

The Scopes Trial

“People, this is no circus. There are no monkeys up here. This is a lawsuit, let us have order.” Court Officer Rice

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In 1925, the Dayton businessmen were not happy. Nothing ever happened in their sleepy town of less than 2,000 souls.² They wondered what they could do to get a little action or maybe even a little notoriety, and the money that came with it. Earlier in the year, the state legislature had passed a new law called the Butler Act; the townsmen seized an opportunity to turn the law into manna from heaven.

The Butler Act, passed by the Tennessee legislature, stated “That it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” The stage was set for a real crowd pleaser!

In 1924, the young John T. Scopes (1900–1970; Fig. 1), a freshly minted law major from the University of Kentucky, was hired as football coach and physical science teacher at the Rhea County, Tennessee, high school.³ In his first year, he also briefly taught biology as a substitute when the regular biology teacher was ill. The following summer, Scopes stayed in Dayton rather than leaving town because a



Figure 1. John T. Scopes. From Tompkins.⁵

local girl had caught his eye. So he was around, playing tennis one afternoon, when he was approached by the town businessmen who wanted to bring some lively action to Dayton. Still perspiring, he walked down to Robinson’s drugstore to meet them. What they wanted to know was whether he thought that biology could be taught without including evolution. Scopes said no. He had read Darwin as a child, and “thought Darwin was right. It was the only plausible explanation of man’s long and tortuous journey to his present physical and mental development.”³ He acknowledged that his sabbatical stint had included some review of biology, using the class textbook, *Hunter’s Civic Biology*,⁴ which included discussions of evolution.

By teaching this material, the instigators said, Scopes was clearly in violation of the new anti-evolution law.

Would he be willing to stand trial to test the law? He agreed, though he couldn’t remember whether he had actually taught the evolution sections of *Hunter* (Fig. 2). They put “the Professor” on trial for this offense, which carried a fine of between \$100 and \$500.

To make the most of the occasion, they brought in a celebrity prosecutor who had been a leader in the struggle of religion against evolution, the former Presidential candidate and Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan (Fig. 3). That would ensure a conviction and would attract national media attention as well. In defending Scopes, the American Civil Liberties Union brought in a celebrity of their own, Clarence Darrow (Fig. 3), probably the most famous lawyer of his age, a fighter for enlightened but unpopular causes, and already a known Bryan antagonist. As everyone

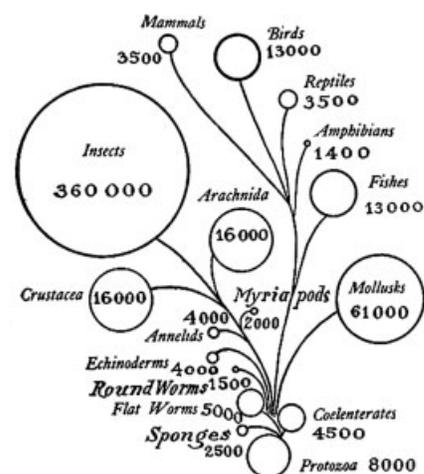


Figure 2. Hunter’s diagram of evolution. Note the small circle at the top representing mammals. From Hunter.⁴

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Figure 3. Legal aid. The famous face-off of Darrow (left) and Bryan, at the trial. Source: public domain.

knows, Darrow embarrassed poor Bryan, “the idol of all Morondom,”⁶ over his literal interpretations of the Bible.

The Scopes trial was made into a play and a Hollywood movie, “Inherit the Wind,” which are still seen and helped make a modern American legend.⁷ The trial is well-remembered as the image of a triumph of Science over Religion, rather than a narrow legal test, much less a trial explicitly staged as a publicity stunt for Dayton. Nevertheless, the tactic succeeded, because while “Most of the newspapers treated the whole case as a farce instead of a tragedy . . . they did give it no end of publicity.”⁶ But underlying the trial’s theatrics were issues of substance that are not as well remembered as its caricature in legend. To see what those issues are, let’s look first at what the students were actually being taught.

A PROPER CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION—OR FOR THE DEFENSE?

George W. Hunter, a teacher at New York’s famous DeWitt Clinton High School, regularly consulted with nearby Columbia University’s biology

faculty. His contacts included at least one student of the prominent geneticist Thomas H Morgan and *Civic Biology* became the leading text in its field.⁸

Hunter attributed the gradually advancing nature of life to Darwin’s “theory of evolution,” with adaptive natural selection at its core. He essentially defined evolution as a steady progression from primitive to advanced. He quickly applied that notion to humans, asserting that we evolved from “lower animals.” So if Scopes taught this kind of stuff, his fate would seem to be sealed!

In subsequent sections, Hunter said there are five human races, each different in “instincts, social customs, and, to a certain extent, in structure,” and that these include “the highest type of all, the Caucasians, represented by the civilized white inhabitants of Europe and America.” He took a strongly eugenicist view of human nature, describing a few famous cases taken from the leading book on eugenics.⁹ These included one “Margaret, the mother of criminals,” and the Kallikak family that spawned countless “feeble-minded,” sexually immoral, and drunkard descendants. The “rem-

edy” for the “improvement of the future race,” since we can’t kill the defectives, is selective breeding, preventing their intermarriage “and the possibilities of perpetuating such a low and degenerate race.” On the other hand, there was Elizabeth Tuttle, who in 1667 was a person “of strong will, and of extreme intellectual vigor” and begat a long list of distinguished citizens, even including several university presidents. Good genes indeed! As Hunter⁴ pointedly noted, “The evidence and the moral speak for themselves!”

Surprisingly, what should have been Exhibit A, *Civic Biology*’s actual content, was hardly mentioned in the trial at all. Nor did Scopes himself ever testify until he responded to the verdict.¹ This might seem strange, since the only issue actually on trial was whether he had taught a book that violated the Butler Act. Besides the fact that he couldn’t remember if he’d actually taught the evolutionary parts of Hunter, Scopes was never called to testify because Darrow feared he would be asked whether he was actually a biology teacher and that he might not stand up well under interrogation about biology.⁸

“THE ROCK OF AGES IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE AGE OF ROCKS” (Bryan)¹

Clarence Darrow only showed up in Dayton after he read that Bryan¹ had signed on for the prosecution. It was the only case Darrow ever took for no fee.⁶ He was determined to undermine Bryan, who headed the movement responsible for fundamentalist anti-evolution activities around the country, including the Butler Act. Darrow’s “only object, was to focus the attention of the country on the programme of Mr. Bryan and the other fundamentalists in America . . . Education was in danger from . . . religious fanaticism.”⁶

From the beginning, it was clear that this was a show trial. The weather was hot, the courthouse jammed (Fig. 4), journalists everywhere. The trial was broadcast on radio and loudspeakers, and the *pièce de résistance* was even held outside on the courthouse lawn to accommodate the large,



Figure 4. Rhea County courthouse, scene of the action.¹

sweltering crowd (Fig. 5). Reporters sent home excited daily bulletins. More reports were wired overseas, Bryan said, than for any previous story in the United States.¹ The trial was intentionally converted, or perverted, as Bryan told Darrow it would be, away from its narrow technical issues into a “fight to the death” between evolution and religion.⁶

Less well-known aspects of the trial included thickets of legal dueling over the acceptability of expert witnesses. The prosecution said that since Scopes had taught man’s descent from lower animals, plain and simple, no details about evolutionary theory were relevant. The defense countered that, based on the wording of the Butler Act, Scopes could only be in violation if he taught the evolution of humans and denied the creation story in the Bible. They asked whether the Bible was, in fact, incompatible with evolution. Indeed, which version or edition or translation counted as “the Bible” that Scopes could possibly be convicted of denying? Much of this jockeying was done with the jury excused, explicitly to set the stage for subsequent appeals.

In the famous “monkey trial,” Darrow eventually asked whether Bryan, as a Bible expert, would testify on some of these points. Bryan confidently agreed, so long as Darrow would then also testify. Judge Raulston con-

sented,¹⁰ and that’s when Darrow made a famous monkey out of Bryan. The transcript shows a lawyer of legendary skill going after his witness the way lawyers do, on highly selective particulars and with great rhetorical aplomb heavily dosed with satire.¹

Darrow raked Bryan over the coals defending biblical literalism, chapter and verse. Was Jonah really swallowed by a whale? Or was it a fish? Did Joshua really lengthen a day by commanding the sun to stand still? Did human races really all arise in the 4,200 years since Noah’s flood? Where did Cain get his wife? But this wasn’t quite the spontaneous grilling the legend seems to imply. In 1923, the pump had been primed when, in the *Chicago Tribune*, Darrow printed similar questions for Bryan to answer in response to comments Bryan had previously published there.⁶

Although it had been agreed that Darrow would go on the stand after Bryan, that never happened. The next day, the judge had had enough of the circus and ordered Bryan’s testimony be stricken from the record as irrelevant to the narrow question of whether Scopes had violated the Butler Act. For similar reasons, he also disallowed several written statements on the evidence for evolution the defense had solicited from prominent scientists. The Butler Act was clear

enough for a verdict to be reached without extraneous interpretation.

In a way, it didn’t matter. Bryan’s testimony was widely publicized anyway and is what everyone remembers. But if the tables had been turned and the great orator had had his chance to put Darrow on the stand in the full light of publicity, our view of the trial might be somewhat different.

IF DARROW HAD TESTIFIED

We can’t know what Bryan would have asked, but we can obtain inklings because in fact, Bryan did, after a fashion, interrogate both Darrow and Darwin. Bryan had raised a few of his points during the earlier haranguing about expert witnesses, but had also prepared a summary statement that he intended to read at the end of trial. The judge did not allow it, but shortly before his death in Dayton five days after the trial, the exhausted but rebounding Bryan agreed to have his statement published.¹

Much as Darrow had confronted Bryan about the truth of the Bible, Bryan went after the truth of evolution. Darrow would have claimed some knowledge of evolutionary biology.¹¹ “For a lawyer,” he later wrote, “I was a fairly grounded scientist.”⁶ He, like Scopes, had been fed Darwin even



Figure 5. Bryan testifies. Source: Image #2005-26202, Smithsonian Institution Archive.

as a child. The arguments in the admissible-evidence part of the trial had shown uncertainties in evolutionary biology at the time, which many viewed as a crisis for Darwinism. There was agreement that evolution had occurred, but not about its connection to Darwin's theory of natural selection. Indeed, the issues were not settled until some years after the trial, when the Modern Synthesis at least united Mendelism and Darwinism into a consistent evolutionary theory.

Bryan characterized Darwinism as "merely an hypothesis" based on "millions of guesses strung together." Not only had speciation never been observed, but both sexual and natural selection had been widely abandoned by biologists as its mechanism. He cited the leading geneticist William Bateson's doubts about the origin of species, stating that "As to the nature of this process of evolution, we have many conjectures, but little positive knowledge."^{1,5} What value, wrote Bryan, is evolution if it can't even explain the origin of species?

Hunter described evolution as producing a steady trend toward increasing complexity. His tree diagram (Fig. 2) is hierarchical, showing simpler species lower down than "higher types of life," even though they exist today. This is in contrast to Darwin's stress on divergence rather than hierarchy, in which all contemporary species are shown at the same level. Bryan lambasted Hunter's figure for hiding humans within a tiny "mammal" circle at the top of his tree of life (along with the wolf, hyena, and the skunk, no less!), thus ignoring our dramatically unique nature.

Bryan, an ardent populist, noted that the courts had already established the legal right of schools not to teach things "inimical to the public welfare." Hunter's book credited Darwin with providing a theory that many viewed as underlying world progress.⁸ Bryan assailed the harshness of a doctrine that justified inequality as being the true nature of things. Darwinism systematically destroyed students' faith, undermining the basis of social morality and, by focusing on the past and future, diverted attention from how people should live their lives today.

And Darrow's view? Bryan pointed out that in recently defending the murderer Richard Loeb in the famous Leopold-Loeb trial, Darrow had said Loeb's crime was "inherent in his organism" because he'd inherited a bad seed passed through the ages from some brute ancestor, a view Darrow claimed "not a biologist in the world" would disagree with. Darrow also defended Loeb's actions as done under the influence of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's Darwinian view that society should make accommodation for the superior few, of which Loeb thought he was one, at the harsh expense of the pedestrian masses.

Bryan bitterly attacked this "dogma of darkness and death," which asserted that we inherit fates fixed by the laws of heredity, as "an insult to reason [that] shocks the heart."¹ Darwinism justified rapacious selfishness, according to which the poor deserved their poverty. Bryan also opposed militant imperialism, including the human disaster of World War I (as Secretary of State, he had opposed the United States' entry into the war). Bryan also quoted Darwin's statement that medical care preserves the weak and harmfully interferes with Nature's way of improving the species. Bryan wrote that only Christian love could reform social ills, whereas the only remedy for society that Darwinism left was "scientific breeding," or eugenics.¹

When he had Bryan on the witness stand, Darrow conveniently did not mention Hunter's eugenics. It would have undermined his case for the legitimacy of evolution. Yet, only three months later, he used Hunter's same examples in blasting the falseness and abysmal lack of rigor in eugenics in a paper he must have been written quickly after the trial, with Hunter fresh in mind. He followed that up the next June, vigorously attacking the excesses of racial Darwinism,^{12,13} saying that since we have no knowledge of what kind of human might be better than what Nature has already evolved, the Darwinian presumptuousness constituted a "eugenics cult."¹¹ In effect, Darrow put Hunter's evolution on trial for reasons resembling Bryan's, but only after his campaign against fundamentalism in the trial was safely over.

Both sides were scoring points they knew had little to do with the narrow question at issue in the trial. But if Bryan had been able to force Darrow to defend not only the doubts among professionals about evolution, but also whether Hunter's treatment of race and eugenics was the "evolution" that should be taught to high school students, the squirming at the Scopes trial might have been a bit more symmetrical.

Bryan was a believer, to be sure, but he was not a totally thoughtless biblical literalist, for which even fundamentalists took him to task at the time. He was a "day-age" creationist; he allowed that in Genesis a "day" might mean an age of unspecified length in earth history. He also acknowledged that the Bible could clearly be metaphorical, as when it says that humans are the "salt of the earth." In his prepared but unread statement, Bryan even said that he'd not object to evolution being taught, as long as it was not extended to humans. His objections to the teaching of evolution were societal as well as biblical. He didn't even think the Butler Act should have a formal penalty attached; moral conscience alone should guarantee adherence.² Moreover, Bryan spent a large amount of his energies defending ethics and equity for ordinary people.

"THE ENEMIES OF SCIENCE SEE THEIR CHANCE" (Bateson, 1922⁵)

The struggle continues to this day, of course. But I wonder if we can see signs that since Scopes the focus has changed in a way that may even reflect an encouraging, if still incremental victory for science. Bryan defended what he accepted on faith as the ultimate truth of the Bible, seeing it as the logical alternative to the unproven theory of evolution. In recent years, fundamentalists have acknowledged the relevance of the rules of evidence that, rather than blind faith, define science. They have at least been claiming to be doing "creation science" themselves to prove Biblical truth or at least the untruth of evolution. They have been doing this as scientists, circumventing church-state separation in

the process, so that their view should finally be included in the biology curriculum.

That claim was put to a recent test in Pennsylvania and drew forth a model decision on the point. Kitzmiller sued the Dover, Pennsylvania, Area School District, which had attempted to include Intelligent Design in its science curriculum. Presiding was Judge John E. Jones, a Christian, and even a Republican appointee. He wrote a thoughtful discussion of these issues that everyone should read (www.pamd.uscourts.gov/kitzmiller/kitzmiller_342.pdf). Despite his personal beliefs, he acted first and foremost as a judge. His wonderfully worded opinion correctly characterized Intelligent Design as being not legitimately based on science, but instead yet another intrusive attempt to force religion into the classroom.

It is never time to relax our vigilance in defense of the facts of life. The effort to portray biblical fundamentalism as science continues and, strangely, may even be intensifying, as exemplified by the Discovery Institute (www.discovery.org) and "Answers in Genesis" (www.answersingenesis.org).

Fortunately, there are counterweights. The National Center for Science Education and its director, Eugenie Scott, have been dedicated to keeping science in the science classroom. This organization provides aids for teaching evolution and responding to fundamentalist assaults (see www.ncseweb.org and Scott's book.⁴). One can quibble with what they include or stress in their treatment of "evolution," but they provide extensive material for a first line of defense against the contemporary fundamentalist challenge.

SUMMING UP

Scopes was found guilty in his show trial. Judge Raulston fined him \$100, but the fine was overturned on a technicality and, after various appeals, the case was thrown out. Nothing came of it directly. Unlike the myth that has grown around the trial, the news write-ups after the trial did not describe it as a victory for science.⁸ The reporters and cameramen went home and Dayton, Tennessee, went back to sleep. Today they build La-Z-

Boy chairs in Dayton; Bryan College, a Christian school named after the famous defender of the faith, is there, as is a museum in the courthouse where reenactments draw tourists every summer. The Butler Act remained on the books until challenged by a dismissed teacher in 1967.

The problem, then as now, is that in a culture war, which is what this largely is, the temptation may be to win and worry about the details later. There was much of this in Dayton. Bryan objected to what he felt Darwinism allowed in terms of inequality, but inequality of all sorts has been compatible with many Christians' world view. Darrow objected to eugenics, but not at the trial, because he, too, wanted to win.

But let's look beyond the circus and beyond the culture war, because things that were irrelevant to the case itself are highly relevant to evolutionary biology today. Even based on what was known at the time, not all of us would have believed that students should be given Hunter's version. For example, Darwin had written of the vain nature of any effort to assign humans to a few specific race categories.¹⁵ Hunter's views on race differences were certainly widespread, but there had been vigorous debates about that among evolutionary biologists in the nineteenth century. Darwin's and Wallace's views were more subtle than Hunter's, though it must be admitted that both tended to give some superiority to Europeans. Elitist eugenics has been advocated in Western thought at least since Plato's Republic, but in many eyes had gained a scientific rationale from evolutionary concepts that traced back to Darwin's family or even Darwin himself. Still, not everybody agreed, even at that time, including both Bryan and Darrow.

Evolution remains an elusive target. Each year I ask students to write down, without consulting any sources, what "evolution" means to them. They give widely varying answers, and that's also true among professionals. Some students stress a single earthly origin of life, others the origin of species from other species. Still others equate evolution with natural selection, some invoking ruthless competition and "survival of the fittest." Some allow a

God to have started it all; to others evolution disproves religious claims. A few even allow the seeding of life on earth from outer space, reflected in the belief that there was life on Mars.

Since the 1930s, evolution has been widely viewed as a genetic phenomenon. We routinely point out, as Darwin did, that almost every human trait varies at least somewhat around the world, and that genes play a role in that variation. Yet there are considerable differences of opinion about the relative importance of the various evolutionary factors, in particular how stringent, pervasive, or specific natural selection is relative to chance, mutation, gene duplication, and recombination. There is persistent and often fervent disagreement, even among anthropologists, about the role of genes and evolution in such subjects as behavior, whether races exist and, if they do, whether they have any biological importance, or what those races evolved to be adapted "for." Many of the issues have not changed much since Scopes' time, including the relevance of Darwinism to social inequality or to the behavioral traits that continue to attract interest.

If some of Hunter's treatment was widely accepted in his time but would be incorrect or even objectionable to us today, what aspects of evolution as we currently see it are sufficiently irrefutable that we would want them taught to our children? For example, the intrusiveness shoe could easily be put on the other foot: a recent survey of eminent evolutionary biologists found that a small fraction accepted some form of theistic religion.¹⁶ However, more than 70% believed that religion is a sociobiologically adaptive illusion. It's debatable whether this is a matter of belief or factual science but, if it is the latter, it explicitly co-opts religious truths in much the way that literalists claim the Bible co-opts biology. Should we quietly omit mentioning that, to avoid confrontation with religion, or is it the purpose of science to confront the world as we see it? Who decides? Just as important, given the nature of American higher education, who are the teachers who will present it and how well are we preparing them for the job?

Our understanding of evolution is dynamic, approximate, and always changing. Even in a culture war, we should be on guard to keep it that way. We should not allow ourselves to respond in kind by being bullied into insisting on a too neatly packaged or simplistic, much less dogmatic view, even though expressing uncertainties about our knowledge provides food for our opponents. If our science is to remain healthy, we should always be putting ourselves on trial.

NOTES

Scans of Hunter's pages that relate to evolution are available from me on request. I welcome comments on this column: kenweiss@psu.edu. I have a feedback and supplemental material page at <http://www.anthro.psu.edu/>

weiss_lab/index.shtml. I thank Abby Bigham, Ellen Quillen, Ellen Weiss, and especially John Fleagle and Anne Buchanan, for critically reading this manuscript.

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MEETINGS OF INTEREST

September 3-7, 2007

2nd Congress of the European Federation for Primatology
Prague, Czech Republic

For more information: <http://www.unipv.it/webbio/efp/efp.htm>

September 14-16, 2007

9th Annual Conference of the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarcheology
Reading, UK

For more information: <http://www.babao.org.uk>

September 25, 2007

The 4th Stony Brook Human Evolution Symposium: Diversity in Australopithecus
Stony Brook, NY

For more information: <http://www.stonybrook.edu/humanevolution>

October 6, 2007

Evolutionary Anthropology at the Interface: A Celebration of Cliff Jolly's Contributions to the Field
New York, NY

For more information: <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/anthro/programs/csho/JollyConference.html>

October 17-20, 2007

67th Annual Meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology
Austin, TX

For more information: http://www.vertpaleo.org/future_meetings.htm

October 23-27, 2007

57th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics
San Diego, California

For more information: <http://www.ashg.org/genetics/ashg/2007/meeting/>

October 28-31, 2007

Geological Society of America Annual Meeting and Exposition
Denver, CO

For more information: <http://www.geosociety.org/meetings/2007>

November 28-December 2, 2007

106th American Association of Anthropologists Annual Meeting
Washington, DC

For more information: <http://www.aaanet.org/mtgs/mtgs.htm>

December 8-10, 2007

Second International Society of Zoological Sciences Symposium
Beijing, China

For more information: <http://www.globalzoology.org>

December 11-14, 2007

Gottinger Freilandtage: Primate Behavior and Human Universals
Göttingen, Germany

For more information: <http://www.soziobio.uni-goettingen.de/welcome.html>

January 2-6, 2008

Annual Meeting of the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology
San Antonio, TX

For more information: <http://www.sicb.org/meetings/2008/index/php3>

March 25-26, 2008

Annual Meeting of the Paleoanthropology Society
Vancouver, BC

For more information: <http://www.paleoanthro.org/meeting.htm>

March 25-29, 2008

68th Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology
Memphis, TN

For more information: <http://www.sfaa.net/sfaa2008.html>

March 26-30, 2008

73rd Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology
Vancouver, BC

For more information: <http://www.saa.org/meetings/index.html>

April 7-13, 2008

77th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists
Columbus, OH

For more information: <http://www.physanth.org/annmeet/>

June 4-8, 2008

20th Annual Meeting of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society
Kyoto, Japan

For more information: <http://beep.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~hbes2008/index.htm>

June 20-24, 2008

Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Evolution, the American Society of Naturalists, and the Society of Systematic Biologists
Minneapolis, MN

For more information: <http://www.evolutionarysociety.org/meetings.htm>

August 26-29, 2008

20th International Congress of Zoology
Paris, France

For more information: <http://www.globalzoology.org/index-new/icz.htm>