The Great Monkey Trial

By L. Sprague de Camp
Doubleday & Company, Inc.
493 pages, 1968

Reviewed by John Blanton

Early in 1925 the state of Tennessee passed a law “… prohibiting the teaching of the Evolution Theory in all the Universities, Normals and all other public schools.” This was a time when the nation’s mind had just come off a war that saw the loss of 20 million lives. People were looking to the root causes of evil, and Christian fundamentalism was on the rise.

The author of the law was second term state legislator John Washington Butler. Like many in his state and like most in rural Tennessee, Butler was a Christian fundamentalist—believing in the literal truth of the Bible. The ever popular notion that anything contradicting the Bible contributed to a decline in moral values moved him to draft the “Butler Act” and to champion it in the state assembly.

The surprise success of this first effort caught the notice of national newspapers and also the fledgling American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU advertised for a Tennessee teacher to volunteer to be the goat in a test case of the law. Enterprising citizens of Dayton saw the immediate opportunity to air a local debate on evolution and, at the same time, to garner some notoriety for this backwater town. John T. Scopes was summoned from his tennis game and readily agreed to be the pawn in this drama. He was from out of state, working as a science teacher and athletic coach for the Dayton high school. He subscribed to evolution, as most educated in the sciences at that time did. After conferring with the plotters at the local drugstore, Scopes returned to his game and stepped into the history books.

Thus began The Great Monkey Trial.

L. Sprague de Camp was about the age of one of Scopes’ students, so he likely followed the saga of the Scopes trial as it played out in the newspapers that summer of
The dramatization does not use actual names, and events are considerably altered. Actor Dick York is arrested and jailed for teaching in the topic. If ever the twentieth century had an anti-evolutionary champion it was three times presidential candidate Williams Jennings Bryan. From humble beginnings, Bryan seemed to rise to greatness on force of personality alone. Though exposed to some of the greatest events and minds of his time, he never seemed to absorb any of this greatness, supremely confident in his own preformed convictions to the end of his life. An icon for the common people, he was “the great commoner.” Though his “cross of gold” speech at the 1896 Democratic Party convention still rings as one of the great American oratorical triumphs, his intellect never rose above the power of his lungs. In the end he came to symbolize to others the archetypical fundamentalist.

Bryan jumped at the chance to aid the prosecution in John Scopes’ trial. It would be his finest moment, his opportunity to meet the evolutionist devil head on, on a world stage.

Equally famous as Bryan was trial lawyer Clarence Darrow. Darrow and Bryan were long acquainted and had previously worked together on social reforms of the time. However, Bryan’s fixation on Biblical inerrancy and his inability to differentiate between truth and the sound of his own voice eventually drove a wedge between the two. When Darrow volunteered for Scopes’ defense team, their meeting on the central issue of science versus religion completed the splintering of the friendship.

The stage play Inherit the Wind by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee and especially the movie based on the play did much to popularize the Scopes trial in the early 1960s. Inherit the Wind is not a literal account of the trial, but is, instead, a commentary on government excesses, with Joseph McCarthy’s abuse of power its particular target. The dramatization does not use actual names, and events are considerably altered. Actor Dick York is arrested and jailed for teaching.
evolution in the movie, but Scopes never spent a day in the slammer. Scopes was convicted and fined $100, but he never paid it, and his conviction was later overturned on a technicality.

One event in the movie that closely tracks actual events is the demolition of William Jennings Bryan by Clarence Darrow. In the movie actor Spencer Tracy is the character parallel to Clarence Darrow, and Frederick March is the Bryan stand-in. In 1925 Darrow, in a dramatic move, asked attorney for the prosecution Bryan to testify regarding the Bible. Bryan’s enormous ego would not let him resist and trial Judge John Raulston, the 1920s’ answer to Lance Ito, never passed up an opportunity to make a show of the trial.

Clarence Darrow was a notoriously vigorous, some would even say vicious, defense attorney, and he turned his talents on his old friend on the stand.

Quizzing Bryan about the conflict between the Genesis account of creation and the known facts regarding the age of the Earth and the universe, he forced Bryan to admit that it was not a matter of just six days. Local fundamentalists and others were shocked and dismayed to hear this from Bryan, because the Creation is a pillar of fundamentalist belief. Many of Bryan’s fans among the locals had begun to slip their allegiance a bit on seeing what a windbag Bryan was in person. Now Bryan lost many of them completely.

As in the movie, Darrow relentless forced Bryan to admit he knew as little about the Bible as he did about science and about real events in general. Irish Bishop Ussher had calculated dates for events in the Bible. What was the basis for these calculations, and had Bryan ever gone through the exercise for himself?

He never had, and he had never thought about it. As in the movie, Bryan notably remarked “I do not think about the things I don’t think about.”

Darrow responded “Do you think about things that you do think about?”

“Sometimes.”¹

The great exponent of fundamentalism was exposed as an intellectual cripple, and fundamentalists caught the spatter face on. Although fundamentalism continued its assault on science, particularly evolution, the summer of 1925 was the peak of the anti-evolution movement. For the time being.

In Inherit the Wind fundamentalism’s windbag gasps out an abortive speech in the court room and dies on the spot. In real life William Jennings Bryan was not allowed his chance to preach. A few days following the trial, back in Dayton, he passed away in his sleep.

By 1968 the various anti-evolution laws had been stricken, and the advent of Sputnik had rejuvenated science teaching in the U.S. What was not seen in 1968 was the coming resurgence of anti-evolution. What is remarkable now are the parallels between the fundamentalists in those bygone days and modern day advocates of the Intelligent Design movement. See, for example, disclaimers in biology texts and “evolution is just a theory.” In this light, Intelligent Design appears to be just day-old bread.

Sprague de Camp concludes with:

“Many critics found the proceedings at Dayton much too raucous, clownish, and undignified for their taste. In some of the earlier, grimmer battles of this war of ideas—those involving Galileo, Serveto, Bruno, Pallisy, and Vanini—the dignity of the law was preserved; but the outcomes—three burnings at the stake and two confinements for life—were not funny at all. While the great American battle in this ideological conflict caused the dignity of the law to be a little bent, it is to the nation’s credit that the action took place on a plane of high comedy and added to the gaiety of nations.”²

References

2 Ibid., P 493.
Trouble
by John Blanton

All right, Skeptics. We’re in for it now. The creationists are on to us.

I just fielded a call from a kook, I mean creationist, in California. Horrors! They told his son in biology class that the Earth was 4.5 billion years old. Not 6000 years. Not 6 million years. But 4.5 billion. That’s billion with a ‘b’.

Fortunately this very astute father had the goods on us. He knew that radiometric dating was the lie that set the clock at 4.5B, and he had the proof of the lie. And it came from us.

If you are a fan of L. Sprague de Camp’s books you don’t need further elaboration. The rest of you may want to become acquainted.

Sprague is best known for his science fiction writing, typically of what I call the fantasy style. His novels often involve dragons and other bizarre creatures. With Robert Howard he authored Tales of Conan and a few of the other Conan works. After Howard’s death Sprague acquired the rights to the character and continued the Conan tales for many years, often in collaboration with other writers. He once made a startling revelation to us. While he wrote out the Conan plots, the cultured and refined Catherine de Camp wrote the gruesome storylines and dialog. When Hollywood made Conan the Barbarian, Sprague was engaged as a technical consultant and even got to meet Arnold.

Here’s the quote:

What complicates things for the uranium-lead method is that non-radiogenic lead 204, 206, 207 and 208 also exist naturally, and scientists are not sure what ratios of non-radiogenic to radiogenic lead were early in the moon’s history. ... The problem of how much lead was around to begin with still remains. ... If all of the age-dating methods (rubidium-strontium, uranium-lead and potassium-argon) had yielded the same ages, the picture would be neat. But they haven’t.¹

Wait, there’s more. The quote is from a presentation by Don Patton, and I went on to explain how he had mangled the quote, leaving out some important stuff and even re-arranging the order of the quoted snippets to make his argument.

Mr. Erudite, for he must remain anonymous, was not interested in any explanations about out-of-context quotes or how geologists really do radiometric dating. He only wanted me to confirm that non-radiogenic lead 204, 206, 207 and 208 also exist naturally (not from the uranium decay sequence). Once I confirmed the obvious, he thanked me for the direct quote. He told me this proves radiometric dating is invalid. And he hung up.

I am left with the impression that Mr. Erudite will present the quote he got from me over the telephone as sound evidence that radiometric dating is invalid, that the Earth is not really 4.5 billion years old, that Darwin was wrong, and that the Bible is correct. My concern is there will be people out there who will accept this evidence. A further concern is these people are allowed to have sharp objects and to vote.

References
What’s new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What’s New column at http://www.bobpark.org/. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Polygraph: science moved on federal agencies never noticed.

Eighteen years ago, WN said, “the polygraph can’t tell a lie from the sex act,” (WN 4 Mar 88). It still can’t, but Monday, the Office of the Inspector General of the Justice Department released a 20-page report on the use of the polygraph by the Justice Department. The polygraph is used slightly less as an investigative tool (recall it failed to expose the Green River killer). But it is used increasingly to screen employees (recall it missed CIA super-mole Aldrich Ames, and has never uncovered a single spy). Meanwhile, brain research became the hottest frontier after physicists developed fMRI brain scanning, revealing what really goes on in our heads. The report never mentions all the unrefuted science showing the polygraph is worse than useless. Nor does it mention fMRI research advances.

Telephone telepathy: it’s too much to be a mere coincidence.

Even as President Bush this week called on Congress to give him “additional authority” for the “warrantless eavesdropping program,” Rupert Sheldrake, who is funded by a grant administered by Trinity College of Cambridge University, was explaining to the British Association for the Advancement of Science that we can already do it telepathically. Sheldrake claims that when the phone rings we know who is calling. Perhaps he could get in touch with President Bush, with or without the phone. Sheldrake is the “scientist” who claims pets are telepathically in touch with their owners. He was followed by a psychiatrist who thinks near-death experiences are evidence of an afterlife. I seem to be getting telepathic messages from Congress that there is no way they can deal with Bush’s requests before the election, however, I haven’t a clue as to why BAAS chose to showcase this session.

Rain: governor of South Dakota called for a week of prayer.

Gov. Mike Rounds of South Dakota, the state hardest hit by the severe drought in the plains, proclaimed the last week of July to be A WEEK TO PRAY FOR RAIN. Not a drop has fallen from the heavens on South Dakota since. The governor used the wrong technology. You pray to get out of Iraq, for rain you dance.

Evolution: Pope prepares to embrace Intelligent Design theory.

It appears, however, that the departure of George Coyne as director of the Vatican Observatory was the result of a colon cancer operation earlier in the year. He asked to be replaced. The Vatican, unfortunately, made no comment at all, leading to speculation about the cause. It is widely believed that the Church will become more closely aligned to anti-evolutionists.

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org.

Future Meeting Dates

November 11, 2006         March 17, 2007
December 9, 2006          April 21, 2007
January 13, 2007          May 19, 2007
February 17, 2007         June 16, 2007
Application for Membership

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16. The Scopes Monkey Trial. Lecture no. 16 from the course: The Great Trials of World History and the Lessons They Teach Us. Defense lawyer Clarence Darrow also made history defending high-school teacher John Scopes at 1925’s famous Monkey Trial. Discover how the case that put the theory of evolution on trial brought to Tennessee a three-time presidential candidate, a flock of international reporters, and the battle for 1920s social mores. The Great Monkey Trial Hardcover January, 1968. by L. Sprague De Camp (Author). 5.0 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews.

This is a readable, witty, informative look at the famous Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. Author L. Sprague de Camp describes the trial, the prosecution led by ex-President candidate William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925), and the defense headed by famed agnostic and Chicago attorney Clarence Darrow (1856-1938). The Great Monkey Trial book. Read 3 reviews from the world’s largest community for readers. The true story of a court battle that began on a hot July day... This book is a very readable, enjoyable overview of the “Monkey Trial” in Dayton, Tennessee, that was the basis for the play and movie Inherit the Wind. While written by a person who was completely on the side of the defense in the trial, major prosecution figures like William Jennings Bryan are treated fairly and sympathetically. Anybody interested in the Scopes trial or the ongoing evolution-vs.-creationism flap could gain from reading this book. flag 1 like · Like · see review. Jan 16, 2017 Jeff Keehr rated it liked it.
The trial could not properly be called a witch hunt, one trial historian notes, because "the accused [Scopes] and his defenders were actually the hunters, stalking the law with the intent of overturning it or at least making it unenforceable." de Sprague, *The Great Monkey Trial* (1968), p. 490. In addition to Clarence Darrow (still regarded by many as the greatest criminal trial attorney in American history), Scopes enjoyed the expertise of Dudley Field Malone (who delivered a speech in Dayton that Bryan honestly believed was the finest speech on any subject that he had ever heard), and two other attorneys (one a law professor, one from the... 261ff, and (5) that the gap between the monkeys and the most evolved apes is akin to the gap "The Great Monkey Trial" is a 1968 book on the Scopes Trial by L. Sprague de Camp, first published in hardcover by Doubleday. This history of the trial was based on the memoirs of John T. Scopes, the archives of the A.C.L.U., assorted newspaper files, correspondence and interviews with dozens of those present at the trial, books and magazine articles written on trial (including the official record of the trial in the Rhea County Courthouse), and a couple of visits to Dayton. De Camp breathed life into the trial transcript by adding vocal inflections, facial expressions, gestures and