

The Scopes Trial and *Inherit the Wind*; a Comparison

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What was the Scopes Trial?

The Scopes Trial, which took place in 1925, is one of the most important trials that has ever taken place. It is the trial of a man accused of violating the Butler Act (TN law) which prohibited teaching human evolution in a state funded school. Although the Butler Act passed, the book the state required the teachers to use was a book that presented human evolution as a sound theory. William Jennings Bryan was asked to be a part of the prosecuting team and although he had not tried a case in over 36 years he readily agreed, believing that the presentation of human evolution was going to destroy the faith of many (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/bryanonevol.html>).

Bryan's comments about the trial sum up his feelings,

Science is a magnificent force, but it is not a teacher of morals. It can perfect machinery, but it adds no moral restraints to protect society from the misuse of the machine. It can also build gigantic intellectual ships, but it constructs no moral rudders for the control of storm-tossed human vessel. It not only fails to supply the spiritual element needed but some of its unproven hypotheses rob the ship of its compass and thus endanger its cargo. In war, science has proven itself an evil genius; it has made war more terrible than it ever was before. Man used to be content to slaughter his fellowmen on a single plane, the earth's surface. Science has taught him to go down into the water and shoot up from below and to go up into the clouds and shoot down from above, thus making the battlefield three times as bloody as it was before; but science does not teach brotherly love. Science has made war so hellish that civilization was about to commit suicide; and now we are told that newly discovered instruments of destruction will make the cruelties of the late war seem trivial in comparison with the cruelties of wars that may come in the future. If civilization is to be saved from the wreckage threatened by intelligence not consecrated by love, it must be saved by the moral code of the meek and lowly Nazarene. His teachings, and His teachings alone, can solve the problems that vex the heart and perplex the world.¹

¹ William Jennings Bryan, "Science Not a Teacher of Morals," in *The Last Message of William Jennings Bryan*, eds. George Milton & J.R. Sizoo (Euston Grove Press, 2009), 44-45.

Many “firsts” took place at this trial. This was the first live radio broadcast of a trial, costing a lot of time and money to make that happen. Darrow called W. J. Bryan, counselor for the prosecuting team, to the stand as a witness and Bryan agreed on the condition that Darrow would take the stand afterwards. Darrow agreed, but then he had the trial end when he called for the jury to find Scopes guilty (wanting, at this point, to take the case to a higher court). Darrow never took the stand and Bryan was prevented from sharing his closing remarks.

Many reporters came to Dayton, more than had ever attended any trial up until that date, and more words were transmitted by wire to Britain about the Scopes trial than any previous event in America. Film from two cameramen was flown out daily. Trained chimpanzees performed on the courthouse lawn. When the building became too hot and the judge felt there were too many people in the courtroom the trial was moved out of doors, on the lawn of the courthouse.

What is *Inherit the Wind*?

Inherit the Wind opened on Broadway in 1955. The movie, which followed in 1960, is regarded as a great example of historical propaganda. Made-for-TV versions were released in 1988 and 1999. This movie continues to sway the opinions of its viewers as it negatively stereotypes those who are opposed to teaching evolution as a fact. Many school children watch this movie every year and base their opinion of the creation versus evolution debate on this grossly inaccurate account of the Scopes Trial that took place in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925.

The authors of *Inherit the Wind* (Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee) originally claimed that the publication was not to be taken as historically accurate. However, few would argue that this so-called tale of fiction is none other than a very poor rendition of the famous Scopes Trial. The play, and subsequently the movies, have advanced the false notion that the Scopes trial proved that science and religion cannot go hand-in-hand and that these two forces are diametrically opposed to one another.

Many say the play was never intended to be an accurate depiction of the Scopes Trial but rather as commentary to McCarthy’s anti-communist campaign that started soon after World War 2. However, it would be quite a stretch, even with all the inaccuracies contained in the play/movies, not to see the similarities between the Scopes Trial and *Inherit the Wind*.

The movie opens with “Give Me That Old Time Religion” playing in the background, encouraging the viewer to believe that the main issue of the Scopes Trial is a battle between science and religion. The battle is much larger than that. Issues contained in this trial include the discussion of what subjects should and should not be mandatory in the school system,

parental rights, freedom of thought, honest journalism, and more.

A Comparative Look at *Inherit the Wind* and the Scopes Trial – Film vs. Reality

Opening Scene

Film: The movie opens with a group of businessmen and the reverend entering a classroom where evolution is being taught. The song “Give Me That Old Time Religion” is being played in the background. A cameraman enters the classroom.

Reality: A local businessman read the ACLU’s ad in the Chattanooga paper looking for a teacher who would confess to teaching evolution. Scopes was asked to confess to this charge and a scheme was hatched, more for publicity than for the defense of academia. He was told his fine would be covered and he would spend no time in jail.

Film: No one ever visited Scopes classes to see if he did, in fact, teach evolution to his students.

Reality: Scopes was asked to say that he taught evolution when he substituted for the biology teacher. After the trial Scopes claimed that he never did teach evolution. Before asking Scopes to admit to teaching evolution, the businessmen considered asking the biology teacher to take part, but since he was married and had children the decision was made to go with John Scopes, a single man, instead. He was a sports coach who also taught algebra, chemistry and physics. He was not a biology teacher.

Film: In both the play and the movies there is no mention of the ACLU being the instigator of the trial, but rather suggests that bigotry was the only motivation behind the trial. In the movie there is a group of businessmen upset that the trial is bringing the town adverse publicity.

Reality: The Chattanooga paper published an ad by the ACLU looking for a teacher willing to admit he/she had taught evolution in Tennessee in order to challenge the Butler Act. The ACLU offered to pay the expenses of any teacher willing to test the anti-evolution law. George Rappelyea (a man who came to Dayton from New York City to manage the financially troubled Cumberland Coal and Iron Company) conspired with several other Dayton businessmen at the local drugstore (Robinsons) to take the ACLU up on their offer, hoping to “put Dayton on the map.”

Fun fact: *One of the lawyers on the prosecuting team was named Sue Hicks, the man who inspired the song Johnny Cash sang entitled, “A Boy Named Sue.” Apparently Mr. Hicks’ mother died in childbirth so his dad named him after his mom.*

Film: Cates (Scopes) is arrested while teaching evolution in the classroom, was jailed and remained in jail until the end of the trial.

Reality: John Scopes was arrested, but never spent time in jail. When he was asked to take part in the trial he was told that his fines would be paid and that no jail time would be involved. He was also told he would not lose his job. He never took the witness stand during the trial. On the fourth day of the trial Scopes was late to the afternoon session because he had been swimming at a local pond with William Jennings Bryan Junior. (No rock through the jailhouse window since he was never in jail.)

5:00

Film: Citizens of Dayton were embarrassed by the negative publicity the trial incurred.

Reality: The businessmen were motivated by the economic advantage that would come as a result of the publicity that the trial would bring and they had high hopes that the trial would rejuvenate a failing economy.

7:30 Brady volunteers to join the prosecution team (William Jennings Bryan)

8:59

Film: Scopes is in jail playing a game with the jailer.

Reality: Scopes did not spend any time in jail.

9:20

Film: John Scopes did not have a girlfriend named Rachel Brown. She is a totally fictional character created to add to the plot of the play and film.

Reality: John Scopes was not engaged and did not even have a girl friend at that time.

11:38

Film: In the play and film the journalist (Hornbeck) comes across as a kind and witty man, and is not portrayed as the racial and religious bigot that he was. Neither does the film does show his hatred for Bryan and all he represented.

Reality: H. L. Mencken, one of the journalists at the trial, believed that most people were too stupid to choose a proper form of government and, instead, that America should be run as an oligarchy. He was a racist who held much contempt for not only rural folks, but for most human beings. At first his articles criticized Scopes for not doing the job he was hired to do. When Darrow joined the defense team Mencken changed his tune somewhat, but he still seemed more determined to pour scorn on Bryan and everything for which he stood.

14:16

Film: More playing of Give Me That Old Time Religion as a motorcade escorts Brady (Bryan) through town:

Reality: Bryan did not arrive until July 7th, 3 days before the start of the trial. As he stepped down from the trail there was applause, welcoming gestures, and a band that played both religious and patriotic tunes. There was no motorcade escorting Bryan through town.

16:50

Film: Dayton Mayor makes Bryan an honorary Colonel.

Truth: Bryan was a Colonel in the US army during the Spanish-American War of 1898.

17:55

Film: Bryan asks for the spiritual leader of the community. Reverend Brown is introduced as the spiritual leader of the community.

Reality: Dayton was home to more than 13 churches and the pastors were not hateful, angry or outspoken at the trial.

18:00

Film: Bryan was out to “get” Scopes for teaching evolution.

Reality: Bryan offered to pay Scopes fine if he needed the money. Bryan thought the Tennessee law was poorly written since it involved firing an educator.

19:17 Hornbeck (Mencken) announces that Henry Drummond will be defending Scopes (Clarence Darrow)

Film: The residents of Dayton were ignorant, ill-mannered, and extreme stating that they will send Drummond (Darrow) back to hell. While welcoming Bryan with open arms, they showed a great disliking to Darrow and the others on the defense team.

Reality: The residents were split over their opinion regarding the trial, yet they were civil and well-mannered. Darrow expressed surprise that the residents of Dayton were so kind to him. He admitted that he expected to be mistreated, but that he was not. Mr. Darrow stated, “I don’t know as I was ever in a community in my life where my religious ideas differed as widely from the great mass as I have found them since I have been in Tennessee. Yet I came here a perfect stranger and I can say what I have said before that I have not found upon anybody’s part — any citizen here in this town or outside, the slightest discourtesy. I have been treated better, kindlier and more hospitably than I fancied would have been the case in the north, and that is largely to the ideas that southern people have and they are, perhaps more hospitable than we are up north.” Even H. L. Mencken wrote, “The town, I confess, greatly surprised me. I

expected to find a squalid Southern village with darkies snoozing on the horse blocks, pits rotting under the houses and the inhabitants full of hookworm and malaria. What I found was a country town of charm and even beauty.”²

21:35 The Reverend and his daughter in conversation

Film: Entire conversation fabricated to sway the viewer to see Christians as radical fundamentalists who are angry, illogical, and unkind.

Reality: No girlfriend, no hostile reverend.

25:00 Mencken welcomes Darrow to Dayton

26:30 Chimp on display ... trained chimps did perform on the courthouse lawn. Citizens congregated around the courthouse and held picnics during the circus-like atmosphere of this trial.

27:29

Film: Farmer stops Drummond to tell him Dayton doesn't need any outsiders. Drummond says he's there because a teacher is in jail.

Reality: Dayton citizens were well mannered and Scopes was not in jail.

28:23

Film: Students show support of Cates (Scopes)

Reality: Some students did testify that Scopes taught evolution in the classroom (after they were cajoled to do so) but few, if any, were passionate about his defense.

29:25

Film: Bryan's wife admires Clarence Darrow, keeping her eyes on him and not her husband. She then proceeds to chastise her husband for over eating.

Reality: Mrs. Bryan did not admire Darrow and she and her husband had a good marital relationship. Mrs. Bryan was a semi-invalid and Bryan took care of her, not vice versa.

31:00 Welcome to Bryan and booing of Darrow (no evidence this took place)

32:00 Twelfth juror being selected

Film: Mencken is broadcasting loud from the courtroom.

Reality: Because of the extreme heat Mencken often did not even attend the trial, said he knew how it would end, and even left town before the trial was over, missing the most

² <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/day6.htm>

dramatic part of the trial, Darrow questioning Bryan. "He bragged to another reporter that he spent his evenings in an airy suite on Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga with bootleg liquor and a fan blowing a cool breeze over a bathtub of ice."³

36:37

Film: Bryan was made an honorary Colonel when he arrived in Dayton and Drummond was appointed a temporary, honorary Colonel

Reality: Bryan was a Colonel during the Spanish-American War

41:35

Film: Judge reads announcement that there will be a prayer meeting that night

Reality: No such event (announcement in court) took place

42 Discussion of Read Your Bible sign and its removal is accurate

Film: Woman shouts at Drummond and citizen say they will run Cates (Scopes) out of town

Reality: This is another attempt to make the citizens of Dayton appear to be ignorant, hateful yokels.

44

Film: Cate's (Scopes) girlfriend attempts to get Scope to end the trial

Reality: Totally fabricated. No girlfriend. Scope was not persecuted for being a part of this trial. He could keep his job if he wanted it but he chose to leave Dayton after the trial.

48

Film: Bryan shows opposition to all teaching of evolution.

Reality: Bryan was opposed to evolution being taught as fact and not theory. Bryan conceded in one speech that evolution might be possible right up to the point of the ape becoming man. He also believed that other major explanations, such as creation, should be taught as well.

48:59

Film: Mrs. Bryan chooses to sit with Darrow and not her husband

Reality: Mrs. Bryan was very loyal to her husband, and would not have publically embarrassed Bryan by making this choice

51

³ See: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/peopleevents/p_mencken.html

Prayer meeting. Totally fabricated. This portion is filled with information contrary to scripture. God did not scowl on the 6th day. He did not ask that we curse men to damnation. This is the portion where the verse is quoted that contains the words, "Inherit the Wind." At least Bryan (in the film) takes a stand for grace and forgiveness, but this is not included in any historical documents of the trial.

1:00

Film: Student gives exact details as to what was taught in class by Scopes.

Reality: Darrow did question seven students who admitted, when asked, that Scopes taught that man and all other mammals evolved from one cell organisms.

1:08

Film: Rachel Brown testifies

Reality: Rachel Brown is a fictitious character and no woman ever testified at this trial. The story of the drowning student was totally fabricated. Scopes never threatened to change his plea to guilty, but was always aware that he would be found guilty.

1:18:30

Film: Darrow threatens to withdraw from the case

Reality: Darrow never threatened to withdraw from the case

1:19:20

Film: Slippery slope argument (banning evolution to banning books and more)

1:20:30

Film: Darrow is cited for contempt of court. The Judge set bond at \$2,000 but then vindictively increased it to \$4,000 after a flippant remark by Darrow.

Reality: Darrow was cited for contempt of court. The amount was never raised, never collected, and later forgiven. There was never any discussion by anyone about Darrow being put in the custody of the bailiff, not being able to post a bond, or having to spend time in jail.

1:22:07

Film: Local citizens burn Scopes and Darrow in effigy

Reality: This never took place. Scopes was still well liked and greeted warmly by Dayton citizens.

1:31

Film: Bryan says he is not at all interested in the book, Origin of the Species

Reality: Bryan had, in fact, read the book and studied other writings on evolution

1:32

Film: Bryan says everything in the Bible should be interpreted literally

Reality: Bryan admitted that portions of scripture were symbolic, and not to be taken literally

1:35

Film: Questions of sex and sin with Bryan saying that all sex is sin.

Reality: This discussion never took place at the trial.

1:40:10

Film: As the cross-examination progressed and Bryan conceded that even a sponge has the *right* to think (if it can think at all, and notwithstanding Bryan's denial of mankind's right to think *a la* the Butler Act), the tide of sentiment in the courtroom gallery slowly but surely turned against the Great Commoner.

Reality: There was no discussion in the trial of sponges or their abilities or rights to think. As for the audience switching alliances from Bryan to Darrow during the trial, there is no evidence of this. The audience laughed and applauded both the Prosecution and the Defense attorneys as appropriate from the beginning of the trial to the end.

1:41:53

Film: Bryan says the creation of the earth occurred at 9:00a.m. on 23 October 4004 B.C.

Reality: Bryan did not claim to know the age of the earth. Bryan said that Genesis was open to interpretation allowing for the earth to be much older than 4,000 years.

1:45

Film: Bryan lost his composure while on the stand.

Reality: Bryan did not begin shouting out all of the names of the books of the Bible.

1:47

Film: Rachel comes to the Bryan's room and accuses him of being a fake. Mrs. Bryan slaps Rachel.

Reality: Totally made up for the movie

1:50

Film: Mrs. Bryan questions her husband's actions and integrity.

Reality: Mrs. Bryan was a huge supporter of her husband and there is no record of her questioning his behavior.

1:51

Film: Bryan seems to begin losing his mind, grabbing his papers, shouting and then crying.

Reality: No evidence of this ever taking place.

1:59

Film: Bryan gets upset with Scope's fine of \$100.

Reality: Bryan not only was not bothered by the fine, but he offered to pay it if Scopes needed the money. Bryan opposed the inclusion of *any* fine in the Butler Act. Prior to the passage of the Tennessee statute (which Bryan did not draft), Bryan was consulted on the wording and recommended striking the fine. Bryan was directly responsible for a similar Florida statute which contained no fine for being violated.

2:00

Film: Bryan attempted to deliver his last speech while pitching a fit and died in the courtroom.

Reality: Bryan was disappointed that Darrow ended the trial when the jury found Scopes guilty (hoping that the case would go to a higher court). Bryan had agreed to testify on the stand if Darrow would do the same, but Darrow ended the trial abruptly, removing the opportunity for Bryan to question Darrow and taking away Bryan's opportunity to deliver his closing statement. When the defense waived its right to make a closing speech (under TN law), the prosecution was prevented from presenting his closing statement. Bryan died in his sleep five days after the trial (in Dayton).

2:02

Film: Mencken states that Bryan "died of a busted belly."

Reality: Darrow is the one who is quoted as saying that Bryan died of a busted belly.

2:07

Film: Darrow holds in one hand *The Origin of Species* and in the other hand a Bible. The Battle Hymn of the Republic plays in the background as he puts the two books together and leaves the courtroom, perhaps as a gesture that symbolizes theistic evolution.

Reality: As far as we know, that never took place.

Further Non-Historical Material in the Film

Darrow was not witty and wise but was rather a hostile, sarcastic and condescending man.

Bryan was a leading political figure and very much respected. He was a presidential candidate three times, elected to congress twice, was Secretary of the State for Woodrow Wilson, and served as a Colonel during the Spanish-American War. He was known as the Great Commoner because of his concern for the average American citizen. His oratorical skills were greatly admired and he was called "The Golden-Tongued Orator."

The experts were not allowed to testify in the case because their testimony was irrelevant to whether or not Scopes taught evolution. The argument was not over evolution versus creation, but whether Scopes did, in fact, violate the Butler Act by teaching evolution to students. The vast majority of the evidence that was allowed to be read into the record at the trial has since been disproven.

Scopes was never fired; he was extended an offer to continue on as a coach and teacher in the fall at Dayton High School. He elected, however, to attend graduate school on a scholarship from monies raised at the trial from the Baltimore *Evening Sun* and the scientific witnesses.

In regard to the historical ramifications of this trial, Samuel Youngs, professor at Bryan College, writes, "This trial definitely was ideological in foundation, cultural perception, and ramifications. The Butler Act material was, on both sides, the 'gateway' through which evolution could be advanced (by getting the Act struck down) or thwarted (by upholding the Act and decrying evolution in educational contexts)."

Eighteen months after the trial the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the case on a technicality. The Butler Act remained as a Tennessee statute until 1967. The court set aside the conviction on appeal because the jury, not the judge, should have decided the fine.

Carol Lannone of New York University writes: *The truth is not that Bryan was wrong about the dangers of the philosophical materialism that Darwinism presupposes but that he was right, not that he was a once great man disfigured by fear of the future but that he was one of the few to see where a future devoid of the transcendent would lead.* <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1997/02/002-the-truth-about-inherit-the-wind--36>

Additional resources

<http://www.bryan.edu/college-history/scopes-trial> (article, video reenactment of the trial, and study guide)

One hour video that includes photographs, interviews, and more:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVD4TjxnJ0M> (This video is well worth watching and possibly showing the students.)

NPR's 12 minute summation of the trial:

<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=4723956&m=4>

730675 (This video includes testimony by a resident of Dayton at the time of the trial, Eloise Reed.)

Eloise Reed (1912-2007) age 13 at the time of the trial, shares her thoughts:

<http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/scopes-monkey-trial-tested-strengthened-womans-faith>
(She is also included in the video and audio referenced above.)

Monkey Town: The Summer of the Scopes Trial by Ronald Kidd (This is a very accurate historical fiction account of the trial except for the inclusion of a relationship between Scopes and the daughter of the local drug store owner and a night time prayer meeting that takes place in the woods.)

Myths of the Trial: <http://www.doesgodexist.org/JanFeb00/TheMythOfTheScopesTrial.html>

Answers in Genesis article: <https://answersingenesis.org/scopes-trial/inherit-the-wind-an-historical-analysis/>

The courthouse in Dayton is still in use today as a court house. The basement contains a museum of memorabilia from the trial and is open to the public on weekdays. Each July a reenactment of the trial takes place in the courthouse.

If your family, class, or co-op would like to visit Bryan College and include a trip to the courthouse during your visit, please contact the admissions department. Depending on the date/time of the visit we may be able to arrange a guide to the museum and a workshop on the Scopes Trial.

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