

Remarks

By Dan Kevles

Session of Remembrance of J.L. Heilbron

OHST, Berkeley, 3/20/25

I first met John in the mid-1960s at the American Philosophical Society library by reason of, as John later put it, “the racket he was making with [an ancient] typewriter in an otherwise silent reading room.” The typewriter was in a cubicle courtesy of the Society for the use of scholars. John had been trying quietly to write his notes on small cards – the origin of his famed pink cards -- using the modern version of a quill pen. He found my noise disturbing. He walked into the cubicle to see who was upending the peace. But rather than chastise me, he asked what I was working on. The history of physics in the United States, I said. He wanted to know more, so he suggested that I join him and Paul Forman for lunch. That was the John I came to know, far more curious and open-minded than judgmental. And so began our long, ever-closer friendship. We came to think of ourselves as brothers.

It was a wonderful friendship, marked by conversations on multiple subjects, several collaborations, and good meals and good times, often *en famille*, from Berkeley to Bologna. Together with Paul, he formed for me a small but shaping invisible college, generously providing critical comment and crucial encouragement when I was writing my first book, *The Physicists*. Even today I sense John sitting on my shoulder as I write, admonishing me against the commission of any number of literary sins.

John himself was an exquisite writer, master of many languages, and a towering figure of astonishing chronological range in the history and biography of physics. His command of its technical content and of the connections of the physics enterprise to the larger society through so many centuries left his friends, including me, in awe. But you already know these features of John’s life, so permit me to dwell on his character and commitments.

While history of science was John’s vocation, I learned early on that his encompassing avocation, pursued with devotion, was gardening. He cherished the plants that he and his wife Pat, who died in 1993, grew on the rise between the entrance to their Berkeley home and the gate above to the street. In Shilton, he and Alison, his treasured collaborator in all the dimensions of his life for 28 years, found joy and pride in the garden that ran from the patio at the rear of the house to a shallow stream perhaps thirty yards away. They designed it, cultivated it, and protected it against assaults of excessive heat, flooding storms, and invasion by any number of bugs. It was – and so far as I know – remains gorgeous, a living work of art, rich in varieties, brilliant in complementary colors, treats for the eye and spirit.

John’s devotion to the garden serves as a metaphor for much of his approach to life and work. He was a wise, generous, and effective cultivator – of young talent wherever he found it, of scholarship at home and abroad, of collaborations across all boundaries, of widely influential institutions, including his own University., and, above all, of friendships.

John cultivated fresh understandings from what nurserymen call “chance finds in the fields” – that is, by noticing in libraries, archives, and galleries what most others had missed, for example the Roman Catholic Church’s continuing and significant patronage of natural philosophy, or a painting showing its prosperous seated subject posed with a copy in hand of a work by Galileo. Why Galileo? John wondered, a question that led through assiduous thought and wide-ranging research to *The Ghost of Galileo*.

When we were once flying to California from the East Coast, I asked John what he would most like to have been if he wasn't a historian. For myself, I had in mind a major league baseball player. John answered quickly: A medieval knight. The response expressed more than his characteristic playfulness and good humor. It also bespoke his quiet, unswerving commitment to a code of conduct and the principles it embodied. He was an enemy of cant, obfuscation, and murkiness, a tireless advocate of clarity, succinctness, and air-tight argument. He was approachable and unpretentious. He preferred to sign his publications simply -- J.L Heilbron.