



Einstein in Oxford: A “Barbarian on the Roam”

Andrew Robinson

Albert Einstein had a universally appealing sense of humour. A famous photograph shows him—wild-haired as normal—poking his tongue at an intrusive photographer. Much less familiar is the Bodleian’s comic poem Einstein wrote while visiting Oxford from his Berlin home in 1931, in which he views himself residing in elegant Christ Church college rooms through the eyes of their regular occupant, an absent classics don. Here’s verse four:

Grumble: Why’s this creature staying
With his pipe and piano playing?
Why should this barbarian roam?
Could he not have stopped at home?

British physics always held a special position in Einstein’s mind and heart. No wonder, then, he accepted an invitation to visit Oxford in May 1931, give public lectures on physics at Rhodes House, receive an honorary doctorate at the Sheldonian, and reside in Christ Church. His host was Professor Frederick Lindemann, today best known as Winston Churchill’s wartime science adviser.



“Why should this barbarian roam?”

Could he not have stopped at home?”

Left: Einstein at Oxford



Apart from physics, Einstein took part in Oxford’s life by playing his violin with professional musicians in Norham Gardens, giving talks on pacifism and politics, sailing on the River Cherwell, and wandering around the city, often alone. Once, he encountered an undergraduate: William Golding, a future Nobel laureate in literature, who was standing on a small bridge in Magdalen Deer Park looking at the river when a “tiny moustached and hatted figure” joined him. “Professor Einstein knew no English at that time, and I knew only two words of German.” For about five minutes they stood side by side. At last, “With true greatness, Professor Einstein realised that any contact was better than none.” He pointed to a trout wavering in midstream. “*Fisch*,” he said. “Desperately I sought for some sign by which I might convey that I, too, revered pure reason. I nodded vehemently. In a brilliant flash I used up half my German vocabulary: ‘*Fisch. Ja. Ja.*’” For another five minutes, the unknown undergraduate and the world-famous scientist stood together. “Then Professor Einstein, his whole figure still conveying goodwill and amiability, drifted away out of sight.”

In 1932 and 1933, Einstein returned—latterly as an endangered refugee from Nazi Germany. In June 1933, he gave one of his most important and controversial lectures ever, “On the Method of Theoretical Physics”. It opened with an uncharacteristically emotional statement, partly inspired by Lindemann’s desire to make Oxford Einstein’s new home: “I wish to preface what I have to say by expressing to you the great gratitude which I feel to the University of Oxford for having given me the honour and privilege of delivering the Herbert Spencer Lecture. May I say that the invitation makes me feel that the links between this university and myself are becoming progressively stronger?”

Sadly, they never ripened. In October 1933, Einstein abandoned Europe forever, and emigrated to the United States, where he stayed in Princeton until his death, living largely alone like a “barbarian”. As the Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin recalled, after meeting Einstein there in 1952: “Remoteness, a relative absence of intimate personal relationships, is... a genuine ingredient of certain types of genius.”

Andrew Robinson is the author of *Einstein in Oxford*, published by Bodleian Library Publishing on 12 September. He will speak on Einstein in Oxford at the Bodleian on 26 September.