

## A Tribute to a Doubter and Questioner

Russell E. Martin

*Dubitando enim ad inquisitionem venimus; inquirendo  
veritatem percipimus.*

With these words—“By doubting, we come to question; by questioning, we perceive truth”—Peter Abelard began his monumental *Sic et Non*; and we, the editors of this volume, have placed the first of these words (*dubitando*: “by doubting”) at the beginning of the title of this book honoring our dear friend and esteemed colleague Donald Ostrowski. It is a fitting way to frame this tribute since Don has been doubting (*dubitando*) and questioning (*inquirendo*) documentary sources and interpretative models his entire career as a historian of early Russia and Ukraine. The relationship between doubting and questioning was obvious to Abelard, and his bold—some in his lifetime thought heretical—pursuit of the truth brought him both fame and trouble. Don’s own penchant for doubting and questioning as a means for getting at the truth about early Slavic history has been just as bold and heretical, a little less trouble-filled, but just as successful at uncovering the truth.

Don has been dealing in truth for many years. Nearly every work in his long and substantial bibliography is dedicated to examining, and often challenging, a long-held tenet of belief among scholars of early Russia and Ukraine. Perhaps Don’s best known work is his edition of the *Povest’ vremennykh let (PVL)*—the Rus’ian Primary Chronicle that survives in numerous copies from different parts of the East Slavic space, with vexing and significant variant readings distinguishing these copies into text critical branches of interrelated versions of the story. The relationship between these versions of the *PVL* has attracted the attention of many of Russia’s and Ukraine’s best textual scholars over the centuries. As a result, very few felt today the need to start questioning these texts and these textual relations that had been etched in stone for so long. But Don doubted that the work done so far on this substantial body of texts had uncovered the truth about the *PVL*, and so he went about questioning the traditional relationships and isolated readings, comparing versions of the *PVL* word by word. Whether Don reached the “truth” is something even he would say only time will tell, but we would not now have a new mammoth edition of the *PVL* without Don (and his co-editors) first doubting, questioning, and believing that they should try to get closer to the truth.

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This kind of boldness and gumption appears in Don's many other works, many of which tackle time-honored interpretations of persons, events, and individual texts. Don recently turned nearly upside down the textual stemma for the *vita* of St. Alexander Nevskii. He challenged the traditional meaning and purpose of service tenure landholding (*pomest'e*) in Muscovy. He questioned the time-honored understanding of scholars of the Judaizer "heresy." He reenvisioned the Muscovite Assembly of the Land (*Zemskii sobor*). He overturned what most thought was going on at the 15th- and 16th-century councils of the Russian Church. He established the origin of Psalmic citations in the *PVL*. Working with me, he reconsidered the heretical speculations of Aleksandr Zimin and the origin of the Igor Tale. And Don's book on the nature and extent of cross-cultural borrowing between the Muscovites and the Mongols has laid out arguments that are so striking and novel that the field is still digesting the implications of his findings. Don has most recently taken his doubting and questioning outside the field of early Slavic studies—to the on-going debate over the authorship of Shakespeare's works. Don has (since 2008) been on the editorial board of the online and print journal *Brief Chronicles: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Authorship Studies*, which is dedicated to investigating the Shakespearean canon from an Oxfordian perspective. Clearly, Don has produced a long list of studies and new discoveries rooted in his doubting and questioning. Nearly everything in his extensive bibliography presents a new and convincing revision of things we thought we knew so well.

But this is not to say that Don is a doctrinaire revisionist. Often, his doubting and questioning have led him back to familiar ground and interpretations. For all its many bold and revisionist claims about the role and influence of the Mongols in early Russian history, Don's book about the Muscovites and the Mongols ends up supporting (and providing some of the best evidence for) the classic argument, formerly made for passionate and romantic reasons, that the Muscovites were deeply linked to, and borrowed from, Byzantium. This same pattern—adding new and supporting evidence to familiar arguments—is true as well in his study of the "extraordinary career" of Tsarevich Peter (Kudai Kul), of Tsar Simeon Bekbulatovich, and of old Muscovite political tales. Doubting and questioning is always the methodology in Don's work, and his conclusions are what they are. Don goes wherever the evidence takes him. Sometimes the evidence leads to new and controversial territory, and other times back to familiar landscapes. In all things, it is always the evidence that guides Don to his conclusions. He is the least ideological historian I know.

It is precisely Don's regard for the evidence that is perhaps his most important attribute as a scholar, and it is an attribute that I believe is a manifestation of his character: his unfailing and highly principled sense of integrity. Don has absolutely no axe to grind in any of his research. I remember a conversation with Don once when he was uncharacteristically agitated by a paper

he had heard at a conference that treated textology, paleography, codicology, and other kinds of textual studies as “ancillary disciplines.” As I recall it, Don’s point was that all interpretive models must be rooted in a firm understanding of the sources, and any model or theory that strays even an inch from the sources is not worth his time. This is especially true, of course, when working with sources in the medieval and early modern periods, when the dating and general paucity of sources present enormous problems for historians trying to reconstruct a period, a reign, a biography, or a belief or practice. But Don has argued in print and in conference presentations that source study (fontology) is not something just for the pre-modernists. Historians study texts—reading them, dating them, interpreting them—both as the sources of our information about the past, but also as a discrete and worthy subject of our time and attention in their own right. He is right, of course. And his conviction that all historians, regardless of the period they study, are textual scholars is revealed in nearly every one of the articles, book chapters, and, perhaps especially, book reviews he has written. Don’s highly-tuned sense of integrity, then, boils down to an undistracted faithfulness to the sources. His professional integrity is an extension of his character.

I came to know Don toward the end of my time in graduate school at Harvard, but my friendship and mentor-mentee relationship with him developed mostly after I had left Cambridge for western Pennsylvania and as I began my annual summer pilgrimages back to Widener Library. Don and I began to meet at Peet’s Coffee House in Harvard Square for hours of shop talk about Muscovite history and the politics of working in our field in these crepuscular times. These hours together with laptops and lattes are among the most important intellectual experiences I have had since finishing graduate school. It was at one of these sessions that Don suggested that I write a book about bride-shows in Muscovy, a topic I had been writing on for some time but had never considered pulling together into a monograph. Don was there at the beginning of that project, and he read every word of every chapter afterward, advising me on small points of fact and Slavonic grammar, and engaging with genuine enthusiasm the large conceptual ideas in the book. He was, in a word, very generous with his time and his insights, and I am deeply grateful to him for it.

And I am hardly the lone beneficiary of Don’s integrity and generosity. While Don and I would sit at Peet’s Café and debate topics on early Russian or Eurasian history, we would often be interrupted by his students, who call him by his first name and who feel entirely free and invited to approach him with any sort of question they might have. Or, just to chat. His students come to Peet’s because they know he’ll be there (he is so frequent a visitor to this café that he was once proclaimed the “Customer of the Week”) and they know he’ll be willing to drop whatever he’s doing—like talking to me—to answer a question or to read over a draft. Don has been teaching at the Harvard Extension School since 1982. He has been Research Advisor in the Social Sci-

ences since 1988 and Lecturer in Extension Studies since 1992. Before and during these years, Don has also taught at Boston University (1991–92 and 1996–98), in the Committee on Degrees in History and Literature at Harvard (1984–86), in the Department of Slavic Languages at Harvard (1984–85), and in the History Department at Harvard (1981–83), as well as teaching courses at Emerson College and Newbury College. Don takes his teaching responsibilities enormously seriously and had been recognized for his achievements in the classroom at Harvard, winning the Petra T. Shattuck Excellence in Teaching Award in 1992. Yet he is also one of the most prolific scholars in our field. Employed, as I am, at a self-described “student-centered college,” where the balance between teaching, research, and service—the Holy Trinity before which all professors prostrate themselves—is tremendously hard to find, I can only stand with gaping jaw at the success he has found in all three areas of his work. It is therefore not enough to praise and celebrate Don as a highly published and respected researcher and author. One must also think of him as a teacher and as a successful and energetic contributor to the Extension School community.

And beyond the Harvard Extension School. Don has been an active leader in service to his field, as well. He was one of the founders and first officers of the Association for the Study of Eastern Christianity (ASEC) and one of the first (and most active) members of the Early Slavic Studies Association (ESSA). (His edition of the *PVL* won the ESSA’s very first Distinguished Scholarship Award.) Perhaps Don’s most important service to the field has been his chairing (since 1998) of the Early Slavic Seminar at the Davis Center at Harvard University, a monthly gathering of early Slavic specialists that provides a venue for experts from around the country (and the world) to present their current research to the community of scholars at Harvard. These lectures have been the setting for the first public presentations of some of the most important (and controversial) ideas in recent scholarship. They have become places to express doubt, to raise questions, and to seek the truth, and thus have very much taken on Don’s personality.

Festschriften are rare tributes, especially in these tough days in the publishing world. And they ought to be rare. To offer one to a colleague is the highest accolade, and the highest accolade ought to be offered sparingly and deservedly. I can think of no one who deserves this accolade more than Don, who has published fundamental and enduring works of scholarship, who has contributed broadly to the survival and fitness of the field of early Slavic studies, and who has energized students to think critically and historically through his teaching. He has taught us all by his example to doubt and to question, and has done so with enormous generosity and integrity. Don is one of the models I attempt to emulate in my professional life. And it is to this model of scholarly doubting and questioning that I, along with my co-editors, gratefully offer this book.