

A Tribute to John

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Prof. John Esling is a force in phonetics, but more important, he's been a friend for many years. When we were at Michigan in 1971-3, John was the Ear-Tongue-Throat champion. John's perfect scores on transcription tests were noted, of course, but there was much more. One marveled at his rendition of standard American, supported by a supple glottal note that suggested vocal folds with luxurious mucous membranes -- and that was just his presentation of self. The fun began when he did his imitations of Pike and Catford. It wasn't just the accent, timing, and voice quality, it was face and hands and tilt of the head. It really got uncanny when he did pseudo-Italian or mock-Persian. Why is John not on stage? Sid Caesar would slink off in shame.

John's skills could perk up a lunch meeting or a dinner party, but John was bent on putting them to serious use. I assume that one of John's parents was there lurking in his head, scolding him for frivolity and urging him on to an academic career. He just wanted to do phonetics. Even with Pike and Catford at Michigan, the romance and the drafty indoor spaces of Edinburgh got a grip on his imagination. Probably, the prospect of high tea with Prof. Abercrombie, a deeper training in traditional performance phonetics, and a more considered outlook on professional life were the principal attractions that drew John to Edinburgh.

Well, it turns out that Edinburgh was not above the rising tide of quantitative approaches and modern instrumentation. So, while gathering the long view of phonetics at Abercrombie's knee, or at some other joint, John actually plunged into the experimental hurly-burly. The crafted insights of Daniel Jones were trumped by data and statistics. John Laver and Tony Anthony were the pole star and the guide. From that point on, John's path is well documented in the annals of phonetics.

Although the material above may have some minor inaccuracies (the fact checker is off today), there are certain firm constants in John's life and career. John is a man without rancor; he never displays resentment and he frankly admires the work of others. Careerism never taints his judgment. He's a tireless advocate for those village-Hampdens, for the alert and careful colleagues who plainly describe how people really speak, but who never command the applause of listening senates. I salute John Esling, his work, and his spirit.