
Opening Extract from...

Travelling to Infinity

Written by Jane Hawking

Published by Alma Books Ltd

TRAVELLING TO INFINITY

MY LIFE WITH STEPHEN

JANE HAWKING

ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD
London House
243–253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.almabooks.com

Travelling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen is an extensively revised version (with new material) of *Music to Move the Stars*, first published by Macmillan in 1999
Travelling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen first published by Alma Books Limited in 2007
First paperback edition first published in 2008, reprinted 2010
This new edition first published by Alma Books in 2014. Repr. 2014

ISBN: 978-1-84688-366-8
EBOOK: 978-1-84688-373-6

Printed in Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

For my family

La parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles.

– Gustave Flaubert

Human expression is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out music for bears to dance to, when really we long to move the stars to pity.

1

Wings to Fly

The story of my life with Stephen Hawking began in the summer of 1962, though possibly it began ten or so years earlier than that without my being aware of it. When I entered St Albans High School for Girls as a seven-year-old first-former in the early Fifties, there was for a short spell a boy with floppy, golden-brown hair who used to sit by the wall in the next-door classroom. The school took boys, including my brother Christopher in the junior department, but I only saw the boy with the floppy hair on the occasions when, in the absence of our own teacher, we first-formers were squeezed into the same classroom as the older children. We never spoke to each other, but I am sure this early memory is to be trusted, because Stephen was a pupil at the school for a term at that time before going to a preparatory school a few miles away.

Stephen's sisters were more recognizable, because they were at the school for longer. Only eighteen months younger than Stephen, Mary, the elder of the two girls, was a distinctively eccentric figure – plump, always dishevelled, absent-minded, given to solitary pursuits. Her great asset, a translucent complexion, was masked by thick, unflattering spectacles. Philippa, five years younger than Stephen, was bright-eyed, nervous and excitable, with short fair plaits and a round, pink face. The school demanded rigid conformity both academically and in discipline, and the pupils, like schoolchildren everywhere, could be cruelly intolerant of individuality. It was fine to have a Rolls Royce and a house in the country, but if, like me, your means of transport was a pre-war Standard 10 – or even worse, like the Hawkings, an ancient London taxi – you were a figure of fun or the object of pitying contempt. The Hawking children used to lie on the floor of their taxi to avoid being seen by their peers. Unfortunately there was not room on the floor of the Standard 10 for such evasive action. Both the Hawking girls left before reaching the upper school.

Their mother had long been a familiar figure. A small, wiry person dressed in a fur coat, she used to stand on the corner by the zebra crossing near my school, waiting for her youngest son, Edward, to arrive by bus from his preparatory school in the country. My brother also went to that school after his kindergarten year at St Albans High School: it was called Aylesford House and there the boys wore pink – pink blazers and pink caps. In all other respects it was a paradise for small boys, especially for those who were not of an academic inclination. Games, cubs, camping and gang shows, for which my father often played the piano, appeared to be the major activities. Charming and very good-looking, Edward, at the age of eight, was having some difficulty relating to his adoptive family when I first knew the Hawkings – possibly because of their habit of bringing their reading matter to the dinner table and ignoring any non-bookworms present.

A school friend of mine, Diana King, had experienced this particular Hawking habit – which may have been why, on hearing some time later of my engagement to Stephen, she exclaimed, "Oh, Jane! You are marrying into a mad, mad family!" It was Diana who first pointed Stephen out to me in that summer of 1962 when, after the exams, she, my best friend Gillian and I were enjoying the blissful period of semi-idleness before the end of term. Thanks to my father's position as a senior civil servant, I had already made a couple of sorties into the adult world beyond school, homework and exams – to a dinner in the House of Commons and on a hot sunny day to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. Diana and Gillian were leaving school that summer, while I was to stay on as Head Girl for the autumn term, when I would be applying for university entrance. That Friday afternoon we collected our bags and, adjusting our straw boaters, we decided to drift into town for tea. We had scarcely gone a hundred yards when a strange sight met our eyes on the other side of the road: there, lolloping along in the opposite direction, was a young man with an awkward gait, his head down, his face shielded from the world under an unruly mass of straight brown hair. Immersed in his own thoughts, he looked neither to right nor left, unaware of the group of schoolgirls across the road. He was an eccentric phenomenon for strait-laced, sleepy St Albans. Gillian and I stared rather rudely in amazement but Diana remained impassive.

"That's Stephen Hawking. I've been out with him actually," she announced to her speechless companions.

"No! You haven't!" we laughed incredulously.

"Yes I have. He's strange but very clever, he's a friend of Basil's [her brother]. He took me to the theatre once, and I've been to his house. He goes on 'Ban the Bomb' marches."

Raising our eyebrows, we continued into town, but I did not enjoy the outing because, without being able to explain why, I felt uneasy about the young man we had just seen. Perhaps there was something about his very eccentricity that fascinated me in my rather conventional existence. Perhaps I had some strange premonition that I would be seeing him again. Whatever it was, that scene etched itself deeply on my mind.

The holidays of that summer were a dream for a teenager on the verge of independence, though they may well have been a nightmare for her parents, since my destination, a summer school in Spain, was in 1962 quite as remote, mysterious and fraught with hazards as, say, Nepal is for teenagers today. With all the confidence of my eighteen years, I was quite sure that I could look after myself, and I was right. The course was well organized, and we students were lodged in groups in private homes. At weekends we were taken on conducted tours of all the sights – to Pamplona where the bulls run the streets, to the only bullfight I have seen, brutal and savage, but spectacular and enthralling as well, and to Loyola, the home of St Ignatius, the author of a prayer I and every other pupil at St Albans High School had had instilled into us from constant repetition:

> Teach us, O Lord,
> to serve Thee as Thou deservest,
> to give and not to count the cost…

Otherwise we spent our afternoons on the beach and the evenings out down by the port in restaurants and bars, participating in the fiestas and the dancing, listening to the raucous bands and gasping at the fireworks. I quickly made new friends outside the limited St Albans scene, primarily among the other teenagers on the course, and with them, in the glorious, exotic atmosphere of Spain, experimented with a taste of adult independence away from home, family and the stultifying discipline of school.

On my return to England, I was whisked away almost immediately by my parents who, relieved at my safe return, had arranged a family holiday in the Low Countries and Luxembourg. This

was yet another broadening experience, one of those holidays in which my father specialized and which he had been arranging for us for many years – ever since my first trip to Brittany at the age of ten. Thanks to his enthusiasms we found ourselves in the vanguard of the tourist movement, travelling hundreds of miles along meandering country roads across a Europe in the process of emerging from its wartime trauma, visiting cities, cathedrals and art museums, which my parents were also discovering for the first time. It was a typically inspired combination of education, through art and history, and enjoyment of the good things of life – wine, food and summer sun – all intermingled with the war memorials and cemeteries of Flanders' fields.

Back in school that autumn, the summer's experiences lent me an unprecedented feeling of self-assurance. As I emerged from my chrysalis, school provided only the palest reflection of the awareness and self-reliance I had acquired through travelling. Taking my cue from the new forms of satire appearing on television, I, the Head Girl, devised a fashion show for the sixth-form entertainment, with the difference that all the fashions were constructed from bizarrely adapted items of school uniform. Discipline collapsed as the whole school clamoured for entry on the staircase outside the hall, and Miss Meiklejohn (otherwise know as Mick), the stocky, weather-beaten games mistress on whose terrifyingly masculine bark the smooth running of the school depended, was for once reduced to apoplexy, unable to make herself heard in the din. In desperation, she resorted to the megaphone – which usually only came out for a blasting on Sports Day, at the pet show, and for the purpose of controlling those interminable crocodiles we had to form when marching down through every possible back street of St Albans for the once-termly services in the Abbey.

That term long ago in the autumn of 1962 was not supposed to be about putting on shows. It was supposed to be about university entrance. Sadly it was not a success for me in academic terms. However great our adulation for President Kennedy, the Cuban missile crisis that October had well and truly shaken the sense of security of my generation and dashed our hopes for the future. With the superpowers playing such dangerous games with our lives, it was not at all certain that we had any future to look forward to. As we prayed for peace in school assembly under the direction of the Dean, I remembered a prediction made by

Field Marshall Montgomery in the late Fifties that there would be a nuclear war within a decade. Everyone, young and old alike, knew that we would have just four minutes' warning of a nuclear attack, which would spell the abrupt end of all civilization. My mother's comment, calmly philosophical and sensible as ever, at the prospect of a third world war in her lifetime, was that she would much rather be obliterated with everything and everyone else than endure the agony of seeing her husband and son conscripted for warfare from which they would never return.

Quite apart from the almighty threat of the international scene, I felt that I had burnt myself out with the A-level exams and lacked enthusiasm for school work after my taste of freedom in the summer. The serious business of university entrance held only humiliation when neither Oxford nor Cambridge expressed any interest in me. It was all the more painful because my father had been cherishing the hope that I would gain a place at Cambridge since I was about six years old. Aware of my sense of failure, Miss Gent, the Headmistress, sympathetically went to some lengths to point out that there was no disgrace in not getting a place at Cambridge, because many of the men at that university were far inferior intellectually to the women who had been turned away for want of places. In those days the ratio was roughly ten men to one woman at Oxford and Cambridge. She recommended taking up the offer of an interview at Westfield College, London, a women's college on the Girtonian model, situated in Hampstead at some distance from the rest of the University. Thus one cold, wet December day, I set off from St Albans by bus for the fifteen-mile journey to Hampstead.

The day was such a disaster that it was a relief at the end of it to be on the bus home again, travelling through the same bleak, grey sleet and snow of the outward journey. After the uncomfortable exercise in the Spanish Department of bluffing my way through an interview which seemed to hinge entirely on T.S. Eliot, about whom I knew next to nothing, I was sent to join the queue outside the Principal's study. When my turn came, she brought the style of a former civil servant to the interview, scarcely looking up from her papers over her horn-rimmed spectacles. Feeling exceedingly ruffled from the fiasco of the earlier interview, I decided it was better to make her notice me even if in the process I ruined my chances. So when in a bored, dry voice, she asked, "And why have you put down Spanish rather than French as your main

language?", I answered in an equally bored, dry voice, "Because Spain is hotter than France." Her papers fell from her hands and she did indeed look up.

To my astonishment, I was offered a place at Westfield, but by that Christmas much of the optimism and enthusiasm that I had discovered in Spain had worn thin. When Diana invited me to a New Year's party which she was giving with her brother on 1st January 1963, I went along, neatly dressed in a dark-green silky outfit – synthetic, of course – with my hair back-brushed in an extravagant bouffant roll, inwardly shy and very unsure of myself. There, slight of frame, leaning against the wall in a corner with his back to the light, gesticulating with long thin fingers as he spoke – his hair falling across his face over his glasses – and wearing a dusty black-velvet jacket and red-velvet bow tie, stood Stephen Hawking, the young man I had seen lolloping along the street in the summer.

Standing apart from the other groups, he was talking to an Oxford friend, explaining that he had begun research in cosmology in Cambridge – not, as he had hoped, under the auspices of Fred Hoyle, the popular television scientist, but with the unusually named Dennis Sciama. At first, Stephen had thought his unknown supervisor's name was *Skeearma*, but on his arrival in Cambridge he had discovered that the correct pronunciation was *Sharma*. He admitted that he had learnt with some relief, the previous summer – when I was doing A levels – that he had gained a First Class degree at Oxford. This was the happy result of a viva, an oral exam, conducted by the perplexed examiners to decide whether the singularly inept candidate whose papers also revealed flashes of brilliance should be given a First, an Upper Second or a Pass degree, the latter being tantamount to failure. He nonchalantly informed the examiners that if they gave him a First he would go to Cambridge to do a PhD, thus giving them the opportunity of introducing a Trojan horse into the rival camp, whereas if they gave him an Upper Second (which would also allow him to do research), he would stay in Oxford. The examiners played for safety and gave him a First.

Stephen went on to explain to his audience of two, his Oxford friend and me, how he had also taken steps to play for safety, realizing that it was extremely unlikely that he would get a First at Oxford on the little work he had done. He had never been to a lecture – it was not the done thing to be seen working when

friends called – and the legendary tale of his tearing up a piece of work and flinging it into his tutor's wastepaper basket on leaving a tutorial is quite true. Fearing for his chances in academia, Stephen had applied to join the Civil Service and had passed the preliminary stages of selection at a country-house weekend, so he was all set to take the Civil Service exams just after Finals. One morning he woke late as usual, with the niggling feeling that there was something he ought to be doing that day, apart from his normal pursuit of listening to his taped recording of the entire *Ring Cycle*. As he did not keep a diary but trusted everything to memory, he had no way of finding out what it was until some hours later, when it dawned on him that that day was the day of the Civil Service exams.

I listened in amused fascination, drawn to this unusual character by his sense of humour and his independent personality. His tales made very appealing listening, particularly because of his way of hiccoughing with laughter, almost suffocating himself, at the jokes he told, many of them against himself. Clearly here was someone, like me, who tended to stumble through life and managed to see the funny side of situations. Someone who, like me, was fairly shy, yet not averse to expressing his opinions; someone who unlike me had a developed sense of his own worth and had the effrontery to convey it. As the party drew to a close, we exchanged names and addresses, but I did not expect to see him again, except perhaps casually in passing. The floppy hair and the bow tie were a façade, a statement of independence of mind, and in future I could afford to overlook them, as Diana had, rather than gape in astonishment, if I came across him again in the street.