

In Remembrance of John Heilbron, by Ken Alder (October 2024)

Over the past few decades, historians of science, including Thomas Kuhn, have offered various explanations for the frequency of simultaneous discoveries in science, and for the subtle differences in interpretation which fuel so many priority disputes. Rarely, however, do these historians report on how uncanny this simultaneity can feel for the discoverers themselves, especially for the more junior parties. I first “met” John Heilbron 35 years ago, when someone told me—30 minutes before I was to give the first conference paper of my career—that an eminent historian had very recently addressed my “exact” topic in the 1989 Sarton Memorial Lecture, and that an extended version of that talk was currently in-press in a forthcoming collected volume. That eminence was, of course, Prof. Heilbron, and his paper was “The Measure of Enlightenment.”

I immediately rushed to the book display in the main conference room to frantically leaf through the pages of the pre-print. There, to my relief and horror, I learned that our interpretations agreed at some points, and diverged at others. I recall being more relieved about the divergences, than upset about the overlaps, presumably because at the time I was more anxious to be thought original, than horrified to be thought wrong. Afterward, I sent my conference paper to Vice Chancellor Heilbron and arranged to meet with him in his office in Berkeley a few months later. He could not have been more gracious. In important ways, that conversation marked my welcome to the community of scholars, and I have been forever grateful for the combination of intellectual rigor and collegial generosity with which he treated a young graduate student from another institution. Twenty years later I presented a version of my essay on metric conventions as the 2009 Sarton Memorial Lecture, which I dedicated to John Heilbron, whose work has preceded, dogged, and inspired mine.