

Eloge for JLH at HSS
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I would like to highlight a few elements of John Heilbron. An important quality that John imparted to his students was good taste. He did so more by example than by explicit instruction, as taste is hard to define but you know it when you see it. John's good taste was evident in his selection of research topics and the way he wrote about them, and his students tried to emulate it. And as John observed—quoting one of his early modern subjects, Ludovico Muratori—the three fundamentals of good taste were: “humility, humility, and humility.”

John taught students humility by reminding them how much they didn't know. To take a purely hypothetical example, in the oral qualifying exam of a student concentrating in history of modern physics, John might ask a question about the Cambridge mathematical tripos, which the student would answer confidently. Through several innocuous followup questions John would walk the student 250 years back in time, so that the student would find himself discussing mixed mathematics in the time of Galileo. And with a cocked eyebrow from John, our hypothetical student would suddenly realize that he was on very thin ice, talking about something he knew nothing about. And that student would know humility.

John would ease the sting of that humility on the ensuing walk across campus back to Stephens Hall by discussing the challenges in understanding early modern mathematics, perhaps followed by a beer at Henry's. He would thus teach the student a second lesson: the importance of collegiality, the sense of a communal—and international—effort among scholars of good faith to expand our understanding of the past. John exemplified collegiality at the OHST colloquium, where he might strongly disagree with a speaker in the questions, but greet them warmly after the talk and host them at a lively group dinner at a local Chinese restaurant.

A final characteristic: his sense of humor. In John's inaugural issue as editor of HSPS he encouraged contributors to write with “economy of expression and an occasional smile.” He added, “The ridiculous in the human condition touches scientists as well as their historians.” He practiced what he preached, generously leavening his own writing with irony and wit.

As for economy of expression, John taught all his students to be concise. So I will stop here.