

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

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### CAN SCIENCE REFUTE DESIGN?

SUMMER FOR THE GODS. Edward J. Larson. 1997, 1998. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 318 + x p. Paper, \$13.75.

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We all know the story of the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925: Biology teacher John Scopes violated the law by teaching evolution in his class. The fundamentalist crusader William Jennings Bryan joined the local clergy in a witch hunt to put an end to Darwin's influence. Clarence Darrow came to defend Scopes from the bigotry of the local populace. Darrow made mincemeat of Bryan, thus saving poor Scopes from those who wanted to see him put in jail for his beliefs. Wrong!

What actually happened in the summer of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee was far different from the impression millions of Americans have received from the film parody, *Inherit the Wind*. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, Edward Larson reviews the actual history of the Scopes trial and finds a dramatically different story from that presented in the movie.

The book consists of three sections, entitled "Before ...", "During ...", and "After ...". The first section describes the interaction of Christianity with evolutionary theory, the rise of Fundamentalism, and the origins of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

In reality, the Scopes trial was provoked by the ACLU, which had formed only a few years earlier, and had not yet won a case. An ACLU secretary in New York, Lucille Milner, noticed a dispatch in a Tennessee newspaper announcing that the state of Tennessee had passed a law prohibiting the teaching of evolution. She relayed the notice to her boss, Roger Baldwin, who was looking for an opportunity to expand

the ACLU's influence. The ACLU posted a notice in the *Chattanooga Times*, advertising to find a teacher willing to test the law in court.

The second section describes how the trial was initiated and conducted. Local boosters in Dayton arranged the trial, thinking it would help bring publicity to Dayton. George Rappleyea, a chemical engineer who managed the coal and iron mines in the area, read the ACLU advertisement, and brought it to the attention of Fred Robinson, the school board chairman. They agreed that it might be good for local business to stage a trial in Dayton. The two local city attorneys, Herbert Hicks and Sue Hicks (named for his mother who died at his birth) agreed to help with the prosecution if they could find a local teacher who had taught evolution after the law was enacted. Robinson called in John Scopes and explained the plan to him, and Scopes agreed to be the defendant, although he wasn't the regular biology teacher, and couldn't remember whether or not he actually taught evolution. Hicks and Scopes were close friends, and agreed to play their respective roles on opposite sides of the issue, never dreaming what the outcome would be.

The press immediately got hold of the story, and broadcast it around the country. It was clear from the description that this was not being handled the way court cases are typically handled. It smacked rather obviously of a setup. Many editorials denounced the whole thing as a cheap publicity stunt. Every major newspaper in Tennessee criticized Dayton for staging the trial.

Unfortunately, once the media got the word out, things got out of hand. First, William Jennings Bryan, three-times Democratic presidential candidate, offered to help with the prosecution. This offered the Dayton boosters the opportunity for greater publicity than they had dared hope for. Next, Clarence Darrow, probably the most notorious criminal lawyer alive at the time, volunteered for the defense. Darrow had just come from a sensational trial in which he was successful in obtaining acquittals for two confessed murderers by arguing that they were not responsible because their behavior was determined by their heredity. Darrow's entry into the fray added to the sensationalism, and his zealous agnosticism transformed the trial from a small-town publicity stunt into a national confrontation between science and religion.

The trial began on Friday, July 10. By the following Friday, the trial was all but over, and the outcome was clear. The defense had lost

the case, Clarence Darrow notwithstanding. All that remained was to clear up a few formalities. But Darrow had other ideas, and Bryan was willing to meet the challenge. Darrow called Bryan to the witness stand, over the objections of Tom Stewart, lead prosecutor. Unfortunately for Bryan, his ego stood in the way of his objectivity, and he waived off his colleague's objections. Once Bryan was in his grasp, Darrow proceeded to grill Bryan about his religious beliefs — which had nothing whatsoever to do with the case at hand. Bryan affirmed belief in miracles such as Jonah living in the whale for three days, and Eve created from a rib taken from Adam. But when it came to the literalness of the days of creation, Bryan hedged, replying that they could have represented long ages. Although this exchange did not help to exonerate John Scopes, it did provide publicity for the antireligious views Darrow represented.

The third section of the book discusses the aftermath of the trial. Contrary to the popular legend, the antievolution movement gained strength after the trial. Darrow's outspoken antireligious views gave Bryan the status of a martyr when he died only five days after the trial ended. Mississippi and Arkansas soon had antievolution laws, and Texas and Louisiana barred the subject from textbooks used in their respective states. Although the movement never caught on in the North, it did not die. Both sides claimed victory, but neither side was defeated.

The distortion of the trial and its effects began in 1931 with publication of a book by Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday*, in which Allen reflected on the happier days of the Roaring Twenties in contrast with the Great Depression. Allen attributed a great victory for Scopes and the defense, in line with the prevailing attitude among evolutionists. What he failed to note was that the Fundamentalists regarded it as a victory for their side. In reality, the trial was not decisive for either side, but merely a sensationalized confrontation in an ongoing conflict between two world views.

The play (1955) and movie (1960) marked the completion of the popular, but false, legend of the Scopes trial. As it turns out, both the movie and the play on which it was based, were actually not motivated by the Scopes trial. Instead, the play writers had in mind the anti-communist campaign of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the threat it posed to personal liberties. They merely used the Scopes trial as a setting to make their point that attempts to limit speech were inimical

to personal freedom. In view of their purpose, there was no real need to be concerned about historical accuracy. Yet the play and movie have been the main source of “information” about the Scopes trial, with the result that the average American is sadly misinformed about the historical realities of the trial.

Two lessons from the story deserve mention. First, one should be cautious about believing everything he “knows.” Much of what we “know” about the Scopes trial seems to be wrong. The same is probably true in other cases. It has been said that history is rewritten by those in power. Second, big egos make big targets. Bryan’s overconfidence led him to take the witness stand for what seems to be no purpose other than to satisfy his desire for publicity. Bryan’s experience is somewhat reminiscent of the experience of Samuel Wilberforce in his debate with Thomas Huxley, although it is likely that Wilberforce’s story has suffered a similar distortion at the hands of those in power.

In summary, the book is highly readable, and attempts to present the trial from as unbiased a point of view as possible, although the author’s bias does show through in a few places. I highly recommend the book.