



Spencer Weart

It's hard to say which century was John Heilbron's favorite. He rooted around in every one from the 17th to the early 20th, exploring obscure archives to find unusual people and unexpected ideas. So it was against the grain when he and Paul Forman took up the then revolutionary field of quantitative history, where numbers rule. Yet their survey of  Physics ca. 1900  remains unmatched in the history of science. The project was a stroke of luck for me personally, since it gave John funds to hire me as a research assistant, when Dan Kevles recommended me to his attention. But it didn't hurt that I had a degree in physics. John was originally trained in physics, like almost every historian of physics back then, and physics was a sort of intellectual substrate that bonded us all. It also bonded the historians with working physicists, which came in handy for me personally when John, lobbying in ways I never learned about, helped get me hired as Director of the American Institute of Physics' History Center. In effect, my entire career in history of physics was his creation.

Countless other scholars benefited from John's quiet aid and guidance. As a demonstration of his popularity and goodwill I'll just mention one History of Science Society meeting when John and I were walking through the opening reception, drinks in hand. It was impossible to get to the other side of the room. Every few steps someone would stop John to ask him a question, thank him for something, or just, you know, be with him for a minute.

John had an ability to see things sidewise, noticing things that others missed but that somehow illuminated major scientific developments. Good historians are good writers, and his personality shows up best in his writing style: always lively and humane, always meticulously accurate, with here and there an ironic smile, a raised eyebrow, a finger pointing to something worth thinking about.

- S. Weart