

## **John Heilbron: Research Mentor**

Rebecca Ullrich

I will say to you three phrases:

- know your own mind,
- cast your net widely, and
- impose your will on the material.

I was a grad student at Berkeley in the 1980s and heard these phrases from John Heilbron repeatedly – not together, but as instructions at relevant points in research and writing. Instructions for getting started, when you must know the question or at least the issue you are addressing (know your own mind); instructions for doing research, in which you should not be limited by existing boundaries or categories (cast your net widely); and for writing, in which you must not let the many threads and trails from the research flummox you (impose your will on the material).

I wasn't John's student in that he wasn't my advisor. I knew John best through working for him as a research assistant for several years.

I love research, letting my mind wander in the past and see its patterns. John encouraged that – depended on it in his research assistants. He was a lot of fun to work for – to listen to him frame up the questions, to be in the library rooting about among the wild geese, and then bring back the results, on track on the topic but with the net cast widely (perhaps into a different century than he thought it would be in). To explain what I'd found, to argue for its relevance or discuss until I saw his point (or, rarely, until he saw mine). He made room for all of that, with no show of impatience. And a lot of time was spent deciding what to use, what to leave out, what to keep looking for. I saw him build the story and his arguments out of the bits and pieces – decide what worked and what didn't. Saw three hours in the library turn into one sentence.

The image I hold of John is of him taking the research and imposing his will upon it. Renée Courey and I were about to housesit for him and Pat, so they had us over for dinner. We arrived, were given a glass of wine and a bit of conversation on the deck. Then John toured us through the gardens with the lush plants we would spend the next 6 weeks killing. He returned us to Pat, who toured us about the interior. Before we stepped into the house, he'd already picked up his fountain pen

and was writing. By the time we got back, he'd written over a page, longhand, in that precise, tiny script.

I don't know that I learned much in John's classroom, but he provided me with an extensive education in doing research and turning it into history. As a result, I'm a good historian. I work in public history and often have to take my research and shape it into story quickly. I think of John, pen in hand, having absorbed the research, sketching the next word and the next. I am grateful.