

BOOK REVIEWS

A Biographical Bandwagon

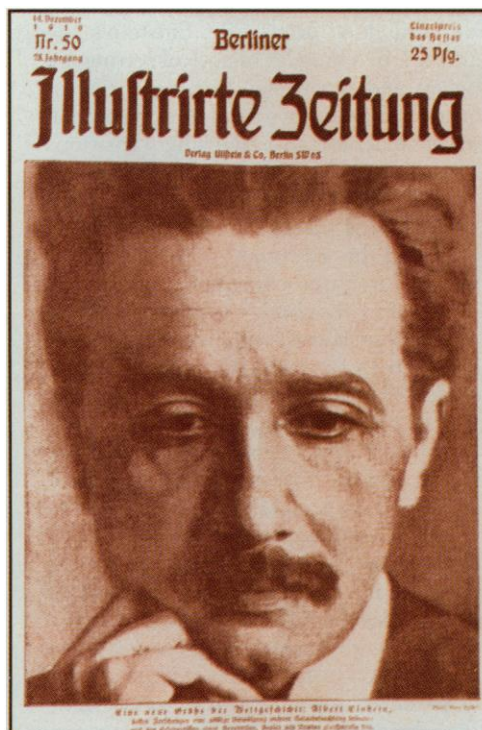
Albert Einstein. A Biography. ALBRECHT FÖLSING. Viking, New York, 1997. xiv, 882 pp. + plates. \$34.95 or C\$45. ISBN 0-670-85545-6. Translated from the German edition (Frankfurt am Main, 1993) by Ewald Osers.

Einstein. A Life. DENIS BRIAN. Wiley, New York, 1996. xvi, 509 pp. + plates. \$30, ISBN 0-471-11459-6; paper, \$19.95 or C\$27.95, ISBN 0-471-19362-3.

The publication of these two volumes brings to at least six the number of biographical works about Einstein appearing in the past five years (1), with others rumored to be in preparation. Einstein will, of course, and should continue to draw our interest. His development of the special and general theories of relativity, thereby laying the foundation for modern relativistic cosmology, his role in the development of the quantum theory, his contributions to our understanding of Brownian motion and the foundations of statistical physics, and his pursuit of the dream of a unified field theory mark him as the greatest scientist since Newton. He was an important figure in the political history of the 20th century through his work on behalf of pacifism, Zionism, and socialism, his role as an instigator of the American atomic bomb project, his post-war advocacy of the sharing of nuclear secrets, and his opposition to the McCarthyite persecutions of the late 1940s and early '50s. Einstein the human being also makes a fascinating study, for this modest and painfully self-aware intellectual combined a passionate love of humanity and a capacity for deep and enduring friendships with what often seemed a selfish and callous indifference to the feelings of some of those closest to him, especially his two wives and his children.

The recent spillage of ink over Einstein's life, however, is to be explained less by these perennial considerations than by lurid curiosity aroused by some new information uncovered by the editors of *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein* in the course of preparing the first volumes in the series (2). Most notable in this regard are the so-called "love letters" between Ein-

stein and his first wife, Mileva Marić, from which we learned of the birth of their illegitimate daughter, Lieserl, in 1902 and gleaned hints of previously unsuspected scientific collaboration between Albert and Mileva during their student years (3). Only a little less sensational were the early letters between Einstein and his second wife, Elsa, which revealed the development of their relationship well before Einstein's separation from Mileva and thus a powerful additional motivation for Einstein's move from Zurich to Berlin—Elsa's home—in 1914 (4). Background research for *The Collected Papers* has led to equally important discoveries on the scientific side, especially con-



"A New Giant in World History . . . whose researches mean a complete overthrow of our views of nature," 1919. [From *Albert Einstein: A Biography*; Ullstein Bilderdienst]

cerning the genesis of general relativity (5), but the new biographies have paid comparatively little attention to these less salacious matters.

Widespread interest in what we now see to be the more complicated human

character of Einstein has created a climate in which authors and publishers are tempted to rush into print with inferior or at best premature efforts. In different ways, the biographies by Fölsing and Brian illustrate the problem. Both offer largely reliable guides to the basic facts about Einstein's life, if not also his scientific work (6). Moreover, both authors make extensive use of the materials now available in the Einstein Archive, though Fölsing does so to better advantage, and each author contributes some new information based on original research and the identification of new sources. But in addition to occasional technical or factual errors, both books evince serious flaws, ranging from lapses of style to problems of overall conception and balance. In the end, neither can be judged a significant contribution to the literature on Einstein or can be recommended unreservedly.

Of the two Fölsing's is, without question, the better. Indeed, the effort and ambition that have gone into the preparation of this massive book (7) could have made it a worthy successor to Ronald Clark's *Einstein: The Life and Times* (8), which was the first truly comprehensive biography of Einstein but, written just a few years before the Einstein Archive was made available and the Einstein Papers project got under way, was soon dated.

Fölsing is a science journalist whose work includes biographies of Galileo, Röntgen, and Hertz (9). In places, he makes a sincere effort to explain Einstein's scientific work, especially for the years through 1914, where editorial notes in the published volumes of *The Collected Papers* provide a guide, but the treatment is still superficial and insecure. Fölsing does a more thorough job with Einstein's private and public life. One might question, however, the relative attention paid to different periods. Like other authors following the lead of the early volumes of *The Collected Papers*, Fölsing devotes considerable attention to the years from Einstein's birth in 1879 to his 1914 move to Berlin, and his 19 years in Berlin receive even more intensive treatment, occupying 338 out of a total of 741 pages of text, whereas his 22 years in Princeton (1933–1955) receive a mere 63 pages. The child being the father of the man, it is necessary that we understand Einstein in those early years, which in any case include the *annus mirabilis* of 1905, in which Einstein's first papers on relativity, the quantum theory, and Brownian motion appeared; and it was during his Berlin years that he became the public figure whose every utterance made front-page news from Berlin to New York. Surely, however, Einstein's involvement

in the politics of American atomic weapons development, his emergence as one of America's leading public intellectuals and an influential voice on issues ranging from social justice and racial discrimination to international understanding and Arab-Israeli relations, as well as the steady refinement of his critique of the quantum theory and his pursuit of a unified field theory, are all more important than the question whether, as the German government claimed at the time of his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1922, he had actually become a German citizen upon accepting an appointment to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1914 or the even less interesting matter of his romantic liaisons with Berlin socialites.

It is the failings of the translation, however, that most clearly indicate indifference toward quality on the part of the publishers. Ewald Osers has produced an admirably fluid and colloquial translation of most of the text, excepting, surprisingly, the scientific material, where one finds an embarrassing number of errors, the worst being the laughable rendering of *Verjüngung*, the German term for the tensor operation of contraction, as "rejuvenation" (p. 648). One also puzzles over Osers's decision to translate afresh many passages from Einstein's papers and letters for which technically superior English translations have long been available. Related to this is the preservation of Fölsing's references to German editions of works that are widely available in English translation, as a result of which the very readers who have need for this translation of his biography will find the citations less helpful than they could have been.

One final reservation must be recorded. Fölsing pays considerable attention to Einstein's evolving attitude toward his Jewish identity and his involvement with the Zionist movement. One wants to commend this entirely appropriate emphasis but for the fact that Fölsing himself seems (to put it charitably) uncomfortable with the subject, as signaled, for example, by his habit of using a term, *Stammesgenossen*, that Einstein used occasionally for the purpose of referring to his fellow Jews by an ethnic, not religious, designation. Einstein's own innocent employment of a term that we now see as having racist overtones does not justify a biographer's overuse of it. The problem is only compounded by Osers's translation of the term as "tribal companions," when "kindred" would be the more accurate equivalent (10).

When one turns to the biography by Denis Brian, one can only ask whether Wiley, a reputable science publisher, had any reason for publishing this book other

than a desire to jump on the Einstein biography bandwagon. Brian's book tells us virtually nothing about Einstein's scientific work, aside from a few amateurish descriptions. What, for example, is "the quadruple [sic] formula for gravitational radiation" (p. 95)? Did Einstein really "perfect" the photoelectric effect (p. 105)? Did Otto Hahn really discover atomic fission in 1920 (p. 110)?

Brian concentrates instead on Einstein the person. But in spite of his promise that "this account will surprise those fixed on him as a secular saint," that its exploration of Einstein's private life will reveal him "with his halo slightly askew" (p. xi), Brian tells us virtually nothing that is not already well known in the literature, aside from a few quite unsensational stories gleaned from Princeton acquaintances.

Brian's style is breezy and journalistic, as is not surprising from an author whose previous books include biographies of Ernest Hemingway, Tallulah Bankhead, and the parapsychologist J. B. Rhine and a set of conversations with famous scientists (10). The book lacks any organizing idea other than the most linear narrative structure, and its efforts to set Einstein's life and work in a broader historical setting are uneven and superficial. Among the most annoying features of a most annoying book are the many forced, often silly transitions from one topic to another. My favorite is the sentence that carries us from discussions of racial discrimination, the atomic bomb, and the sad situation in Palestine in 1946 (all in three paragraphs, one might note) to remarks about a few inconsequential pieces of correspondence: "If Einstein needed to escape from the nightmare of a devastated world, he had merely to look through his mail from women" (p. 352). Should the reader be more offended by the implied insensitivity to the sufferings of Jews and Arabs in Palestine or by the trivialization of women as correspondents? Or should we be most offended by Wiley's failure to insist on a higher standard of editorial decency? That the latter is the root of the problem is suggested by the inclusion of a tasteless appendix that tells the pathetic tale of the removal of Einstein's brain and eyes by ghoulish, souvenir-hunting physicians before the body was cremated.

When major publishing companies are putting out this kind of biography, it is time for a moratorium. A definitive biography of Einstein cannot be written until the Einstein Papers project is completed, both because new material is still being discovered by the editorial staff and because an appreciation of Einstein's life, work, and legacy will require the perspec-

tive that only time and distance from a pandering press can give. Surely we owe him that much respect.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

- Others are: P. A. Bucky, in collaboration with A. Weakland, *The Private Albert Einstein* (Andrews and McMeel, Kansas City, MO, 1992); R. Highfield and P. Carter, *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein* (Faber & Faber, London, 1993); M. White and J. Gribbin, *Einstein: A Life in Science* (Simon and Schuster, London, 1993, and Dutton, New York, 1995); and A. Hermann, *Einstein: Der Weltweise und sein Jahrhundert* (Piper, Munich, 1994).
- Published by Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, beginning in 1987; six volumes are now in print, covering the period from Einstein's birth to 1917.
- The letters were first published in J. Stachel et al., Eds., *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, vol. 1, *The Early Years, 1879–1902* (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, 1987), and M. Klein et al., Eds., *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, vol. 5, *The Swiss Years: Correspondence, 1902–1914* (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, 1993). They have also been published in a separate edition: A. Einstein and M. Marić, *The Love Letters*, J. Renn and R. Schulmann, Eds. (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, 1992).
- These letters were published in M. Klein et al., Eds., *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, vol. 5, *The Swiss Years: Correspondence, 1902–1914* (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, 1993).
- See especially J. Stachel, "Einstein's search for general covariance, 1912–1915," in *Einstein and the History of General Relativity*, D. Howard and J. Stachel, Eds. (Birkhäuser, Boston, 1989), pp. 63–100, and J. Norton, "How Einstein found his field equations, 1912–1915," *ibid.*, pp. 101–159.
- For a technically sophisticated guide to Einstein's scientific work, A. Pais's *Subtle is the Lord . . . : The Science and the Life of Albert Einstein* (Clarendon, New York, 1982) is by far the best bet. Those wishing a more popular but still knowledgeable and accurate account of Einstein's physics in the form of biography should consult B. Hoffmann and H. Dukas, *Albert Einstein: Creator and Rebel* (Viking, New York, 1972), or J. Bernstein, *Einstein* (Viking, New York, 1973).
- At 882 pages, this is, in fact, a slightly abridged translation of the German original, *Albert Einstein: Eine Biographie* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 1993), though the fact that the translation omits a substantial portion of the German text is nowhere mentioned in the English edition.
- R. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (World, New York, 1971).
- Galileo Galilei, *Prozess ohne Ende: Eine Biographie* (Piper, Munich, 1983); Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen: *Aufbruch ins Innere der Materie* (Hanser, Munich, 1995); Heinrich Hertz: *Eine Biographie* (Hoffmann und Campe, Hamburg, 1997).
- Stamm* can be used to mean "tribe" in German, but it also means "stock," "lineage," or "family." Thus, a *Stammbaum* is a family tree.
- Tallulah, *Darling: A Biography of Tallulah Bankhead* (Macmillan, New York, 1980); *The Enchanted Voyager: The Life of J. B. Rhine, an Authorized Biography* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1982); *The True Gen: An Intimate Portrait of Ernest Hemingway by Those Who Knew Him* (Grove, New York, 1988); *Genius Talk: Conversations with Nobel Scientists and Other Luminaries* (Plenum, New York, 1995). Curiously, the Bankhead and Rhine biographies are not mentioned in the author note on the dust jacket of the present work.