

ROGER HAHN (1932-2011)

James E. McCLELLAN III *

I always liked Roger. “Roger” in English never captured him; to me, he was always “Roger” as the French pronounce the name, with a sly glint in his blue eyes, not the hard-sounding “Roger” as he was known in English. Roger Hahn was born in France, escaping Nazism in 1941, thinking, he told me once, his parents were taking him south on vacation, when actually he boarded a vessel bound for the United States. Raised and mostly educated in the United States, and definitely not French, Roger maintained a French connection that was his scholarly and personal trademark.

As a second-year graduate student at Princeton, reading Hahn’s *The Anatomy of a Scientific Institution. The Paris Academy of Sciences, 1666-1803* after it came out in 1971 played a major role in orienting me towards the history of science in the Old Regime and Old-Regime French scientific institutions in particular¹. I first met Roger in 1973, when we both attended René Taton’s seminar at the Centre Alexandre Koyré on the rue Colbert in Paris, he on leave from Berkeley and me a humble *boursier du gouvernement français*. I especially remember the debriefing sessions Roger led for us neophytes over beer and coffee at nearby cafés after Taton’s seminar. He was respectful of René Taton and Pierre Costabel, yet generous in making us historiographically more *au courant*.

Hahn graduated from Horace Mann-Lincoln High School in New York in 1949 and then went to Harvard, where he studied history and physics with I. B. Cohen as his teacher and Thomas S. Kuhn his tutor, graduating magna cum laude in 1953. He prepared a teaching certification in science education at the Harvard School of Education, but a Fulbright took him to Paris and the venerable École pratique des hautes études. After a stint in the U.S. Army, again in France, he turned to the history of science, earning a Ph.D. from Cornell University that he completed under Henry Guerlac in 1962 with a dissertation on the fall of the Paris Academy of Sciences during the French Revolution. Tom Kuhn, decamping Berkeley for Princeton, tapped Hahn to replace him at Berkeley

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1. R. HAHN, *The Anatomy of a Scientific Institution. The Paris Academy of Sciences, 1666-1803*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1971.

in 1961². Roger remained in the history department at Berkeley thereafter, retiring as professor emeritus in 2008. At Berkeley, along with his historian of science colleague, John L. Heilbron, Professor Hahn was instrumental in founding the Office of the History of Science and Technology in 1973, serving as its director from 1993 to 1998. He contributed unstintingly to teaching undergraduates and training graduate students, supporting the oral history office at Berkeley, working in the French Studies Program, expanding the collections of the Bancroft Library, and offering other service to the university and to the history of science more largely, including as a council member of the History of Science Society, a leader in the West Coast History of Science Society, vice-president of the Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences in 2005, and an organizer of the international summer school of the history of science held at Berkeley in 2000. He served a term as president of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and was active in community service, particularly on the advisory council of the Bay Area cultural organization, Humanities West, where he lectured on Voltaire in 2007 and Copernicus in 2009. He naturally received his share of awards and honors, including being named a National Science Foundation Fellow twice and a fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies. In 1977 he received laurels from the French government as *officier de l'ordre des palmes académiques*.

Two books mark the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of Hahn's academic and scholarly career. The first, his *Anatomy of a Scientific Institution* of 1971, remarkably today remains the starting point for any study of the Académie royale des sciences in Paris, the first scientific institution of the eighteenth century. This is not something that can be said for most forty-year-old scholarly tomes. The *Anatomy* already characterized Hahn's approach as a scholar: cautious in its way, grounded in detail, and rooted in meticulous documentation³. In retrospect, part of the continuing appeal of the work stems from its evident concern with science as a social activity, the product of social forces... what, with a kind of historiographical Whiggism, we might see as the social construction of knowledge. In its day, it best exemplified what used to be known as the "external" history of science, a brand of the study of science and its history that shied away from too direct a consideration of scientific ideas per se, thought unassailably lofty and pure, yet that sought to situate the activity of knowledge-making in historically specific contexts. This approach, too, might be said to characterize Roger's studies throughout his career, although, in retrospect again, the reference in the *Anatomy* to Talcott Parsons and structuralism⁴ dates the work in yet other ways that readers might tend to miss. The University of California Press reissued the book in paperback in 1986, and it was translated into French, apparently badly, in 1993⁵.

2. Susan Marie GROPPi reports these details on her blog, <http://www.susangroppi.com/2011/06/roger-hahn/>; consulted 26 October 2011.

3. The useful appendix, "Biographical Data on Academicians", should be noted in this regard (see R. HAHN, *The Anatomy of a Scientific Institution...*, *op. cit.*, p. 330-373).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 316-317.

5. R. HAHN, *L'Anatomie d'une institution scientifique. L'Académie des sciences de Paris, 1666-1803*, Bruxelles, Éditions des archives contemporaines, 1993. On the quality of the translation, see comments by Françoise WAQUET in her review, *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, n° 153, 1995, p. 217-219 (here, p. 217).