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Book review

Einstein: His Life and Universe, Walter Isaacson. Simon, Schuster (2007). 704 pp., \$32, ISBN:9780743264730.

Writing a biography of a complex personality and mastermind like Albert Einstein is a daunting task for any historian of science. Yet the sheer temptation of writing his biography has apparently helped to overcome scholarly scruples, as biographies of Einstein have appeared quite regularly on the market. One of them is *Einstein: his Life and Universe* by journalist Walter Isaacson. It is a best-seller, which is one of the reasons the book deserves a critical evaluation. Isaacson is a man of considerable repute: he has been the chairman of CNN and managing editor of *Time* magazine. Isaacson's *Einstein* is written in a style that is accessible to a wide audience. Scholars who are already familiar with Einstein's physics may still enjoy the parts of the book that deal with the relation between Einstein and the press. Indeed, the breadth of its scope is the book's major merit, as it connects the personal, scientific, public and political dimensions of Einstein's life. In this review, I discuss Isaacson's treatment of these dimensions one-by-one.

Firstly, Einstein's personal life. Einstein, as depicted by Isaacson, is basically a happy and friendly man. Of course, this is the Einstein we all know. It is impossible not to be familiar with pictures showing him cheerfully sticking his tongue out. Pictures can mislead, however. I cannot help feeling that Einstein's personality was more complex than Isaacson suggests. This shows, for example, in Einstein's social relations. As Einstein once admitted with respect to his closest friends and family: 'I have never lost a sense of distance.' Isaacson (2007) comments: 'As long as someone put no strong demands or emotional burdens on him, Einstein could readily forge friendships and even affections' (p. 274). The tension, however, is evident as true friendship implies strong emotional ties. So too, Einstein's relationship with women has been notoriously difficult. Jürgen Neffe, another recent biographer, has been said to put Einstein in the 'darkest light imaginable' (Dongen, 2007, pp. 752–753), but Isaacson (2007) goes to the other extreme, avoiding critical issues with clichés like 'relationships... are hard to judge from afar' (p. 41) and 'personal relationships involve nature's most mysterious forces' (p. 184). Most telling, perhaps, is that in a 600+ page biography the section promising 'the human side' is only five pages long (Isaacson, 2007, pp. 37–42).

Secondly, Einstein's scientific life. Isaacson's account of Einstein's science will be helpful to the general reader. He succeeds in communicating technical issues in a non-technical manner (i.e. without using mathematical formulas). And without a doubt, Isaacson's biography will contribute to the public understanding of Einstein's theory of relativity. Isaacson portrays Einstein as a second Newton, an image Einstein seems to have cultivated himself. In doing so, however, he ignores scientific developments between 1687 and 1905. All-important figures such as Helmholtz, Maxwell, Planck and Lorentz get little attention from Isaacson. He draws on the popular 'myth' (Brush, 1969, p. 9) that late-19th century physicists believed that physics was almost complete. Thus, he suggests that Einstein shocked an otherwise unproductive and self-satisfied scientific community (Isaacson, 2007, pp. 90–93). However, the turn of the century was not only a period of amazing and puzzling experiments, such as those of Hertz, Zeeman, Michelson and Röntgen, but also a period of wild theoretical speculations on the ether and profound reflections on the foundations of science.

In the *fin-de-siècle*, exotic and optimistic theories of everything co-existed with pessimistic views that science was in a state of crisis (Heilbron, 1982; Porter, 1994). Isaacson's slightly hagiographic biography gives a distorted image of the history of science. Do we really have to forget Einstein's immediate predecessors in order to do justice to his accomplishment?

Thirdly, Einstein's public life. One of the major merits of Isaacson's biography is that it draws attention to the fascinating interaction between Einstein and the press. It is in these parts of the book that Isaacson's expertise is most visible. In the 1920s, Einstein was caught between Jewish scientists seeking social acceptance ('assimilation') and anti-Semites. Einstein's celebrity was uncommon and frowned upon by most of his colleagues, partly because it strengthened anti-Semitic sentiments. Einstein's relation with the American press was more fortunate. Isaacson (2007) notes that Einstein cultivated his role as a solitary genius that was imparted on him by the press: 'Einstein performed' (p. 269). It would have been interesting if Isaacson, with his expertise, would have pursued this theme a bit further. Einstein was extremely aware of his image. To a degree that we are likely to underestimate, the fact that 'his face [has become] a symbol and his name a synonym for genius' (Isaacson, 2007, p. 2) is a co-production of Einstein and the press. What kind of self-image of himself did Einstein try to convey as he was performing and why? In what ways did his status as a celebrity affect his behavior or his image of himself? These are questions that come to mind, but are left unanswered, in reading Isaacson's biography.

Finally, Einstein's political life. Perhaps it is not surprising that a former chairman of CNN pays a great deal of attention to Einstein's political ideals. On the one hand, Isaacson portrays Einstein as a 'solid American citizen' (Isaacson, 2007, pp. 506–507). The material quoted, however, suggests a more ambiguous relationship with America. Einstein advised the US president about the atom bomb, but he was not invited to the first conference on the bomb, because he was considered to be unreliable (Isaacson, 2007, pp. 477–478). Moreover, Einstein's alleged affiliations with communism were investigated by the FBI, resulting in a file of more than a thousand pages. During the McCarty era, there were circles where the phrase 'you are either with the Americans or against them' was a rhetorical weapon against internal political criticism. To some, Einstein's unconformist politics of moderation was suspect. Isaacson (2007) himself seems to share this criticism, for he writes: '[Einstein] seemed to take a perverse pride in disputing those who blamed the Russians for everything, and those who blamed them for nothing' (p. 498). Yet he does not specify what was perverse about Einstein's pride. Was there something in the way he propagated it? Or does Isaacson mean that it is somehow perverse to take pride in taking a moderate position? In any case, given Einstein's ambiguous relationship to America, it seems ironic that Isaacson turns him into a model American.

Overall, Isaacson's *Einstein* is a welcome attempt to synthesize the various aspects of Einstein's life in a readable and concise manner. But the breadth of the biography is paid for in its depth. In the end, I do not feel to have come much nearer to Einstein. Einstein not only kept his 'distance' to his closest friends and family, but also to his biographer. It would not surprise me, if a future biographer of Einstein would refer to Richard Westfall's unsurpassed *Never at Rest*, who bravely admitted: 'the more I have studied him, the more Newton has receded from me' (Westfall, 1980, p. x).

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