the various places of the country. Let's assume you have, for the moment, your Chair of Armenian here. That will inevitably attract those who are seriously interested in the study to Harvard. They will get their degrees. They, in turn, will go out to California, Wisconsin, all sorts of places, and they will train others, followers and disciples of their own. This seems to be our function at Harvard.

One last point. The program for your Chair seems to be, to me, to have been very shrewd and very sensible. It carries the provision that until the amount of money for the Chair is raised, the interest on the amount given before that time will be used for scholarships. I don't want to compare the graduate student to big league baseball, but there is a tremendous amount of competition going on. I think Harvard should go out in the market and compete with, let's say Yale, and Princeton, and Johns Hopkins, in the amount of money you give people. I think we ought to offer good scholarships. Surely there must be something about Harvard in the intellectual and spiritual character that ought to make up the difference. But nevertheless you see we will need scholarship help very much. As indeed we need help for the Chair. This is inevitable for any private institution of learning. I think, now, I've said what I had to say, I'd better know enough to stop, so let me simply repeat to you that I, personally, feel enthusiastic about the project and I want, again I say, not from a selfish point of view, I want to wish you every good augury and the best of success.