

Entangled with Einstein

Andrew Robinson



Einstein by William Rothenstein, 1927

There are at least 1,700 individual books on Albert Einstein listed in library catalogues globally, written in a great variety of languages. This astonishing total is based on a careful online search in 2015 by Professor Diana Buchwald, director of the Einstein Papers Project at the California Institute of Technology. By now, the Einstein book tally may be around 1,750 – such is the world’s continuing fascination with him.

I confess that I am part of the surfeit – if that is what it is. Buchwald’s calculation appears in her Afterword to the second edition of my 2005 book, *Einstein: A Hundred Years of Relativity*, published in 2015. And I have since written a second Einstein book, *Einstein on the Run: How Britain Saved the World’s Greatest Scientist*.

No other scientist in history – including Isaac Newton – comes close to Einstein’s degree of published attention. Why this welter of books on him? In Stephen Hawking’s view, Einstein ‘was undaunted by common sense, the idea that things must be the way they seemed. He had the courage to pursue ideas that seemed absurd to others. And this set him free to be ingenious, a genius of his time and every other.’ But much the same could be said of a number of great scientists, including Newton. Yet Einstein, in publishing terms, remains a unique phenomenon.

After completing the second edition of my Einstein book in 2015, I had intended to write no more books about him. Then, in 2017, it suddenly struck me, with great surprise, that there was no book about his relationship with Britain among the 1,700-plus Einstein titles. Yet, it would be no exaggeration to say that Britain is the country that made him into the worldwide phenomenon he is today. In the 1890s, British physicists – especially Newton, Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell – inspired Einstein’s youthful passion for physics. In 1919, it was British astronomers led by Arthur Eddington who confirmed general relativity by their observations of a solar eclipse, which made the relatively unknown Einstein world famous. Throughout the 1920s, British scientists keenly supported Einstein – and in 1933 Britain saved his life by offering him refuge from Nazi death threats, before he departed for America later that year, never to return to Europe.

The standard biographies – with the exception of Ronald Clark’s *Einstein: The Life and Times* (first published as long ago as 1971) – neglect Britain in favour of Germany, Switzerland and the United States. Slightly

to my shame, I realised that I had done the same in my first book. I made a new search for references to Britain, and found a great deal of material that had hardly been cited by previous writers, including newspaper reports of Einstein’s secret refuge from the Nazis in rural Norfolk in 1933, his unpublished correspondence regarding Britain and his occasional diaries.

Einstein’s varied response to his visits to Oxford in 1931, 1932 and 1933 turned out to be particularly revealing. I cherish a little-known, thoughtful and witty poem (now kept at the Bodleian Library in Oxford) that he wrote in a private visitors’ book, in which he thanked a classics don at Christ Church College, absent on a world tour in 1931, for the use of his book-lined college rooms. In rhymed German verses (translated by the Oxford literary scholar J. B. Leishman and published in *The Times* just after Einstein’s death), Einstein refers to himself as an ‘old hermit’: ‘One who undeterredly preaches/ What the art of Numbers teaches.’ Then he adds: ‘Shelves of towering folios/Meditate in solemn rows’ – and comments that the classical folios are puzzled that he can work so well without looking at them, preferring instead to smoke his pipe and play the piano. He imagines the folios asking themselves: ‘Why should this barbarian roam?/ Could he not have stopped at home?’

Einstein’s self-image as both a ‘hermit’ and a ‘barbarian’, dedicated above all else to the solitary pursuit of mathematics wherever in the world he happened to be living, and also someone relatively indifferent to the established literature, brings to mind the almost legendary British physicist, and famed hermit, Paul Dirac. A near-contemporary of Einstein’s, his 1930 book, *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics*, became one of Einstein’s few constant companions. When Dirac heard of Einstein’s death in 1955, he openly wept, possibly for the first and last time in his notoriously unemotional adult life.

However, Dirac’s story could not be more different from Einstein’s in regard to his afterlife in publishing. There is a 2009 ground-breaking and moving biography, *The Strangest Man*, by the theoretical physicist Graham Farmelo. But it remains, thus far, the only biography of Dirac for the general reader.

When Farmelo’s book appeared, Dirac, who died in 1984, was virtually unknown beyond the world of physics. Why the quantum difference in public attention for Einstein and Dirac? I asked Farmelo for his opinion. He responded, ‘Einstein is an authentically great figure – not only a truly great scientist, but an outstanding humanitarian.’ On the other hand, ‘His “image” benefited a century ago from an extremely



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well-managed public announcement of the data that gave crucial support to his new theory of gravity. This catapulted him to global celebrity.' Dirac, by contrast, is 'still a much-revered figure among his successors at the frontiers of physics', but had no such historical advantage.

Farmelo hopes that there will be many more Dirac biographies. As for Einstein, he feels there have been too many books and 'this dependably profitable genre is now suffering from the law of diminishing returns.' He may have a point. But the fact remains that Einstein was both a great scientist and an outstanding humanitarian, and this combination is extremely rare – certainly it does not apply to Newton. Einstein focused relentlessly on theoretical physics right up to his death but he was also

active, courageous, generous, humorous and perceptive in human affairs, including education, politics and war – rather like his admirer, Bertrand Russell.

After 1919, Einstein quickly became one of the most highly quoted (and misquoted) figures in history. In 1930, he joked about this to a friend: 'To punish me for my contempt of authority, Fate has made me an authority myself.' And in 1944, he asked a *New York Times* interviewer with genuine puzzlement: 'Why is it that nobody understands me, yet everybody likes me?' As writers, and as readers, we cannot but be fascinated by Einstein's personality – as well as his intellect.

Coming from Princeton University Press next spring: *Einstein in Bohemia* by the distinguished historian Michael Gordin. Aren't you curious, as I am? ●