

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

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### INHERIT THE WIND: MYTH VS REALITY

**Monkey Business: the True Story of the Scopes Trial.** Marvin Olasky and John Perry. 2005. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman. 344 p. Cloth, \$24.99.

*Reviewed by Joe Francis — The Masters College, California*

The 1925 Scopes trial is among the most documented political events of the last 80 years. In 1999, *George* magazine designated it as #4 in a listing of the “100 greatest defining political moments” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Although old black-and-white photographs of the trial give the appearance of a long-forgotten era, the popular media have essentially frozen this event in time with a steady stream of articles, plays, movies and books. The story is resurrected often, especially when the creation/evolution issue surfaces in the public arena. In addition, hundreds of books have been written about or refer to the Scopes trial. What then can yet another text on this subject contribute?

According to the authors, their book is required to counter the many “mistaken assumptions and oversimplifications concerning the Scopes trial [which] still abound.” As their subtitle suggests, “the true story of the Scopes trial” has been overshadowed by urban legends and contrived folklore. Both authors are experienced journalists eminently qualified to correct the “mistaken assumptions and oversimplifications” propagated about this event in the popular press.

The central theme of the text is an engagingly written historical account of the Scopes trial. The first chapter (“Desperate Dayton”) provides an intriguing backdrop to the events of 1925, describing the “glory” coal-mining days of Dayton in the late 1800s. But a series of “unfortunate events” almost led to its complete demise. Enter George Rappleyea: a young business man and manager of one of the few remaining active coal operations in town. In the local newspaper he noted an advertisement sponsored by the ACLU who were looking for a test case to challenge the state’s anti-evolution

education statute. Hoping to boost Dayton's economy, Rappleyea assembled a group of town leaders who decided that their town could benefit from being the site for the test case. They invited teacher and high-school football coach John Scopes to a meeting to devise the plan, and the drama unfolds.

The historical narrative is interrupted periodically by chapters covering philosophical issues surrounding the evolution/creation debate. These inserted chapters disrupt the story and readers may be tempted to skip them. Furthermore, the authors appear to have shortened some of the historical chapters to accommodate the philosophical chapters. For instance, in Chapter 6, which describes the second day of the trial, the authors mention Darrow's two-hour speech, but fail to summarize what Darrow was trying to communicate, leaving the reader at a loss as to its significance.

The philosophical chapters deal with important topics, each of which is worthy of more thorough treatment. A chapter on Darwinism and natural evil (Chapter 9; "The Stakes") makes some interesting and valuable points. However, oversimplification of events and philosophical positions weakens these points. The authors attempted to show that evolutionists have always been of the same mindset with respect to natural selection: "From Darwin's time forward, evolutionists rallied against any 'religious' challenge to random mutation and natural selection as 'unscientific' and 'unprovable'" (p 73). However, the role of natural selection was not widely accepted as a mechanism of evolution by many evolutionists during much of the first half of the 20th century. This disagreement over natural selection is what, in part, helped foster the development of the evolutionary synthesis (or neo-darwinism) which occurred from 1920-50.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, one can find disagreement regarding the sufficiency of natural selection as an arbiter of evolutionary change in contemporary evolutionary literature.<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter 14 ("The Evolution War") the authors argue that the Scopes trial had a negative influence on biology education and textbooks for decades after the trial. While subsequent high-school biology texts may have been influenced by the Scopes trial, the evolution content of the popular high-school biology texts was poor before the trial began. In fact, the high-school biology course was created in the early decades of the 20th century and therefore the texts were in their early stages of development.<sup>4</sup> Olasky and Perry also point out that an increase in the evolution content of the texts did not occur until the 1950s and imply that the play "Inherit the Wind" and the "space race" largely influenced this. However, once again, this is only part of the story because there is strong evidence suggesting that the resurgence in the evolution content of biology curriculum was largely influenced by the growing acceptance of neo-Darwinism

and several major discoveries in biology including the elucidation of the structure of DNA.

Four chapters near the end of the text describe the Intelligent Design (ID) movement and portray it as the long-awaited challenge to evolution. It is true that the design movement has had some success in stimulating dialogue regarding origin issues. However, the authors once again only tell part of the story; creationist organizations and scientists have been active within the scientific community for much of recent history, establishing several peer-reviewed journals and scientific meetings like the International Conference on Creationism. Kurt Wise, paleontologist at Bryan College in Dayton, suggests that if the Scopes trial was held today or within the last few decades, there may have been a different outcome, because William Jennings Bryan would have had many experts to choose from including scientists involved in the intelligent design movement and those active within creationism.<sup>5</sup>

*Monkey Business* is a text worth reading, but also serves as a reminder that much more work needs to be done if the mistaken assumptions and oversimplifications that abound regarding the Scopes trial are to be overcome.

## ENDNOTES

1. Cornelius and Davis. 2000. *Impact: the Scopes Trial, William Jennings Bryan, and Issues that Keep Revolving*. Dayton, TN: Bryan College, p v, 91.
2. Sapp J. 2003. *Genesis: the Evolution of Biology*. New York, NY: Oxford Press. Ch 6.
3. Margulis L. 2003. *Aquiring Genomes: a Theory of the Origins of Species*. NY: Basic Books.
4. Francis JW. 2006. *Biology and the Scopes Trial: an Analysis of Biology Education during the 1920s with a Focus on High School Biology Texts*. Manuscript in preparation. Symposium on the Scopes Trial, Bryan College 75th anniversary celebration, Dayton Tennessee, March 2006.
5. Wise K. 2000. The science played again. In: Cornelius and Davis (Endnote 1), p 91.