

## **John T. Scopes 1900-1970 ("The Monkey Trial")**

John T. Scopes has died of cancer. Who was John T. Scopes? He was a rather small and bespectacled person, and at one time he taught biology and was physical instructor at Dayton, Tennessee. He became famous as the defendant at the "Monkey Trial" held in Dayton in the 1925. Scopes stood trial as he had violated the anti-evolution law. He was found guilty and lost his school job and moved to Louisiana to work as a geologist for a petroleum company, from which he retired several years ago. Until last July, he had remained active, touring the U.S. to deliver lectures: on the trail, one of the strangest trials in American history. He published a book about his experiences and several films have been made of the trial.

"Better wipe out all the schools than undermine belief in the Bible by permitting the teaching of evolution." (1)

The 1920's were the years of the great and intense battles of fundamentalism versus liberalism. (In this article, I identify fundamentalism with the conservative wing of the church.) The fight for the faith "delivered once and for all to the saints" was carried on not only within the confines of churches, colleges and universities, but it was carried over into the political arena as well. The target of its attacks was the teaching of evolution in the public schools. (2) The fundamentalists believed: that it was not proper to teach evolution to people who were not able to make up their own minds as yet. (3) They believed that the Scriptures ought to be the foundation of education also in the field of science. As a consequence, fundamentalists in a number of States attempted to pass laws prohibiting the teaching of the theory of evolution.

A total of 37 anti-evolution bills were introduced into 20 legislatures. But only four were passed. In Tennessee, Senator J. W. Butler was instrumental in introducing the bill prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the schools. This bill was passed in the House by a majority of 71 to 5, the Senate rejected it at first but at reconsideration accepted it with a vote of 24 to 6. In March, 1925, Governor A. Peay signed the State's first anti-evolution law. This law, which was overturned in 1968, forbade to teach "Any theory that denies the story of the divine creation of man as taught by the Bible and teaches instead that man descended from a lower form of animal." (4) John T. Scopes' breaking of this law resulted in a court case.

"Defenders of evolution, however, share with its opponents responsibility for passage of these restrictive laws. They, too, substituted epithets for arguments . . . Analysis of their attitude shows that many of the defenders of 'freedom' were actually striving for freedom of science only, while denying freedom to fundamentalism. Intolerance was by no means all on the side of the anti-evolutionists. President Faunce of Brown wrote:

"The conflict of science and theology is really a conflict between the open mind and the closed mind in both theology and science . . . dogmatics are to be found both in the pulpit and in the laboratory." (5)

John T. Scopes taught in Dayton, a rather small town of about 2,000 residents with nine churches. Scopes disapproved of Butler's law, but did not test the law until Mr. George Rappelyea, the thirty-one year old manager of the Cumberland Coal and Iron Company got involved.

Mr. Rappelyea, who despised fundamentalism, had seen an announcement that the American Civil Liberties Union of New York City, had declared itself willing to back any school teacher who would test the anti-evolution law. Mr. Rappelyea pointed out to his friend Scopes that he was violating the law by using Hunter's Civic Biology, which had been the standard textbook in Tennessee for already five years by then. <sup>(6)</sup> Rappelyea and Scopes hit upon a plan of action which would get the ball rolling and expose the anti-evolution law in court. Scopes would lecture on some aspect of evolution and Rappelyea would file a complaint with the officials. Scopes taught from the Civic Biology book, Rappelyea complained and Scopes was brought to the justices of the peace, who placed him in the hands of a grand jury. And in this way "the two young men had set the stage for the most bizarre trial of the decade." <sup>(7)</sup>

"So intense is Southern hostility against Northern conceptions of science and faith that one can readily conceive of a time when the whole country will be divided by a deep and abiding schism, with New York as the capital for the Modernists and Florida as the headquarters of the Fundamentalists." <sup>(8)</sup>

July 10, 1925, was the day set for the opening of the trial, which would go into history as the "Monkey Trial." As the day of the trial drew near, in Dayton, "a carnival atmosphere" pervaded the community. <sup>(9)</sup> Norman Furniss describes the scene as follows: "A spirit of intense excitement pervaded Dayton on the eve of the trial. Emotions became so strained that, when George Rappelyea arose in a civic boosters' meeting to deliver an impromptu address in behalf of evolution, the town barber fell upon him, crying, 'you can't call my family monkeys', and sank his teeth into the mining engineer. On all roads into Dayton posters appealed to, the skeptical: 'Where Will You Spend Eternity?' and 'You Need God In Your Business'; others invited: 'Sweethearts, Come to Jesus,.' Hot dog, lemonade, and sandwich stands sprang up along the sidewalks. Little cotton apes appeared in windows, and stores offered pins reading 'Your Old Man's a Monkey.' Along with the swarm of reporters that descended upon the town came publicity seekers and religious zealots of very description. Circus performers, hoping to be cabled to testify at the trial, brought two chimpanzees. Lewis Levi Johnson Marshall, 'Absolute Ruler of the Entire World, without Military, Naval, or other Physical Force'; Elmer Chubb, who could withstand the bite of any venomous serpent; Wilber Gleen Voliva, exponent the flat-earth school of geography, and many others came to Dayton to peddle their especial anodynes." <sup>(10)</sup>

The judge at the trial was John Be said, for their intolerance. " T. Raulston, a very godly man, who opened his courts sessions with prayer. Actually, the main characters at the trial were Clarence Darrow, the lawyer representing Mr. Scopes and the honourable William Jennings Bryan, assistant prosecutor for the State of Tennessee. Scopes would have never received "fame" without the presence of these two well known Americans.

And the trial would not have gone down in history "as the most bizarre" if Clarence Darrow had not made such an arrogant attack upon the Bible and the Tittle opportunity Bryan, was afforded to make his defence. (11) Actually, Christian orthodoxy was placed on trial. And this phenomenon was most unfortunate and a theological impossibility, to say the least. How can matters of faith be decided in court?

### **A. Clarence Stewart Darrow 1857-1938**

"This was the first case in his of career in which he was profoundly convinced that there were not two sides, but only one; that the Fundamentalists were an insidious potential for destruction; that there was no tolerant word that could aid for their intolerance. (12)

Mr. Darrow achieved great reputation as a criminal lawyer. He was an agnostic, with a sensitive social concern. (13) This was the only similarity he had with his opponent William Jennings Bryan. Darrow had been in conflict with Bryan already prior to 1925. In the early summer of 1923 they had fought some skirmishes about evolution. Bryan had launched an attack against the theory of evolution which was published by the *Chicago Tribune*. Darrow had replied in a letter to the *Tribune* which was published in the number-two column of the front page. (13) Bryan did not take up the challenge, and I believe rightly so. He replied "I decline to turn aside to enter into controversy with those who reject the Bible as Mr. Darrow does." (14) When Scopes was charged, Darrow offered his services without charging a fee. The reason offered: "For the first, the last, the only time in my life, I volunteered my services in a case. I did this because I really wanted to take part in it." (15) Darrow's only purpose for entering the trial was revenge. At the trial he flew the fifty questions in Bryans face: the questions, which Bryan declined to answer in the *Tribune*. (16) Darrow went to the trial as a crusader for what he believed to be a great challenge to the "freedom" of education. (17)

Darrow accused Bryan of bigotry and intolerance. But he was bigoted and intolerant himself and so is his biographer Irving Stone. Mr. Stone's work is highly opinionated and he paints a picture of Bryan which is grossly unfair. He accused Bryan of seeking to gain political power. "He hoped to turn Fundamentalism into a political movement of which he would be the head; he was confident that garbed in this righteous cause he could become so powerful that he could dictate the choice of President, congressman, governor; control the school, the university, the press," (18) Mr. Darrow achieved fame through his role at the trial, but he did not help the cause he championed. As a matter of fact, "his advocacy of evolution and assault of Fundamentalism enabled the prosecution to identify science and atheism." (19)

The trial was routine until Bryan was called to the witness stand and unfortunately Bryan accepted the challenge. "The cruel tactics" (20) of Darrow triumphed. And Bryan's greatest disappointment was that the gross examination could not be continued'. He had already drafted a rebuttal but was denied the chance to deliver it.

## B. William Jennings Bryan 1860-1925

"My mother taught me at home until I was ten; then my parents sent me to public school until I was fifteen; then I spent two years in an academy preparing for college; then four years in college and then two years in a law school. After nearly twenty years of schooling I took part in my last 'commencement,' and then I began to learn, and have been learning ever since. I have accumulated something of history, something of science, a bit of poetry and philosophy, and I have read speeches without number. I have accumulated a large amount of information on politics . . ." (21)

William Jennings Bryan was born in Salem, a small town in southern Illinois, to which his family had moved from Ohio. His father was a Baptist and his mother a Methodist. He did not join either one of his parents' denominations, but became a Presbyterian when he was still a boy. He attended college in Jacksonville and later on went to study at the Union College of Law, Chicago. After practicing law for a while, he moved to Nebraska and entered politics. He served one term in the House of Representatives and after having been defeated in a second attempt to go to the Senate, he took up journalism and became an editor of the *Omaha World Herald*. Bryan had a very colourful career, and became a leading political figure for many years. He was presidential candidate for the Democratic party in 1896, 1900, and 1908, but he was defeated each time. The political tide was running against the Democrats, and Bryan was a victim of this political atmosphere.

Bryan was one of the greatest orators in the history of America. He had a superb command of the English language and, he used simple words and expressions. His speeches were spiced with illustrations from the King James version of the Bible. He had a phenomenal voice. At the height of his powers "it was a superb musical instrument with never a wolf tone through all the register. Even when in volume it rose to thunder, still it caressed the ears, a thirty-two foot open diapason, not a foghorn." (21) Bryan spoke with apparent ease, but actually he expended a terrific amount of energy in his orations. Yet, after he finished his speech, it seemed if he had plenty of energy left. He could speak to 30,000 people in an open-air meeting and make every word heard without the aid of amplifying equipment or any other mechanical device. Audiences were spellbound by his oratory. Bryan, was a handsome man and in his youth he wore a great mane of black hair.

As other great orators, Bryan had read widely, especially the great speeches of the past. He read *Demosthenes* with great pleasure. Bryan's opponents accused him of gross ignorance, a man with limited capacities. It seemed that in the 1920's people were either all for Bryan or completely opposed to him. For a long time, historians have been neither kind nor objective about Bryan. As Bryan's theological views were conservative, and he was the outspoken leader of fundamentalism, his name was mud with the liberals. Furniss is a good illustration of the afore mentioned. He said: "Yet for all his pretensions to learning, Bryan shared the ignorance so characteristic of the Fundamentalists. He had facts at his disposal, but they were not valid to the biologists or Modernists. He had indeed read widely, but with fixed prejudices enforced by an unexpressed determination to select the weakest statements of his opponents and the

most convincing assertions of men who believed as he did." (23) Only recently, historians are becoming more objective about Bryan. Commager said that Bryan was not a simpleton as people made him out to be. (24) He was not a political philosopher, neither did he pretend to be. But he fostered important legislation. (25) He had an understanding of the psychology of the common people that has never been surpassed. "He knew the problems that harassed millions, and persuaded them that he knew the answers, so for twenty years he was politically indestructible." (26)

Perhaps Commager had the right answer about the unfair treatment Bryan received by historians,. He said "His reputation has been burned up among ruins of his own triumph's." (27)

Bryan had an amazing knowledge of the Bible, which he accepted as infallible from cover to cover. He spoke and wrote in defense of the Bible, which is still interesting reading today. He had no use for higher criticism. A higher circle was considered to be more dangerous than an atheist! "The higher critic is more dangerous than the open enemy. The atheist approaches you boldly and tries to blow out your light, but, as you know who he is, what he is trying to do and why, you can protect yourself. The higher critic, however, comes to you in the guise of a friend and politely inquires: 'Isn't the light too near your eyes? I fear it will injure your sight.' Then he moves the light away, a little at the time, until it is only a speck and then - invisible." (28) The Bible was a living Book for Bryan and he tried to live according to that Book and based his thinking upon it, and dared to take the consequences. He was an idealist and a realist at the same time. He had pacifist leanings which led him to trouble after he had become Secretary of State under President Wilson. As Secretary of State, Bryan had a leading hand in negotiating thirty treaties requiring that prior to hostilities "cooling-off" period should intervene, in which all disputes should be submitted to an investigating committee. And Bryan presented to each of the diplomats of the signatory powers a plowshare paperweight beaten, from a sword supplied by the War department. (29) No wonder that Bryan was a most disappointed man when the First World War activities started. He was a man of peace, and he recognized from the first the implications of economic support for the Allies. He tried to block the extension of credit for England's purchases of arms in the U.S. and favoured measures that would have kept American ships and citizens out of the war zone. He resigned from office because he disagreed with the direction Wilson's policy took after the sinking of the "Lusitania". He was convinced that the U.S. had, embarked on the road to war without a just cause of provocation. (30)

Bryan was a fundamentalist in the historical sense. Fundamentalism has been charged with lack of social concern. But this accusation does not apply to Bryan. He had a special concern for the working people and the farmers. (31) He was their spokesman. He understood their problems, their strength and hopes, and fought for their cause. "When the century began Bryan was the Voice that spoke the heart's desire of the common man, the ancient desire that has driven him since history began, the aspiration toward freedom from want and freedom from fear." (32) No wonder that he was called "The Great Commoner." And he wielded great political influence through his journal "*The Commoner*".

Bryan was not only busy in politics but also in church life. He had been the champion for the conservatives for years. In 1923, he contested for the moderatorship of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the U.S. He was defeated by the liberal and moderate wing of the church. "Mr. Bryan's known views on evolution and perhaps even his lifelong Democratic politics contributed something to his defeat. But the desire for tolerance and unity was the major factor in electing his opponent." (33)

The conservatives did not have the spiritual climate of their times in their favour. Bryan had the tide against him both on the political and ecclesiastical front.

Liberals fought Bryan with all what they had. Their attacks were bitter and more than often vitriolic. Bryan made no bones about his staunch belief in the infallibility of Scriptures and in the historicity of the creation account. Bryan had no quarrel with science, as such. "Science has rendered invaluable service; her achievements, are innumerable - and the hypothesis of scientists should be considered with an open mind." (34) He had his, conflicts with the dogmatic attitudes of scientists!

"There is nothing unreasonable about Christianity, and there is nothing unscientific about Christianity. No scientific fact - no fact of any other kind can disturb religion, because facts are not in conflict with each other. It is guessing by scientists and so-called scientists that is doing the harm." (35)

Bryan attacked the theory of evolution with all the eloquence he could muster. He opposed it with all he had as he saw clearly the danger of having this theory applied to the philosophy of education, and to Biblical hermeneutics." The effect of Darwinism is seen in the pulpits; men of prominent denominations deny the virgin birth of Christ and some even His resurrection. Two Presbyterians, preaching in New York State, recently told me that agnosticism was the natural attitude of old people. Evolution naturally leads to agnosticism." (36)

"If Darwinism could make an agnostic of Darwin, what is its effect likely to be upon students to who Darwinism is taught at the very age when they are throwing off parental authority and becoming independent? Darwin's guess gives the student an excuse that appeals to him more strongly at this age than at any other age in life." (37) Bryan was convinced that the acceptance of Darwinism would have disastrous effects in the areas of religion, economics, and politics. According to Bryan, the natural result of Darwinism would be the denial of God (38), the transforming of the industrial world into a slaughterhouse (39), and to war as evolution would lead to the worship of Nietzsche's Superman. (40)

Now we can see why Bryan crusaded for anti-evolution legislation. He wanted' to prevent young minds being taught and influenced by such a dangerous, theory. (41) His role at the "Monkey Trial" ought to be seen and understood from the perspectives described. The upholding of the anti-evolution law was of the utmost importance, as defeat would mean tragedy at all levels of life. Bryan has done much for the theological

conservative cause, for which it ought to be grateful. However, the trial at Dayton was a tragic climax to a great career. Bryan passed away at Dayton five days after the trial.

I have written more about Darrow and Bryan than about John T. Scopes. Scopes was only the man who started the chain of events. The trial was the battleground of two giants who crusaded for their respective causes. Scopes himself was convicted but later released on a technicality.

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### **Bibliography:**

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- (3) The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan By Himself and His Wife Mary Baud Bryan. . p. 585.
- (4) Christian Fundamentals in School, and Church, 1926, p. 48.
- (5) cit. Milton L. Rudnick. Fundamentalism. The Missouri Synod. A Historical Study of their and mutual influence. p. 61.
- (6) Furniss in his work The Fundamenitalist Controversy states that Rappelyea pointed out to Scopes that he was breaking the law (p. 4) and Irving Stone in his book Clarence barrow for the Defense mentions that it was Scopes who went to Rappelyea. p. 282.
- (7) F'urniss p. 5.
- (8) Christian Fundamentals in School and Church, 1926, p. 48. (9) Rud'nick p. 63.
- (10) Furniss p. 7.
- (11) John Dillenberger. Protestant Thought and Natural Science, A Historical Interpretation. 1960. p. 233.
- (12) Irving Stone p. 293.
- (13) Ibid. pp. 276, 290.
- (14) Ibid. p. 276.
- (15) Ibid. p. 281.
- (16) Ibid. p. 277.
- (17) Ibid. p. 293.
- (18) Ibid. p. 297, cf. pp. 295, 304.
- (19) p. 181.
- (20) F'urniss, p. 9.
- (21) William Jennings Bryan. In Image. p. 161.
- (22) Gerald W. Johnson. Incredible Tale. p. 9.
- (23) Furniss p. 41. (24) C'ommager p. 346. (25) Ibid. p. 346.
- (26) Gerald Johnson. p. 14. (27) Commager. p. 347.
- (28) Bryan. In His Image. p. 40.
- (29) Roland H. Bainton. Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace. 1960. p. 196.
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- (31) Memoirs pp. 427, 494.
- (32) Gerald Johnson. pp. 31f.
- (33) L. A. Loetscher. The Broadening Church. p. 111.
- (34) Bryan. In His Image. p. 93.
- (35) Ibid. p. 119.

- (36) Mr. Bryan on Evolution. New York Times,. Sunday, Feb. 26, 1922. Vanderlaan, pp. 259, 257f.
- (37) Ibid. p. 257f.
- (38) Bryan. In His Image. p. 123. (39) Ibid. p. 126.
- (40) Ibid. p. 133.
- (41) Memoirs, p. 585.