

Critical moment

Stephen Hawking, 1942-2018



PERHAPS HE DIDN'T REDEFINE OUR understanding of our place in the universe, as Einstein did with the theory of relativity, or invent a new branch of mathematics, as Newton did with calculus. Yet Stephen Hawking's life and work captured the public imagination as profoundly as anyone in the history of science. In both mind and body, he symbolized our species' victory over the forces of nature. And behind his story, like a rocket engine, fired a determination to communicate so powerful that it propelled him through the loss of speech via tongue or finger.

A brilliant if unmotivated student at Oxford, then Cambridge, he was diagnosed at 21 with ALS (also called "Lou Gehrig's Disease") and not expected to live to be 25. But the degenerative progress of the disease proved slow and, with death as a constant companion, he found a new sense of purpose. Soon he was a star at Cambridge, occupying the post once held by Sir Isaac Newton and opening new territory in theoretical cosmology.

Eventually almost completely immobile, he nonetheless authored a stream of radical papers shifting scientific perceptions about black holes and

STEPHEN HAWKING at Cambridge University in 1988, the same year he published the best-selling *A Brief History of Time*. One reviewer in *Time* magazine wrote: "Even as he sits helpless in his wheelchair, his mind seems to soar ever more brilliantly across the vastness of space and time to unlock the secrets of the universe."

the origins of the universe. In 1984, pneumonia nearly killed him; an emergency tracheotomy left him voiceless. At first, he was reduced to spelling out words using letter cards held in front of him. But fledgling personal computer technology allowed him to communicate – at a rate of 15 words per minute.

While tech innovations barely kept pace with his physical deterioration, the sound of his speech synthesizer became a brand in itself, a symbol of wit and wisdom that Professor Hawking carried with pride. In 1988, his book *A Brief History of Time*, became a runaway best-seller – over 11 million copies sold in 35 languages. The author himself narrated a feature-length film version. As his fame grew, he frequently appeared – in his wheelchair, with that voice – in cameo roles on TV shows such as "Big Bang Theory," "Star Trek," and "The Simpsons."

His death itself could be seen as a cosmological alignment. Born January 8, 1942, exactly 300 years after the death of Renaissance astronomer Galileo, Stephen Hawking died on March 14, Albert Einstein's birthday.

CARLTON WILKINSON is Managing Editor of the Brunswick Review, in New York.