

On Centennial Fever and Its Ironies

University of Texas physicist John A. Wheeler, who worked with Albert Einstein for many years, not long ago paused to reflect upon the current phase of Einstein frenzy that is sweeping the country. "Einstein doesn't belong to Einstein anymore," he said with a touch of remorse. "He belongs to the world."

Too true. And for better or worse the world seems to have taken the old violin player and rearranged him a bit. Some items:

- Artists have been twisting the image of Einstein into some pretty uncomfortable poses—a belief in the occult, for instance. Robert Berks, a Long Island sculptor, is casting a larger-than-life Einstein statue for the National Academy of Sciences (*Science*, 26 January). His design called for Einstein to be contemplating a star-studded map of the heavens at his feet. The planets were to be shown in their positions of 14 March 1879—the night of Einstein's birth.

Needless to say, it smacked of astrology. After a small group of Einstein purists got wind of the faux pas, they persuaded Philip Handler, president of the Academy, to change the map. It will now show the night sky of 22 April 1979—the date the monument will be unveiled.

- Einstein is often hailed as a great peacemaker—and rightly so. But it is easy to miss the complexity of his position. Said Colman McCarthy, writing in the *Washington Post*: "Of Einstein the pacifist, only the stubborn close-minded can fail to be educated. Here, the stark clarity of his thinking can be understood by anyone who looks around and trembles in horror at what Einstein saw: the insanity by which governments depend on the force of weapons, rather than the force of ideas or compassion, to settle differences."

Yet Einstein, while speaking in 1937 of a close friend who was a pacifist, said: "I do not understand how such a fine man can be so unrealistic." And it was Einstein, after all, who in the face of rising Nazi atrocities wrote to Roosevelt in 1939 about the possibility of building an atomic bomb.

- It is clear that Einstein did not believe in revealed religion. Once asked point-blank if he believed in God, he replied: "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of all that exists, not in that God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings." Yet people with a mind to do so can usually conjure up a "religious" Einstein quote. At the closing banquet of the 38th Annual Science Talent Search in Washington, D.C., where 40 top science students from U.S. high schools recently received awards, Rabbi Laslow Berkowitz dug out one such tidbit for the invocation. "Everyone," said Berkowitz, quoting Einstein, "who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble."

Einstein, however, spoke on many subjects, and the utterances were not always premeditated or meant to be revered. Said C. P. Snow, who knew Einstein and recently gave a lecture on him at the Smithsonian: "He didn't



Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution

Einstein posing for sculptor Gina Plunguian in 1948.

assume that each of his words was sacred. He wasn't talking for the courts of eternity, but often just to give pleasure to a harmless acquaintance."

- Physicists, publishers, and public officials are currently working at a hectic pace to invoke words and images of Einstein. Said physicist Peter G. Bergmann, one of Einstein's old collaborators: "It's an avalanche effect. Everyone wants to snatch a bit of reflected glory."

It even holds true for countries. Take West Germany, for example. The Federal Minister of Education and Science of the Federal Republic of Germany, Jürgen Schmude, was the principal speaker at the 4 March kickoff of the National Einstein Centennial Celebration held at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton. Schmude announced the donation of \$700,000 to the institute for scholarships "in areas related to the work and tradition of Albert Einstein." Many thought it was fitting, as Einstein was born in the old Danube city of Ulm. But it was also Einstein who at the age of 16 renounced his German citizenship, who after he left Europe in 1933 vowed never to return to Germany, who upon hearing of his friend Max Born's plans to retire to Germany urged him not "to live among mass murderers." And it was also Einstein who rejected, with less than his usual courtesy, attempts by German academies and institutions to make amends.

- One oft-repeated litany in the current Einstein revival is that "he would have been appalled by all the fuss." How so? Saint of science though he is, there was more than a touch of ham about him. As C. P. Snow recently observed: "It is romantic to imagine that he didn't enjoy being a world figure or that he wanted at all costs to avoid publicity. Nothing is easier to avoid than publicity. If one doesn't want it, one doesn't get it." And Einstein, as attested by the Smithsonian's exhibit of his personal memorabilia, had no fear of photographers, sculptors, or painters. There are busts in bronze and terra-cotta. At one point, in filling out a questionnaire that asked his profession, Einstein half in jest wrote: "Artists' Model."

There is sometimes a fine line between scholarship and showmanship, as all the hoopla over Einstein suggests. Much is overlooked. Contradictions and subtleties are somehow lost in the reduction of a brilliant and complex character to caricature. But there is hope. Like most illnesses, centennial fever will pass, and, in its wake, maybe a deeper, more penetrating portrait of Einstein the man will emerge.—WILLIAM J. BROAD