



Jim Bennett (1947-2023)

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James Arthur Bennett, known to scholars all over the world as "Jim", was a familiar and much-loved figure within the Italian community of students of scientific instruments, museum curators and historians of science.

He was born in Belfast on April 2, 1947. After earning his M.A. at the University of Cambridge in 1969, in 1974 he was awarded a Ph.D. He spent one year (1973-1974) as Lecturer in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Aberdeen. Appointed archivist at the Royal Astronomical Society (1974-76), in 1977 he joined the National Maritime Museum as Curator of Astronomy (1977-79). From 1979 to 1994 he was Curator of the Whipple Museum of the History of Science at the University of Cambridge, his *alma mater*. The pace of his scholarly and curatorial engagement at the Whipple was truly outstanding and brought Jim to the attention of the international community of scholars of scientific instruments and of the history of science in general. As Joshua Nall, the current curator of the Whipple, has meticulously documented <https://www.whipplemuseum.cam.ac.uk/news/jim-bennett-1947-2023>, in the fifteen years Jim spent at Whipple, he curated or co-curated sixteen major exhibitions. During his curatorship, the Whipple Museum published twenty-four guides to exhibitions, catalogues and monographs, several of which were authored or co-authored by Jim.

In 1994 Jim was appointed Director of the Oxford Museum of the History of Science (now History of Science Museum, HSM), succeeding Francis Maddison. For those of us

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who are old enough to remember, the Oxford Museum was well known for the competence and excellence of its curators, less so as a venue accessible to the public. As a student at Oxford in the early 1970s, I remember the crammed, dusty rooms and the difficulty to access the Museum: spaced-out opening hours were often purely nominal. Few students and indeed Faculty both in the sciences and in the humanities knew what exactly was inside the wonderful little building adjoining the Sheldonian Theatre in Broad Street. With his quiet, gentle touch and relentless work Jim gave the collections and the Museum a new lease of life. In 1997 he obtained a major grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and gained much needed space thanks to a major renovation project, digging under Broad Street. It is less known that the cost was underestimated, though not by Jim, on whose shoulders fell nevertheless the task of raising more money to complete the refurbishing of the new spaces. His only regret was that it proved impossible to finance the complex architectural project and the building of an elevator external to the main body of the Museum, to allow access to disabled visitors. He kept trying until the last day of his tenure. Intellectually, he continued the work started at Cambridge, that of opening the history of scientific instruments to a renewed and intense dialogue with historians of science and historians tout-court. No one working on Early Modern culture and societies can dispense with reading Jim's meticulous and passionate reconstructions of instrumental practices and their role in scientific, intellectual and social settings.

Often with the assistance of Stephen Johnston, at Oxford Jim curated eighteen exhibitions before retiring in 2012. In 1996 he had started a Master's course in the History of Scientific Instruments, that lasted until 2006. His amazing curatorial work, enough to fill one life, was duplicated by a stream of publications, from short notices and scholarly articles to monographs, exhibition catalogues, even a short play on Guglielmo Marconi, first shown during the exhibition *Wireless World: Marconi and the making of radio* (April-October 2006, <https://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/marconi/presspack/>). The Italian inventor was presented in succession as a Bolognese inventor, the wealthy man linked by marriage to Irish whisky distillers, and a cool operator of the City of London, who spent more money on patent lawyers than in research. At the end of the play, the public was asked to vote which of the three personalities most resembled the real Marconi. It should be noted that in 2004 Jim was instrumental in the acquisition of the Marconi Archives and Collection, now deposited at the Bodleian Library and the Museum (<https://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/marconi/collection/>). Johnston, now Curator Emeritus at the Oxford History of Science Museum, Jim's former student and life-long friend and collaborator, has provided an important and moving testimony of his career as multi-faceted curator, scholar, and "museum practitioner", as he liked to call himself (<https://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/article/jim-bennett-1947-2023-life-as-a-museum-practitioner>).

During his tenure, the yearly number of visitors rose from 18,000 to almost 200,000. In the Fall of 2009 and early winter of 2010, there were long queues in Broad Street to access

one of the most inventive and successful exhibitions Jim hosted, *Steampunk*, that totalled 70.000 visitors (<https://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/exhibits/steampunk/>). For someone as unworldly and completely absorbed in his work as Jim was, recognition finally came in the most gratifying way in the new millennium: from the awarding of The Paul Bunge Prize of the German Chemical Society (2001), to the Sarton Medal (2020).

I had the privilege of chairing the board of trustees (the Visitors, in Oxford parlance) of the Oxford Museum from 2006 to 2015; until 2012, when Jim retired, I interacted with him on a regular basis. Apart from the statutory termly meeting, at which Jim reported on the activities of the Museum, there were always small and big problems to attend to, from approval of loans to fending off attempts during 2010 and 2011 to merge the Museum of the History of Science with another major Oxford museum (a very unfriendly takeover bid) that took up a lot of time and emotional energy. Over the years, the only difficulty I personally experienced with Jim was having lunch with him at Linacre: he skipped it most of the time. He was very reluctant to leave his crammed, chaotic room – amazingly, he was always able to find a single sheet of paper in one of the several inches thick piles spread on tables and the floor.

As several recollections of Jim have stressed, he was a truly unassuming person. He had no time for academic parading and networking, that in his eyes took up precious time. When I realised that he had not been granted the title of Professor, in a university where people start working for it almost as soon as they are hired, I made enquiries and found out that he had never applied: in fact, just a letter and a standard cv were required. Jim was very reluctant to start the procedure. He had no time for this, and I am sure never gave a thought to it. I finally managed to convince him with what was possibly the only good argument with him: he should take the title as part of his duty, not of his career, but as a recognition of the role of the history of scientific instruments and of the Museum in the Oxford research and teaching landscape. Indeed, our Master students in the History of Science, Medicine and Technology program were offered classes at the Museum. The compulsory class on methods and themes in the history of science devoted one in eight lectures to the history of scientific instruments, held at the Museum, and followed by a hands-on session. The title of Professor was immediately conferred upon Jim in 2009, as soon as the application was in.

As I mentioned above, Jim had close links to the Museo Galileo: Paolo Brenni, Paolo Galluzzi, Mara Miniati, Giorgio Strano were his personal friends with whom he co-authored articles and volumes. Fittingly, the last major work Jim published was the catalogue of surveying instruments kept in the Florence institution, *Museo Galileo. Catalogue of Surveying and Related Instruments* (Florence, 2022), the accomplishment of many years of painstaking work.