



Einstein in exile

Andrew Robinson: Einstein on the run: how Britain saved the world's greatest scientist. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2019, 376 pp. \$25 HB

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Let me admit from the outset that I have met Andrew Robinson, the prolific author of this book, and in fact am coauthor of three chapters—on Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo—in his 2012 collective biography, *The Scientists: An Epic of Discovery* (Thames and Hudson). Upon learning that Robinson and his wife (to whom he dedicates the book under consideration here) were visiting Caltech during one of our sabbaticals there, my coauthor husband and I arranged to have coffee with them. We have had no interaction since then, however, and I am sure neither couple would recognize the other on the street. I was pleased to find two quotations in *Einstein on the Run* linking Einstein to his scientific predecessors whom we discussed in Robinson's earlier book. In October 1930 at a fundraising dinner in London, Einstein sat at the same table as his fellow speaker, the playwright George Bernard Shaw (116). In his remarks, Shaw called Einstein one of the “makers of universes” together with Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, among others. In the Epilogue, we learn that in an interview with Harvard historian of science I. Bernard Cohen shortly before Einstein's death, the physicist revealed that “it has always hurt me to think that Galileo did not acknowledge the work of Kepler” (308).

Although I have much praise for *Einstein on the Run*, and the book is deeply interesting, it does not really conform to the expectations set up by the title or subtitle. The subtitle asserts that England saved Einstein, but one could argue that Belgium did as much to protect him from potential assassins as England did, although I enjoyed Robinson's extensive discussion of “the bizarre mixture of secrecy and publicity” (249) surrounding Commander Oliver Stillingfleet Locker-Lampson's efforts to keep Einstein hidden and under protection in a remote corner of Norfolk. So much for the subtitle. As for the title, although the Prologue, “A Wanderer on the Face of the Earth,” and Chapter Seven, “On the Run,” clearly deal with Einstein as a refugee, much of the rest of the book is devoted to Einstein's life and work before

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1933. It is only in the Epilogue that Robinson explains what he really means by “on the run”: Einstein was running away not only *from* the murderous Nazis but also *toward* the most perfect scientific home he could find, where he would be cocooned not only from potential enemies but also and “ultimately from unwanted human contact” (319). That’s why he chose to spend his remaining years at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he could live untroubled by the routine responsibilities that are part of most academic institutions, including teaching, committee work, and social demands. This explanation seems to me to constitute a nasty curve ball that Robinson throws the reader, who may have decided on his or her own that the book’s title does not really fit.

I also find it misleading to have been told in the early pages of the book about Einstein’s Anglophilia only to have that assertion qualified in the final pages. The Preface, an *apologia pro libro suo*, stresses that the book “is the first to focus on Einstein and Britain” and highlights the work of three American Einstein scholars who hail Einstein as “an Anglophile” (xii). Yet in a section of the Epilogue entitled “Anglophile, or Not?” (310–313), Robinson enumerates the many things Einstein disliked about life in England. As he told Lord Snow during a visit of the Englishman to his summer home on Long Island, the British style of life “is...splendid.... But it is not for me.” He would rather amble around Princeton dressed in casual clothes and eating an ice cream cone than bother himself with the “getting into and out of formal clothes” that seemed to take up so much of an Englishman’s time.

So why do I endorse the laudatory opinion found on the book’s cover by scholars I not only admire but also know personally? Robinson has done a marvelous job of pulling new and interesting material out of the Einstein archives, which, as he tells us in the Preface, are “similar in size to the archives of Napoleon Bonaparte and several times the size of those of Newton and Galileo” (xiii). I suspect that even readers who have devoured many books about Einstein and are already familiar with his interactions with the English—from Eddington’s announcement at the November 1919 joint meeting of the Royal Society and the Royal Astronomical Society of his confirmation of the general theory thanks to the recent total solar eclipse, a meeting that made Einstein into a world celebrity, to Einstein’s “last public act” (301) of issuing, together with philosopher Bertrand Russell, the Russell–Einstein Manifesto of 1955 calling on world leaders to minimize the danger of nuclear weapons—will find much to learn and enjoy.

Robinson’s choice of chapter titles is inspired, with most of them derived from one or two quotations that the text then helps the reader to decode. Among my favorites are “A Stinking Flower in a German Buttonhole” (Chapter Three), “A Barbarian among the Holy Brotherhood in Tails” (Chapter Five), and “I Will a Little T’ink” (Chapter 8), though I will leave it to the curious to discover the sources of these witty titles by reading the book. I suspect that even Einstein enthusiasts will be introduced to new people and new vignettes, just as I was. As I read, I had on my desk Walter Isaacson’s *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (2007), which remains the most respected popular biography. By consulting its index, I confirmed that I had not read before about Margaret Deneke and her sister Helena, both of whom were connected to Oxford’s first women’s college, Lady Margaret Hall. Not only did Einstein enjoy playing violin at the musical salons the sisters hosted in their villa during his visits to Oxford in 1931, 1932, and 1933, but he also agreed to their request to sit for a portrait by “a little-known Tyrolese peasant

artist,” a reproduction of which readers can enjoy (171), and visitors to the Senior Common Room at Oxford’s Christ Church can admire in person. A second newcomer to my Einstein *dramatis personae*, thanks to Robinson, is Christ Church classicist Robert Hamilton Dundas, whose world tour in 1930–1931 left his rooms available for Einstein during the physicist’s first visit to Oxford. Upon Dundas’s return, he was delighted to find that Einstein had not only left an entry in his absent host’s visitors’ book but also that the entry was a charming poem. In loose translation by an Oxford literary scholar (174), the poem’s final six lines include the poet’s derogatory self-appellation:

*Why should this barbarian roam?
 Could he not have stopped at home?
 Often, though, his thoughts will stray
 To the owner far away,
 Hoping one day face to face
 To behold him in this place.*

The temporary denizen and the regular occupant of the room met in 1932, when Einstein returned to Christ Church. The poem appeared in *The Times* of London after Einstein’s death; the visitors’ book eventually found its way as a donation to Oxford’s Bodleian Library.

Much as I enjoyed this book, I cannot end my review on an upbeat note. I read its final chapters as news broke in February 2020 of an alliance in the central German state of Thuringia between the extreme-right Alternative for Germany party and Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union. Thus, in the state that includes the city of Weimar, the name of the German republic established after World War I as a constitutional democracy, the center-right conservative political party violated its own policy never to ally with nationalist extremists. Recent news reports have reminded readers that in the last days of the Weimar Republic, Thuringia was where the Nazis first gained power locally before triumphing nationwide. In recent years, antisemitism has been on the rise throughout the world. *Einstein on the Run*, with its purported focus on the famous physicist’s search for a home following his flight from Nazi Germany, is another reminder that 75 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, assertions of “Never Again” ring ever more hollow. How to respond to the refugees fleeing slaughter on many continents has become one of the most vexed worldwide political issues. Robinson’s goal is to recount the history of Einstein’s life through 1933 and during his final 22 years in the USA, not to teach moral lessons, but it is hard to read this informative and well-written book without a feeling of angst. Einstein had a choice of many nations that would have happily harbored him during the final two decades of his life, but who today will offer refuge to the numerous scientists at risk around the world, particularly when none of them has achieved worldwide celebrity?