

## Media Coverage of the Scopes Trial and American Creationism



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On May 5, 1925, John Scopes was arrested for teaching the theory of evolution to students at Rhea County High School in Dayton, Tennessee. A young, high school substitute science teacher, Scopes planned to use his trial as a test case to challenge the recent Tennessee Butler Act. Passed by the Tennessee state legislature on March 13, 1925, the Butler Act had banned evolutionary theory from public school curriculums in favor of biblical accounts of man's origins. The advent of radio broadcasting and the expanding reach of newspapers brought an unprecedented amount of attention to *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* trial. Using sensationalist headlines and portraying larger than life characters, the media dramatized the Scopes Trial into a symbolic battle between Protestant Fundamentalism and scientific empiricism that would validate the theory of evolution in the public eye. The media's biased portrayal of the Scopes Trial created an initial sense of optimism that the Scopes Trial had dealt a metaphorical death blow to Fundamentalism and Creationism in America. Later historians, however, witnessed the revival of Creationism in the 1960s with the rise of Creation Science and its development into Neo-Creationism, which has continued into the 21st century. The media's sensationalist coverage of the Scopes Trial ultimately failed to sufficiently educate the American public on evolutionary theory, as evident in the persistence of Creationism and anti-evolutionism in America through the 20th century and into the modern day.

Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan partially grounded the fairly mythic disproportions of the trial in reality. As both were famous figures in America, their involvement in the trial triggered the media storm that would descend on Dayton, Tennessee. Clarence Darrow, born on April 1857 near Kinsman, Ohio, was a famed defense counsel, an avid defender of free speech, and a well-known atheist. Darrow offered Scopes free legal aid, hoping to attack Fundamentalism in his defense of the young teacher. Darrow described his purpose for the trial

as to, “focus the attention of the country on the programme of Mr. Bryan and the other fundamentalists in America.”<sup>1</sup>

William Jennings Bryan, born on March 19, 1860 in Salem, Illinois, was a Democratic and Populist leader, three-time presidential candidate, Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson, and a passionate champion of Fundamentalism and Creationism. Bryan lent his assistance to the prosecution in hopes of continuing his anti-evolution campaign.<sup>2</sup> Bryan died on July 26, 1925, just five days after the conclusion of the Scopes Trial. The press immediately capitalized on this surprising timing, declaring Bryan’s passing to be a symbolic death for Fundamentalism and the anti-evolution movement.<sup>3</sup>

### **Religion and Science in the Early 20th Century**

Anti-evolutionism originated from a division in the American Protestant Church between the traditional reading of the Bible and a new Modernist interpretation, developed in Germany in the 1880’s. In the 1890s, roughly two-thirds of the U.S. population belonged to the Protestant Church.<sup>4</sup> Protestant Fundamentalists believed in the inerrancy of the Bible; they reasoned that since the Bible is the literal word of God, it cannot contain errors and must be scientifically and historically true.<sup>5</sup> This theological perspective was expressed in a series of small, influential booklets called *The Fundamentals*, published between 1910 and 1915.<sup>6</sup> The rise of new

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<sup>1</sup> “Darrow’s Blunder”, 1925, pp. 18. and “Darrow Betrayed Himself”, 1925, pp. 8. in Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Parks, “Summer for the Scientists? The Scopes Trial and the Pedagogy of Journalism,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (2015): 445.

<sup>3</sup> Maren Wood, “The Monkey Trial Myth: Popular Culture Representations of the Scopes Trial,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 32, no. 2 (2002): 157.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion Vol.1, The Irony of It All 1893-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 153. in Edward Caudill, *The Roots of Bias : An Empiricist Press and Coverage of the Scopes Trial* (Columbia, SC: Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication, 1989), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Caudill, “The Roots of Bias,” 9.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The battle for God: A history of fundamentalism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 171. in Eugenie Scott, *Evolution vs. Creationism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 97-98.

scientific discoveries, however, contradicted many biblical concepts, such as the history of the Earth, the virgin birth of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. In particular, evolution and natural selection conflicted with the literal reading of Genesis on the origins of man and animals.

Clear definitions for evolution, natural selection and Creationism are necessary to understand this conflict between science and Fundamentalism. *Biological evolution* is the postulation that living things, “have their origin in other preexisting types and that the distinguishable differences are due to modifications in successive generations”.<sup>7</sup> The mechanism for these modifications is *natural selection*. In evolutionary terms, *natural selection* is the process by which a population with genetic variation is shaped by environmental conditions to produce offspring with the favored variations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, organisms evolve over time to adapt to their environment. *Creationism*, on the other hand, is broadly defined as the belief in Creation by a supernatural force.<sup>9</sup> *Creationism* is usually used specifically to refer to *special Creationism*, the belief that the Christian God created living things in their present form, reflecting a literal reading of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> A conflict arises because evolution views the world as dynamic and changing, as having a history, while Creationism views the world as static following the events of Creation by God.<sup>11</sup>

This contradiction inspired a theological movement called Modernism which began in Germany in the 1880s. Radically different from Fundamentalists, Modernists interpreted the Bible as a document affected by its historical and cultural context and therefore prone to human influence and error. Modernism was compatible with science, evolution and natural selection, since a Modernist reading of the Bible recognized that the Bible could be inaccurate. Acceptance

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<sup>7</sup> “Evolution,” Britannica Academic, accessed May 29, 2018.  
<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/evolution/106075>.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Scott, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, 80.

of this new Modernist view of the Bible varied among denominations, but many embraced evolution by the mid-1870s.<sup>12</sup> Scholars used science to reinforce theological positions such as proof of design, and many scientists referenced their religious views when discussing their scientific findings.<sup>13</sup>

The growing acceptance of science among religious intellectuals in the decades leading up to the Scopes Trial was seen as a grave threat to Fundamentalist Christians. Many Fundamentalists attributed German beliefs in racial superiority and the rise of eugenics during World War I directly to the newfound popularity of the Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.<sup>14</sup> Although most Germans actually rejected natural selection, which opposed their Teutonic ideal, nevertheless Fundamentalists were convinced that evolution was a threat.<sup>15</sup> In America, Fundamentalists encountered the encroachment of eugenics; by 1935, thirty-five states implemented restrictions on reproduction by forced segregation and sterilization of "eugenically unfit" persons.<sup>16</sup> After witnessing the ethnic cleansings of World War I and the development of the eugenics movement, American Fundamentalists pushed for anti-evolution state laws that they believed would protect civilization and religion from the evils of Darwinistic ideas.<sup>17</sup>

The growth of secondary education in America catalyzed the battle between science and Fundamentalism on the subject of education, which ultimately culminated in the Scopes Trial. After Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, evolution and natural selection had slowly entered high school textbooks in the years leading up to the trial. Although this initially took the form of theistic interpretations of evolution, textbook publishers took a more secular,

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<sup>12</sup> Scott, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Scott, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Scott, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Larson, "Summer for the Gods," 27.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, 99.

faithfully Darwinian approach in the 20th century.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the high school enrollment in Tennessee rose from less than 10,000 in 1910 to over 50,000 in 1925, the same year as the Scopes Trial.<sup>19</sup> This increase in high school attendance exposed more of the younger generation to evolution.<sup>20</sup> As historian Edward Caudill describes, “The emergent fundamentalism was headed for collision with the liberal view of the compatibility of science and religion”.<sup>21</sup> In Tennessee, this collision manifested in the passage of the Butler Act in 1925, an anti-evolution law designed to push back against the liberal, Modernist interpretations of the Bible.

### **The Tennessee Butler Act**

Section 1. *Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee*, 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.<sup>22</sup>

Clear and resolute in its wording, the Butler Act banned evolution from public schools, unwittingly setting the stage for a cultural clash between rural traditionalism and urban modernism. This conflict manifested in the Scopes Trial in the debate between Creationism and evolutionism.

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<sup>18</sup> Larson, “Summer for the Gods,” 23.

<sup>19</sup> Larson, “Summer for the Gods,” 25.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Caudill, “The Roots of Bias,” 11.

<sup>22</sup> Sprague de Camp, *The Great Monkey Trial* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1968), 2.

## The Scopes Trial

Hoping to educate the American public about evolution and challenge the new law, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) agreed to sponsor any individual who intentionally violated the Butler Act. Founded in response to American federal restrictions on civil liberties during World War I, the ACLU hoped to defend academic freedoms by supporting a willing defendant.<sup>23</sup> In addition to their legal intentions for the trial, historian Perry Parks outlines the societal goals of the ACLU as, “...to defuse conflict between science and religion, to help protect academics from legislative interference, and to educate the public on evolution science”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the ACLU viewed public perception as an key consideration for the trial. With a clear directive in mind, the Scopes’ supporters sought to capture the attention of the American public by overplaying the importance of a simple trial. An ACLU press release stated, “We are looking for a Tennessee teacher who is willing to accept our services in testing this law in the courts...Our lawyers think a friendly test case can be arranged without costing a teacher his or her job. Distinguished counsel have volunteered their services. All we need now is a willing client. By this test we hope to render a real service to freedom of teaching throughout the country, for we do not believe the law will be sustained”.<sup>25</sup>

John Scopes volunteered to act as the defendant and was promptly arrested on May 5, 1925. The trial began on July 10, 1925, and only lasted 11 days, ending on July 21, when Scopes was convicted and fined \$100. Scopes’ lawyers appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which upheld the constitutionality of the Butler Act. Scopes, however, was acquitted on a legal technicality.

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<sup>23</sup> “ACLU History”, accessed May 21, 2018. <https://www.aclu.org/about/aclu-history>.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Ginger, *Six Days or Forever? Tennessee V. John Thomas Scopes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 87. in Parks, 444.

<sup>25</sup> de Camp, 8.

From a legal standpoint, John Scopes' conviction was inevitable; the law clearly banned the teaching of evolution, and Scopes readily admitted in court to teaching a chapter about evolution from the class textbook, *Civic Biology: Presented in Problems*. The ACLU, however, was more interested in challenging the Butler Act and defending evolution before the courts and the American people.<sup>26</sup> In reality, Scopes could not remember if he had actually taught that specific chapter. He volunteered the information anyway, since Scopes and his supporters ultimately hoped to appeal his inevitable guilty verdict before the Tennessee Supreme Court. Regardless, Scopes and the ACLU at least succeeded in attracting the media and its sensationalist coverage of the trial.

### **The Rise of Media in the Early 20th Century**

The consolidation of newspapers and magazines in the early 20th century broadened the reach of the media, bringing it further into the daily life of the average American. Addressing the Industrial Revolution's impact on America, historian Frederick Lewis Allen wrote that, "Mass production was not confined to automobiles; there was mass production in news and ideas as well".<sup>27</sup> The number of daily newspaper titles actually decreased from 2,580 to 2,001 between 1914 and 1926 due to consolidation.<sup>28</sup> Similarly the number of Sunday newspaper titles decreased from 571 to 541 during the same time period.<sup>29</sup> The number of newspaper subscriptions, however, grew from 2.6 million to 33 million between 1870 and 1920; this resulted in an increase from one newspaper per day for every twenty people to one newspaper for every four Americans by 1920.<sup>30</sup> In summary, consolidation allowed publishers to expand their

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<sup>26</sup> Wood, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's* (n.d.: Harper & Row, 1931), 162.

<sup>28</sup> Allen, 163.

<sup>29</sup> Allen, 163.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Gentzkow, Edward L. Glaeser, and Claudia Goldin, *The Rise of the Fourth Estate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 24.



influence to a national audience.<sup>31</sup> The Scopes Trial captured the attention of the American public, with roughly two hundred reporters travelling to Dayton, Tennessee.<sup>32</sup>

The invention of the radio also played a crucial role in the media coverage of the trial. Developed in the early 20th century alongside newspapers, magazines and motion pictures, the radio was the “first electronic mass medium.”<sup>33</sup> This new technology enabled the human voice to be sent through radio waves across great distances instantaneously, allowing the entire country to listen in real-time to the events of the courtroom.<sup>34</sup>

The media publicized the events of the trial on a nationwide level, though their coverage was heavily biased towards the side of evolution and science. Historian Edward Caudill argues that the press favored the empiricism of science because it complimented the development of fact journalism in the 1920s.<sup>35</sup> This style of journalism was oriented towards objectivity, judging events solely on verifiable facts. Belief in the verity of Christianity and the Bible relies on faith, not objective observations of the physical world. In summary, Caudill writes, “Thus, the press favored verifiable fact, not facts based on unique, individual revelation, however rational the latter system may have been for its proponents”.<sup>36</sup> In this way, the widespread bias of the media towards the side of science helped contribute to early perceptions that the trial was a victory against the Fundamentalism and the anti-evolution movement in America.

More than just a bias, the press hoped its reach would educate the American public on evolution. Complementary to the goals of Scopes’ supporters, the press attempted to, “cover

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<sup>31</sup> Allen, 163.

<sup>32</sup> R.M. Cornelius, *Their Stage Drew All the World: A New Look at the Scopes Evolution Trial* (n.d.: Tennessee Historical Quarterly, 1981), 132. in Parks, 445.

<sup>33</sup> “Radio”, Britannica Academic, accessed May 12, 2018  
<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/radio/345387>

<sup>34</sup> “Radio”, Britannica Academic, accessed May 12, 2018  
<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/radio/345387>

<sup>35</sup> Caudill, “The Roots of Bias,” 15.

<sup>36</sup> Caudill, “The Roots of Bias,” 15.

science in a way that satisfies scientists or meets the public's pedagogical needs".<sup>37</sup> Historian Perry Parks argues that adults, having graduated from school, rely on newspapers to learn new information.<sup>38</sup> In this way, news media has acted as a "vital pedagogical tool since at least the early twentieth century".<sup>39</sup> For example, on July 12, 1925, a New York Times article anticipated that the trial would, "[give] scientific men a better opportunity than they have ever had to bring their teaching home to millions".<sup>40</sup> Similarly, during the trial a public librarian told the American Library Association that the press was, "the greatest and most potent of all educational influences that this country enjoys".<sup>41</sup> The optimism of news outlets established the Scopes Trial as the symbolic demise of Creationism, although they were ultimately unsuccessful in discrediting the anti-evolution movement.

Although the media was expected to be the vehicle to glorify modern science, it failed to accurately convey the subtleties of evolution, assuming that the American public possessed an adequate science education.<sup>42</sup> Reflecting on the failures of the media, Edward Caudill laments, "It has never been easy for the press to cover science in a way that satisfies scientists or meets the public's pedagogical needs. Scientific research is nuanced, incremental, and ambiguous, and journalism seeks to be simple, immediate, and concrete".<sup>43</sup> In 1920, a few years before the Scopes Trial, almost two million students attended high school in America. Just thirty years prior in 1890, however, only 200,000 students attended high school, revealing a generational lack of

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<sup>37</sup> Parks, 447.

<sup>38</sup> Parks, 446.

<sup>39</sup> Parks, 446.

<sup>40</sup> "One Compensation," *New York Times* (New York, NY), July 12, 1925, pp. E6.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1925/07/12/104178681.html?pageNumber=56>

<sup>41</sup> Parks, 446.

<sup>42</sup> Parks, 450.

<sup>43</sup> Dorothy Nelkin, *Selling Science: How the Press Covers Science and Technology* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1995), 5-6, 24, 52, 61, 105. in Edward Caudill, *Intelligently Designed: How Creationists Built the Campaign Against Evolution* (n.d.: University of Illinois Press; 1st edition, 2013), 88. in Parks, 447.

scientific education.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the media failed to educate the older generation, many of whom lacked a concrete understanding of science. For example, they misunderstood scientific vocabulary such as the term “theory”, interpreting it as a “guess”, a conjecture made before data is taken instead of after.<sup>45</sup> Caudill, writing during the rise of Creation Science in the 1960s, argues that, “Journalists missed an unprecedented opportunity in 1925 to teach Americans about a complex but fundamental scientific theory that underlies all biology. They missed this opportunity as a result of professional detachment, improper assumptions, and lingering news values that subordinate knowledge to titillation.”<sup>46</sup> Not only did the press fail to convey the science of the trial, but it distorted the events of the trial in pursuit of profit over verity.

The 1920s and 1930s ushered in a new age of sensationalism and advertising that fundamentally altered how the media presented information. Magazines and newspapers realized that dramatic headlines and melodramatic language attracted more readers and greater profits.<sup>47</sup> As Frank Allen wrote in 1931, “The national mind had become as never before an instrument upon which a few men could play”.<sup>48</sup> Although fact journalism strived for greater objectivity, journalists in the 1920s believed that interpretation was necessary to provide “meaningful context for mere facts”.<sup>49</sup> In other words, as long as the media discussed the “facts” of the Scopes Trial, the conclusions drawn from the “facts” were up for interpretation. As a result, the media was free to dramatize the events of the trial, shaping a narrative of science’s triumph over Creationism, a myth that would pervade through American history. This media narrative

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<sup>44</sup> Larson, “Summer for the Gods,” 24.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Caudill, *Darwinism in the Press: the Evolution of an Idea* (Columbia, SC: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1989) 137.

<sup>46</sup> Parks, 447.

<sup>47</sup> Allen, 163-164.

<sup>48</sup> Allen, 164.

<sup>49</sup> Caudill, “The Roots of Bias,” 15.

overrode its efforts to accurately cover evolutionary theory, and it obscured the endurance of Creationism after the Scopes Trial.

### **The Media Coverage of the Scopes Trial**

Disregarding their pedagogical intentions for the trial, the media instead presented the heated debate between William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow as a melodramatic symbol of modern urban culture's natural succession of rural traditionalism.<sup>50</sup> The legal implications of the trial were irrelevant because, "the press found drama in Bryan's futile struggle and Darrow's predetermined victory. Conflict, not meaning, was the news".<sup>51</sup> Instead of aiding evolutionism in a methodical and objective manner, the media focused on the trial as an inevitable victory for Modernism against the anti-evolution movement and presented anti-evolutionists as blind and uneducated followers, merely obstructions to the progress of the nation. Their gross exaggerations did little to sway rigid believers of Fundamentalism, resulting in the survival of anti-evolutionism after the Scopes Trial.

The media represented John Scopes as young, innocent, and modest, the moral hero of America.<sup>52</sup> The *New Yorker* described Scopes as, "young for his years - more immature than his pictures make him out to be - simply a shy, likable, sensible ... boy".<sup>53</sup> The *Atlanta Constitution* referred to him as, "Johnny Scopes", framing him as an amiable and wholesome lad.<sup>54</sup> Although the media emphasized his youth, they were careful to avoid branding him as naive and maintained Scopes' integrity as an expert in science. Although Scopes was only a general science teacher, newspapers such as the *New York Times*, soon began to label him a, "...youthful

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<sup>50</sup> Wood, 159.

<sup>51</sup> Caudill, "Darwinism in the Press," 110-111.

<sup>52</sup> Wood, 152.

<sup>53</sup> "Dayton, Tennessee - A Summary," *The New Yorker* (New York, NY), July 11, 1925. pp. 9. in Wood, 152.

<sup>54</sup> "Tolerance Marks Gathering for Test of Evolution Law," *The Atlanta Constitution* (Dunwoody, GA), July 11, 1925. pp. 3. in Wood, 152.

teacher of biology”.<sup>55</sup> The exaggeration of Scopes’ expertise and the emphasis on his role as an educator raised him as a stoic defender of free speech and academic freedoms. Furthermore, the bright-eyed youth of Scopes was repeatedly emphasized to confirm his side as that of the modern age and progress towards the future.

In stark contrast, Bryan was portrayed as a large, lumbering, aged man, a hulking symbol of dated rural traditionalism. The media emphasized the age difference between Scopes and Bryan to argue that anti-evolution was an ignorant step backwards into the past.<sup>56</sup> When reporting Bryan’s appearance, *Time* unflatteringly attributed to him a, “perspiring countenance, an impressive pith helmet covering the bald, pink dome of his head”.<sup>57</sup> Depicting Bryan as the antithesis to civilization itself, cartoons such as “The Rise and Fall of Man” featured the evolutionary progression of man, starting with the Neanderthal, transitioning to the modern man, and ending with a Neanderthal-like Bryan.<sup>58</sup> The idea that Bryan represented an obstacle to the progress of humanity was echoed by George Bernard Shaw, an Irish critic, whose words were reprinted in the *New York Times*. Shaw declared that, “[p]eople who have no conception of evolution have no future, no hope” and “what Bryan calls fundamentalism I call infantilism”.<sup>59</sup> The St. Louis Post-Dispatch often illustrated the ignorance and denial attributed to Bryan: one of its cartoons depicted a figure with their head buried in the ground, surrounded by various science textbooks and a globe.<sup>60</sup> The *New Yorker* described Dayton as a place where, “even the most

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<sup>55</sup> “Scopes Here, Shyly Defends Evolution,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 7, 1925, pp. 1. in Wood, 152.

<sup>56</sup> Wood, 154.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “Dorothy, It’s Really Oz.” *Time* (New York, NY), August 23, 1999. pp. 39. in Wood, 153.

<sup>58</sup> “The Rise and Fall of Man”, 1925, pp. 3. in Wood, 153. (see Fig. 2)

<sup>59</sup> “Shaw Calls Ideas of Bryan ‘Infantilism’,” *New York Times* (New York, NY) June 13, 1925. pp. 1. in Wood, 153-154.

<sup>60</sup> “The Truth Seeker,” *St. Louis-Post Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), July 22, 1925. pp. 14. in Wood, 153. (see Fig. 1)

primitive forms of civilization [have] never penetrated" and the *San Francisco Chronicle* declared that science would be a "torch to guide Tennessee out of darkness".<sup>61</sup>

Lastly, the media presented Bryan's unexpected death as a key point in their elaborate narrative that Creationism and the anti-evolution movement died with the Scopes Trial. H.L. Mencken dramatically reported that, "Bryan committed suicide, as a legend as well as in the body. He staggered from the rustic court ready to die, and he staggered from it ready to be forgotten, save as a character in a third-rate farce".<sup>62</sup> In summary, the media used the convenient timing of Bryan's death to cement the Scopes Trial's legacy as the destruction of Creationism and the affirmation of modern science and the progress of the country.

### **The Cultural Impact of the Media Coverage**

From the mainstream, American public's perspective, the Scopes Trial tied the anti-evolution movement to the negative stereotypes often associated with conservative religious views. The media framed anti-evolutionists as uneducated, religious fanatics who were beyond reason. Dramatized aspects of the trial such as Bryan's death affirmed their belief that the trial was a sure victory for modern science. In this way, the media's coverage erroneously convinced the American public that Fundamentalism had died with the Scopes Trial

This false narrative inspired the American play, *Inherit the Wind*, in 1955 and its later film adaptation in 1960. Written by Jerome Laurence and Robert E. Lee, the play was introduced as a work of fiction that was based on real events. Maren L. Wood argues that the play, "broadly portrayed the essential elements of the myth".<sup>63</sup> While most of the trial's fame is due to the

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<sup>61</sup> "Into Darkest Tennessee," *The New Yorker* (New York, NY), June 6, 1925. pp. 1. and "9 Wise Men Prepared to Back Defence." *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA), July 16, 1925. pp. 1. in Wood, 154.

<sup>62</sup> H.L. Mencken, "Editorial," *The American Mercury* (New York, NY), October 1925, pp. 15. in Wood, 154.

<sup>63</sup> Wood, 150.

movie *Inherit the Wind*, the movie served more as an allegory of McCarthyism, “portraying antievolutionists as a mob representing the repressive potential of the emotional masses.”<sup>64</sup>

Addressing the impact of the play, historian Edward Larson observes that, “[I]t may not have been accurate history, but it was brilliant theater - and it all but replaced the actual trial in the nation's memory”.<sup>65</sup> The media’s portrayal of the Scopes Trial endured in the national consciousness by its integration into cultural entities like *Inherit the Wind*.

From a legal point of view, the anti-evolution movement did seem to have died with the conclusion of the Scopes Trial. From 1921 to 1929 the outcome of the trial was promising. At least 37 anti-evolution bills were brought before state legislatures, but only 4 were passed into law.<sup>66</sup> However, the Tennessee Supreme Court concluded the Scopes Trial by affirming the constitutionality of the Butler Act. Furthermore, anti-evolution laws were not declared unconstitutional until 1967.<sup>67</sup>

The media narrative of the Scopes Trial is evident even in famed historian Frederick Allen’s book, “Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s”. Published in 1931, a few years after the Scopes Trial, the book incorporated many of the misconceptions and dramatized aspects created by the media’s coverage of the trial. Allen recorded that Scopes was a biology teacher, that Dayton was “backward” in its religious fanaticism, and that the trial directly caused Bryan’s death.<sup>68</sup> Addressing the lasting impact of the trial, Allen concluded that, “Theoretically, Fundamentalism had won, for the law stood. Yet really Fundamentalism had lost. Legislators might go on passing anti-evolution laws, and in the hinterlands the pious might still keep their religion locked in a science-proof compartment of their minds; but civilized opinion everywhere

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<sup>64</sup> Constance Areson Clark, “Evolution for John Doe: Pictures, the Public, and the Scopes Trial Debate,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 4 (2001): 1277.

<sup>65</sup> Larson, “Summer for the Gods,” 241. in Wood, 150.

<sup>66</sup> Caudill, “Darwinism in the Press,” 115.

<sup>67</sup> Wood, 157.

<sup>68</sup> Wood, 150.

had regarded the Dayton trial with amazement and amusement, and the slow drift away from Fundamentalist certainty continued”.<sup>69</sup> Frederick Allen, a widely read historian, demonstrated how the media’s portrayal became incorporated into the historical narrative following the conclusion of the Scopes Trial.

While many Americans believed that the anti-evolution movement had largely receded, in reality, the movement merely turned its attention to school boards instead of state laws.<sup>70</sup> Historian Eugenie Scott demonstrates how America’s decentralized educational system allowed the anti-evolution movement to hide within school board regulations of local school districts. America developed from East to West, with settlers continually pushed inward, leading to frontier communities that were largely isolated from state or federal influence. Scott summarizes the development of the American frontier with the phrase, “People preceded government”.<sup>71</sup> These local communities were free to decide when, where, and how their schools would be constructed and run. These decisions were decided by locally elected school boards, which could be influenced by the beliefs of its members. As a result, the anti-evolution movement was able to transition into local regulations in locations where Fundamentalists held political power. Scott argues that, “Neither fundamentalism nor the anti-evolutionist campaign disappeared after 1925, though the latter abated somewhat. This was primarily because anti-evolutionism became largely unnecessary: evolution remained effectively absent from science instruction until the 1960s”.<sup>72</sup> Following the Scopes Trial, the anti-evolution movement turned its attention away from direct legal control of school curriculums and instead developed into local education regulations, which were subsequently less visible in early analyses of the Scopes Trial.

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<sup>69</sup> Allen, 178.

<sup>70</sup> George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American culture: The shaping of twentieth-century evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 184. in Scott, 102.

<sup>71</sup> Scott, 93.

<sup>72</sup> Scott, 103.



Although these local regulations were obscured from the mainstream perspective, they played a crucial role in the omission of the evolution from science textbooks until the 1960s. As Fundamentalist interests took hold in Southern schools, Southern teachers increasingly bought textbooks that briefly covered or omitted chapters on evolution.<sup>73</sup> Textbook publishers soon felt an indirect yet formidable economic pressure to either modify their chapters on evolution to become less offensive to Fundamentalists, or remove the chapters entirely.<sup>74</sup> These textbooks tailored specifically towards Southern markets were sold in the North as well as the South.<sup>75</sup> Since evolution was soon absent from textbooks, it disappeared from the classrooms across the nation. By 1930, evolution was omitted in roughly 70 percent of American classrooms.<sup>76</sup> Despite this staggering statistic, the media coverage of the Scopes Trial was largely successful in convincing the masses that modern science had been victorious.

This narrative, however, was a media fabrication that reflected America's optimism in science and the power of the press. The popular narrative of the Scopes Trial, however, would be shown to be a myth in time, for the dormancy of Creationism would eventually be broken by a small metal sphere.

### **The Development of Creation Science and Neo-Creationism in the Late 20th Century**

Competition with the Soviet Union in the 1960s provoked the return of Creationism in the form of Creation Science. Sputnik I, the first artificial satellite, was launched into space by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957. The success of Sputnik I shattered American confidence and heightened the tension between American democracy and Soviet Communism. In response to this national embarrassment, the American government decided to launch several

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<sup>73</sup> Scott, 103.

<sup>74</sup> Scott, 103.

<sup>75</sup> Judith Grabiner and Peter Miller, "Effects of the Scopes Trial" *Science* 185 (1974) 832-837. in Scott, 103.

<sup>76</sup> Edward J. Larson, *Trial and error* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 85. in Scott, 103.

investigations to review and improve scientific institutions, such as increasing funding for scientific research and revamping public school science curriculums.<sup>77</sup> A new government-funded Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS) examined American high school textbooks and found an appalling, widespread absence of evolution.<sup>78</sup> The shocking discovery prompted the BSCS to release three textbooks in 1963, all of which included evolution as the foundation of biology. Up-to-date with modern science and backed by the authority of the federal government, these textbooks created an educational revolution that spread to the commercial publishers, who began to reintroduce evolution into their textbooks.<sup>79</sup>

Although the censorship of textbooks following the Scopes Trial temporarily pacified Fundamentalism in America, the reintroduction of evolution in the early 1960s sparked a resurgence of Creationism and the development of Creation Science. Just as how the introduction of evolution into schools in the 1920s outraged Fundamentalists, similarly religious conservatives resisted the reintroduction of evolution in the 1960s.<sup>80</sup> The anti-evolution movement present during the Scopes Trial had focused on the heretical implications of evolution, and the immorality that science was thought to breed. By the 1960s, however, science had only grown in prestige. Therefore, Fundamentalists sought to transform Creationism into a pseudo-science in this new creationist resurgence. Since the teaching of Creationism in schools would violate the First Amendment for its clear religious ties, they attempted to combine theology and science into Creation Science, an alternative science that could be taught alongside regular science and should be given “equal time” in school curriculums. Proponents of Creation Science created sample legislation called Ellwanger bills which would require the inclusion

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<sup>77</sup> Scott, 104.

<sup>78</sup> Scott, 104.

<sup>79</sup> Scott, 104.

<sup>80</sup> Ronald Numbers, *The creationists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1992. in Scott, 105.

Creation Science in schools to maintain a “balanced” curriculum.<sup>81</sup> They succeeded in introducing these Ellwanger bills in at least 27 states by the early 1980s, although only Arkansas and Louisiana passed the bill.

The development of Creation Science in the 1960s resulted in a clear shift in the historical narrative surrounding the outcome of the Scopes Trial. The revival of Creationism in Creation Science, although diverging slightly from the Scopes-era anti-evolution movement, nevertheless suggested to later historians that the incompatibility of science and religion in America did indeed survive past the Scopes Trial. In 1989, historian Edward Caudill writes, “[I]n the late 1970s and into the 1980s, evolution commonly is presented as the antithesis to fundamentalist Christianity...the pattern shows a significant part of American society remains ill at ease with the implications and values of Darwinism, and perhaps even uncomfortable with science generally”.<sup>82</sup> Caudill and other more contemporary historians are able to recognize the popular Scopes Trial narrative as a fabrication created by the media because they have sight of recent developments in Creationism. By this observation, modern historians are able to criticize the media coverage of the Scopes Trial and its failure to properly educate the American public.

The transition from Creation Science to Neo-Creationism further revealed the falsities of the Scopes Trial media narrative. Although the equal time laws were eventually struck down in Arkansas and Louisiana, these cases left constitutional loopholes open for secular, “alternative sciences”. Consequently Fundamentalists removed all religious language such as “creation” or “creator” from Creation Science and positioned their new theories as “scientific alternatives” to evolution. Historian Eugenie Scott terms this new occurrence as “Neo-Creationism”, defining it as, “The avoidance of Creation Science terminology and the development of Creation

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<sup>81</sup> Scott, 113.

<sup>82</sup> Caudill, “Darwinism in the Press,” 139.

Science-like alternatives to evolution, plus the renaming of the content of Creation Science as evidence against evolution”.<sup>83</sup> Scott argues that Neo-Creationism has threatened evolution and science through the 20th century and into the present day, a testament to the persistence of Creationism, the failure of the Scopes Trial and the fabrications of the media.<sup>84</sup> In this way, the development of Creation Science and Neo-Creationism in the later half of the century is necessary to fully understand the survival of Creationism following the biased media coverage of the Scopes Trial.

Analysis of the Scopes Trial and its corresponding media coverage not only illustrates the pedagogical power of bias in the press, but it also explains America’s unique attachment to anti-evolutionism. Survey data show that the percentage of American adults who accept the theory of evolution has decreased from 45% to 40% over the past 20 years.<sup>85</sup> More comprehensive surveys conducted in 1993 and 2003 provided five answers of varying degrees of uncertainty as opposed to a dichotomous true-false question; the results from these surveys reveal that only 14% of American adults believe that evolution is “definitely true” (80% or more in Sweden, Iceland, Denmark and France; 78% in Japan).<sup>86</sup> Conversely, studies in 2002 and 2003 show that one third of American adults believe that evolution is “absolutely false”, a significantly higher proportion compared to the statistics taken from Japan and nine European nations (7% in Denmark, France and Great Britain; 15% in the Netherlands).<sup>87</sup> Eugenie Scott attributes this pattern to America’s unique historical ties to the Fundamentalism and Creationism.<sup>88</sup> While Fundamentalism in American has prevented widespread acceptance of

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<sup>83</sup> Scott, 119.

<sup>84</sup> Scott, 119.

<sup>85</sup> Excepted from Jon D Miller, Eugenie C Scott, and Shinji Okamoto. 2006, “Public Acceptance of Evolution,” *Science* 313 (5788): 765 LP-766. in Scott, 313.

<sup>86</sup> Excepted from Miller in Scott, 313.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

evolution, Protestants in Europe have accepted the liberal, Modernist reading of the Bible and thus see no conflict between evolution and their faith.<sup>89</sup>

Although the media held a biased interest in educating their audience with objective, fact-based coverage of the trial, they instead crafted a theatrical narrative to captivate the American public. Mistakenly assuming that the American public was well educated in science, the media missed an opportunity to validate evolution through unbiased, accurate and instructive reporting. The failures of the Scopes Trial coverage are mirrored by modern coverage of more recent evolutionary controversies such as intelligent design movement.<sup>90</sup> The media's historical inability to cover science in a competent manner is apparent in the vast disparity between America and other nations in accepting evolution. The cultural legacy of the Scopes Trial illustrates how the presence of Fundamentalism and the inadequacies of sensationalist media coverage have established the unusual endurance of Creationism in America.

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Scott, 306.

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## Appendix

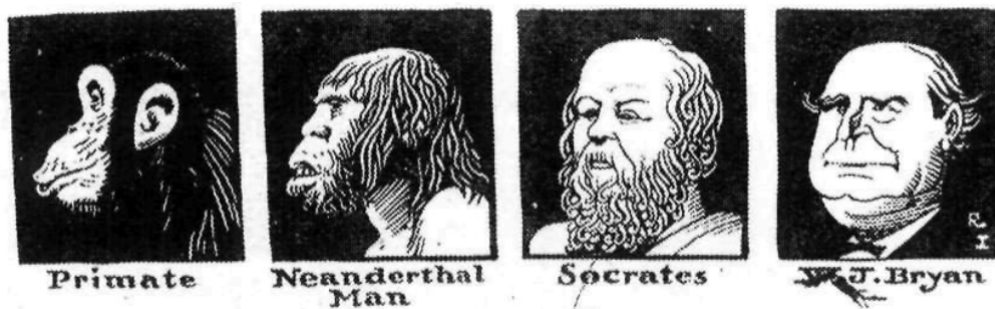
Fig. 1. and Cover Page.





"The Truth Seeker." *St. Louis-Post Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), July 22, 1925. pp. 14.

Fig. 2.



"The Rise and Fall of Man." *The New Yorker* (New York, NY) June 6, 1925. pp. 3.