

EINSTEIN ON THE RUN

HOW BRITAIN SAVED
THE WORLD'S
GREATEST SCIENTIST

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Preface

Whenever we think of the world's best-known scientist, we generally picture him in relation to Germany, where Albert Einstein was born, or Switzerland, where he first became a physicist, or the United States, where he settled during his last two decades, or Israel, to which he willed his massive archives because of his Jewish sympathies.

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Less often considered is Britain. Yet, it would be no exaggeration to say that Britain is the country that made Einstein into the worldwide phenomenon he is today. Profound and creative, Einstein's entanglement with Britain was both intellectual and emotional. In 1927, while he was living in Germany, he wrote to a British physicist in Oxford: 'in England . . . my work has received greater recognition than anywhere else in the world'. In 1933, while revisiting Britain, he remarked with uncharacteristic fervour to a London journalist: 'I love this country.' In 1937, having relocated from Europe to the United States, he told a refugee German physicist in Edinburgh that Britain was 'the most civilised country of the day'.

Einstein's relationship with Britain flourished for over half a century. In the 1890s, British theoretical and experimental physics, as epitomised by Isaac Newton, sparked his scientific development during his school and college education in Switzerland. In 1919, British astronomers confirmed his general theory of relativity,

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which made Einstein internationally famous. In 1933, Britain saved him from likely assassination by Nazi extremists by offering him refuge. And in 1955, Britain gave rise to his most enduring political statement: the Russell–Einstein Manifesto against the spread of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, initiated by the philosopher, mathematician and political activist Bertrand Russell – the last document signed by Einstein before his death.

All this was despite Einstein’s never fluent, indeed at times comical, grasp of English, which he had not formally learned. ‘It just won’t stick to my ancient skull,’ he confessed to his diary in 1931 (of course in German), after trying to study English on a long ocean voyage while going to lecture in the United States. ‘Einstein’s English was very simple, containing about 300 words pronounced in a very peculiar way,’ noted his English-speaking physicist friend Leopold Infeld, a Polish refugee from Nazism who collaborated closely with Einstein at Princeton in the 1930s in the writing of their joint popular success, *The Evolution of Physics*. ‘I cannot write in English, because of the treacherous spelling,’ Einstein confessed in 1944 to another physicist, Max Born, an old friend from Germany who had studied in Cambridge as a young man and was comfortable with speaking and writing the language. ‘When I am reading it, I only hear it and am unable to remember what the written word looks like.’

Even so, ‘Einstein was an Anglophile,’ declared three American scholars of Einstein – Alice Calaprice, Daniel Kennefick and Robert Schulmann – without hesitation or qualification in their study, *An Einstein Encyclopedia*, published by Princeton University Press in 2015. Nonetheless, Einstein specialists, including his many biographers, have tended to downplay his relationship with Britain because of its diversity and subtlety. I myself underrated it in my book, *Einstein: A Hundred Years of Relativity* – as did the book’s nine expert contributors.

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This book, *Einstein on the Run*, is the first to focus on Einstein and Britain. It brings together material that is both familiar and unfamiliar – some of it hitherto unpublished – from disparate parts of the Einstein archives. These archives at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem contain a total of around 30,000 documents, making them similar in size to the archives of Napoleon Bonaparte and several times the size of those of Newton and Galileo, according to the unique Einstein Papers Project at the California Institute of Technology. Since the 1980s, the project has overseen the publication of fifteen large volumes of *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein (CPAE)*, the latest of which concludes in 1927 – leaving nearly three decades of his life still to be published. No wonder that Einstein still has the power to surprise and fascinate the world. As George Bernard Shaw said of him in a speech in London in 1930, at a dinner to honour Einstein: ‘I rejoice at the new universe to which he has introduced us. I rejoice in the fact that he has destroyed all the old sermons, all the old absolutes, all the old cut and dried conceptions, even of time and space, which were so discouraging . . .’.

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