Action at a distance in public affairs

Joseph Haberer

Einstein in America. By Jamie Sayen. Crown: 1985. Pp.340. \$17.95.

OF Einstein it may be said that "fame was the spur" for his life-long involvement in matters relating to political and social issues. In 1920, with his sudden and unanticipated emergence as a world figure, he recognized that his name and celebrity status could be used as a means to shape public opinion and influence those who made decisions on issues with which he was concerned: notably, war and peace; Zionism and the Jewish people; social and economic justice; the threat of fascism and Hitler; the responsible and humane use of scientific knowledge.

Einstein's fame took hold first and especially in America. It is his relationship to the country of his eventual adoption that is at the centre of this biography. In 20 chapters Sayen explores thoroughly and with great acumen the many aspects of Einstein's experience with and in America: from the first journey in 1921 (with Chaim Weizmann, to raise money for the Hebrew University and publicize the Zionist cause) to his last effort in 1955 with Bertrand Russell through a Manifesto to warn against the dangers of the arms race. Most of the book deals with the years after Einstein settled in America in 1933, but three chapters cover the years prior to his arrival and provide an excellent background to the American phase.

Sayen's book is the first to deal primarily with Einstein's various political activities during his mature years, and since there was no intention of writing a complete biography little attention is given to Einstein's scientific work (Abraham Pais's *Subtle is the Lord*, published in 1982 by Oxford University Press, has done this superbly). Sayen demonstrates a thorough grasp of the Einstein materials and literature; evident throughout is his careful and impressive use of the large correspondence from the Einstein Archives. Earlier biographies, most notably Ronald Clark's *Einstein: The Life and Times* (World Publishing, 1971) were clearly deficient in this regard, and are quite misleading on several important aspects of Einstein's political life.

The Einstein that emerges in these pages is a brilliant scientist, as one would expect; a man with a finely honed sense of social responsibility; a person of great warmth, kindness and modesty. We know however, remarkably little about his deeper self and he seems to have gone to considerable lengths to keep it that way. But we know of some problems, most not-

ably his life-long failure to establish intimate personal relationships. Sayen shows Einstein with some of his flaws, and thus avoids the all-too-frequent hagiographic accounts that have come our way.

There is a widely held view that Einstein's political perceptions and activities were those of a man filled with good intentions but characterized by a rather naive grasp of politics and social issues. Sayen lays this myth to rest. Einstein clearly made it his business to be well-informed on those matters on which he took a public stand or in which he became otherwise engaged; he would not, for example, sign petitions, write references or support causes unless he had satisfied himself thoroughly that the facts were such that he could in good conscience do so. He was fully aware that his name was his credit, and he made every effort not to squander it. To be sure he made some mistakes, but he learned quickly to be more careful, and it is remarkable how seldom he erred in his assessments of people and events.

Einstein was the progenitor of the scientist as a publicist for the causes with which he identifies. He wrote (for a scientist of his day) extensively in the press on social and political subjects, and kept up a flow of correspondence in which he addressed important questions of the time. Sayen's book demonstrates that Einstein's understanding of the political and social realities of the twentieth century, as well as his underlying philosophical positions, were much keener and showed a better grasp of the emerging forces than those of most of his critics. For example, his attitude towards the Soviet Union was sympathetic towards its socialist objectives, but from the early 1920s — long before the Stalinist excesses — he was quite aware of the human rights abuses. He refused in the 1920s to sign petitions attacking right-wing excesses unless they included criticism of those of the left also. But he argued in the post-1945 period that an accommodation with the Soviet Union was imperative for a lasting peace, though he recognized the obstacles on both sides that stood in the way. His reluctance to criticize the Soviet Union publicly during the Cold War period was based on complicated reasoning, but came down essentially to an unwillingness to add fuel to the anti-communist hysteria in America.

Although Einstein understood politics, he appears to have thoroughly disliked the activity and the process. He took positions, but avoided choosing parties, or becoming a partisan. Perhaps he resembled somewhat the platonic philosopher-king, who reluctantly, but out of perceived necessity, enters the tainted and turmoil ridden world of the political. He sought to influence while keeping his distance. □

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Close considerations

Jack Cohen

Biology of Fertilization. Edited by Charles B. Metz and Alberto Monroy. *Academic*: 1985. Three volumes, pp.391, 475 and 469. \$75, £75 each volume.

IN THE late 1960s, a number of people, myself among them, moved from other fields of developmental biology into research on fertilization, partly because electron microscopical techniques were dramatically illuminating the magic moments of membrane fusion but also because mammalian gametes were just becoming accessible to experiment. *Concepts of Fertilization*, edited by Monroy and Metz and published in 1967, was a guide book to the territory for us. That collection of authoritative, and revelatory, review articles by all the "big names" put the subject in context and provided both opinion and forecasts; it did not have the now-fashionable tone that "for each expert there is an equal-and-opposite expert", with each disagreement referenced and written in the dense prose which now seems mandatory for the professional review. The editors were daring, for that time, in assembling biochemists, botanists and electron-microscopists, as well as fertilization specialists, and in suggesting that work upon bacteria, algae and *Paramecium* could illuminate sea urchin and mammal fertilizations.

This new collection, which comes in three volumes entitled *Model Systems and Oogenesis*, *Biology of the Sperm* and *The Fertilization Response of the Egg*, looks very different. We have all got older, and we now know much more. But beyond that I believe there is a much more basic and serious difference. As an area of science develops, knowledge should not simply accumulate; generally accepted theories should encompass large areas of previously disparate observations and bring them into a coherent framework. New textbooks then reflect this coherence in their examples for students. There have been several attempts in the area addressed by this collection, of which Austin and Short's series *Reproduction in Mammals*, now going through a second edition, has probably been the most successful.

For me, this new collection of reviews fails because it gives only sporadic indications of the larger view. The density of information, argument and referencing of most of the articles is appropriate to the subjects they consider, and these articles could well have been found in the *Advances in . . .* or *Current Topics in . . .* sort of book. What is missing is the ultimate rather than the proximate consideration. All the authors, even those considering polyspermy and its prevention, write of