

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Denis Brian.** *Einstein: A Life.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996. xiv + 509 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-471-19362-3; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-471-11459-8.



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The fascination with Albert Einstein forty-three years after his death is reflected in the number of biographies that have appeared about him recently. For the most part, these recent works move away from presenting the physicist's scientific ideas in order to examine his human side. Why focus on Einstein the non-scientist? Most authors argue that bringing to light such features as his forgetfulness or his political interests simply makes the person who changed humanity's conception of the universe more interesting.

Most authors examining the human side have focused on negative aspects. One, for example, has claimed to expose Einstein's obsession with younger women; another, Andrea Sabor (*Einstein's Wife*), picked up on Desanka Truhovic-Gjuric's twenty-year-old thesis that Einstein had refused to credit his first wife, Mileva Maric, with devising the theory of relativity. Several experts have convincingly debunked this argument. In *Einstein: A Life*, Denis Brian joins this trend by portraying the scientist in his everyday dealings. Although this collection of detailed anecdotes, loosely grouped around the theme of "private life," is at times informative and amusing, like earlier "tell-all" portrayals of the scientist, it provides little more than a general background on Einstein. Its structure, or lack thereof, suggests it is not intended as anything more than an entertaining read, unfortunately

marred by choppy transitions, multiple proper noun misspellings, and small factual errors.

The challenge facing any Einstein biographer is daunting. The complexity of Einstein's character, his scientific and political activities; the impact of the special and general theories of relativity; and the bulk of pre-existing literature on the man all combine to make him a very difficult subject. Furthermore, the ongoing publication of Einstein's collected papers offers an unparalleled source of new documents with which a biographer must deal. All-encompassing studies such as Ronald Clark's biography (1971) are few, and most researchers in the past have opted to focus on one aspect (usually scientific) of the physicist's work (Abraham Pais's *Subtle is the Lord...* [1982] remains a standard in the field). How then should one proceed to gain a complete picture of Einstein?

Denis Brian's solution is to rely mostly on published documents to construct a chronology, which is roughly divided into one chapter per year (with the exception of the early years and the war years). This focus on Einstein's non-scientific activities helps clarify certain aspects of his life while confusing others. Brian weaves together a variety of primary and secondary sources interspersed with quotations and interviews of historians and Einstein contemporaries. This is commendable, for

it provides the reader with a choice of interpretations of Einstein's actions.

This can also be distracting. The heavy use of detail affects, for example, the structure of Chapter Eight, which discusses the first half of 1902—when Einstein was in Switzerland and had started working at the Federal Patent Office to pay his bills. When Brian summarizes the issues of historiography surrounding Einstein's first child, an illegitimate daughter named Lieserl born in 1902, he jumps to 1935 and then 1980 to explain some of the documentary evidence available (a paternity claim and the discovery of old letters), then takes us back to 1902. The same thing happens on page 70, when Brian moves suddenly from discussing the 1906 visit of physicist Max von Laue to a precise detailing of Einstein's and von Laue's dislike of a cheap cigar to a summary of Einstein's relationship with the Winteler family. One gets the impression that either a paragraph is missing or that the author simply wished to squeeze an additional tid-bit into his episode-heavy book. These chronological wanderings should have been left in footnotes; instead, they crop up throughout the study.

In other sections, puzzling inconsistencies appear. While the process of Einstein's Swiss naturalization in 1901 is laid out clearly (Chapters Four and Five), Einstein was a de-facto German citizen when awarded the Nobel Prize in 1922 (Chapter Eighteen). The reader receives no idea how this happened. In a related issue, the author is unclear on the circumstances by which the German envoy to Sweden accepted the award on Einstein's behalf (Einstein was in Japan at the time), with the Swedish ambassador bringing it to Einstein two months later (pp. 144-45). There are published explanations of these issues, but Brian seems to have skipped these pages in the secondary literature. In a similar vein, some key characters are presented, but not immediately identified, as if every reader would know who they are. For example, Otto Nathan, Einstein's financial advisor and later trustee of his estate, is introduced in Chapter Eight, but his role and importance are not explained until Chapter Twenty-Five.

Interviews with historians are also confusing. Again in Chapter Eight, the reader is treated to a conversation the author had with Robert Schulmann, an editor of the Einstein Papers Project. Unfortunately, the chapter ends abruptly without further comment on the part of the author. While such transcribed interviews provide nice illustrations of the issues surrounding Einstein's life, they

do not always fit well into the surrounding chapter, especially not as conclusions.

Trying to place Einstein in the context of his times is also part of the challenge for any biographer, and once again, Brian meets with mixed results. His chapters on Weimar and Nazi Germany suffer from the use of outdated literature (William Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* for example) as well as inaccuracies: not all members of the *Freikorps* wore swastikas in 1919 (p. 107), and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia began in 1935, not 1936. On the other hand, Brian's sections on Einstein in America come across as informed and convincing. His anecdotes about journalists trying to track Einstein down are often quite funny (one reporter backed down after finding Einstein sunbathing in the nude). The author also summarizes nicely the FBI's investigation of Einstein (in response to rumors that he had Communist sympathies). As in earlier chapters, however, the amount of detail is at times overwhelming (is the fact that angel food cake was served at dessert so important [p. 278])?

The bibliography shows that Brian relied on many interviews with Einstein's contemporaries to document his story. However, where secondary sources were used, the author limited himself to mostly English-language publications (I counted one book in German and one in French), thus ignoring countless valuable foreign studies. Finally, the notes section is confusing. There are no endnote numbers in the text. The reader interested in the source of a statement must look up a page reference and hope that the passage of interest is mentioned there. While this style avoids overloading the text with numbers, it makes any reference check excessively tedious and potentially misleading.

Thus, Brian has written a biography which is a labyrinth of facts without any new interpretation. True, the book has been well-received by several scientists for its entertainment value. That is precisely its problem: it does not really inform the general readership for which it is intended. Instead, it will charm and amuse those with some knowledge of Einstein's life and scientific achievements while losing others in search of critical analysis in a fog of details.

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