

Stefano Gattei

IN MEMORY OF JOHN HEILBRON

HSS 2024, Mérida (Mexico)

10 November 2024

I was never a student of John's. In fact, I got in touch with him shortly after his retirement, in the mid-1990s. I was working on Thomas Kuhn, and John was kind enough to help me with some material and some insights about him.

When I switched from philosophy to history of science, our exchanges grew considerably. John was always supportive of my work: not only was he willing to repeatedly revise the various drafts of my papers (also correcting my sloppy English), but offered all sorts of insightful comments, provided suggestions, and whenever I needed direction, he was there to help. In 2015, at a conference in Pavia, he was so nice as to accept to be the discussant of my paper on Galileo's "relics", and we had great fun in chasing after some of the local saints' relics in the city's churches, both before and after the conference.

Next to his incredible knowledge (he seemed to have read everything and, more importantly, to remember whatever he had read), I always admired his style, his wit, the confidence of his judgment, his terrific sense of proportion. He was an incredibly generous man and scholar. He leaves me with the memory of his uncompromising dedication to intellectual work, carried through to his very last days. Most importantly, I felt he *cared* about me. And I cannot thank him enough for that.

No matter how very different my contributions were from his, no matter how unattainable his often seemed to me, he always made me feel we were both equally engaged in a fundamental and exciting intellectual activity well worth devoting our lives to.

I think back now – as I did during those last, painful few weeks in Padua – of the days of work at Caltech and Oxford, the long walks in Shilton, Pasadena and Trento, the many conversations, ever stimulating and full of new ideas, the bright smile of his great intelligence. One day we were at his desk in Shilton, we were revising the first (1635) English translation of Galileo’s *Dialogue*, one of the projects we were working on. At some point, I made a mistake; he turned to me and said: “Dr Gattei, you are fired as my research assistant”. After a few minutes, he made a mistake, too, and I could not resist saying: “Professor Heilbron, you are fired as my research assistant”. We laughed a lot, as you can imagine. He loved his work, and showed me how to do it seriously and at the same time have fun with it. I will miss him dearly.