

Evolution in the Dock

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In her new book, Brenda Wineapple brings to life one of the most inflamed chapters in the history of America's culture wars: the Scopes trial of 1925.

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Bettmann/Getty Images

William Jennings Bryan, the lead prosecutor in the Scopes trial, delivering his opening remarks, Dayton, Tennessee, July 1925

Reviewed:

Keeping the Faith: God, Democracy, and the Trial That Riveted a Nation

by Brenda Wineapple

Random House, 509 pp., \$38.00

We've seen many skirmishes in America's culture wars over the decades; one recent round, over abortion, was on the ballot in ten states during the 2024 elections. But the most dramatic battle of them all, between two of the twentieth century's greatest orators, took place in 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, after the high school teacher John Scopes was accused of violating a new state law that forbade teaching the theory of evolution. *Time* magazine called his trial a "cross between a circus and a holy war."

The confrontation inspired a 1955 play, *Inherit the Wind*, which has been widely revived; a film version, with Spencer Tracy, Fredric March, and Gene Kelly, was released in 1960 and nominated for four Academy Awards. The story remains so resonant that it has been remade for television three times, starring actors ranging from Jason Robards to George C. Scott. The actual trial lacked a romantic angle, so the play added a young woman torn between her love for the teacher and for her father, a fire-and-brimstone preacher.

Keeping the Faith, Brenda Wineapple's lively new book about the Scopes trial, comes as the culture wars have heated up again. Even though the issues have changed over the past hundred years, it is striking how the two warring sides feel much the same: cosmopolitan urban liberals against small-town white Protestants who value traditional family structure. And hovering in the background but largely unspoken, then and now, are strong feelings about race.

What made the Scopes trial such a spectacle was that this local drama had a national cast. Leading the prosecution was William Jennings Bryan, a former secretary of state and three-time Democratic nominee for president. His legendary oratory, it was said, was always "good for forty acres of parked Fords." Although he opposed an anti-lynching bill, talked about the "yellow peril" of Asian immigration, and said he was a proud member of the "greatest of all the races, the Caucasian Race," Bryan was, on most other issues, a progressive. He supported labor unions, women's suffrage, the income tax, public ownership of utilities, a ban on corporate campaign contributions, and food and drug safety laws. Not for nothing was he known as the "Great Commoner."

Opposing him as chief counsel for the defense was Clarence Darrow, not merely the country's best-known criminal defense attorney but its most famous lawyer of any kind. Darrow had argued for a long series of colorful clients, from the Socialist hero Eugene V. Debs to the Wobbly leader "Big Bill" Haywood to the McNamara brothers, accused of bombing the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1910, to countless labor activists in an era when union organizers risked beatings and death.

From the moment Bryan stepped off a train looking like a Victorian explorer with his white pith helmet in the Tennessee summer heat, the eyes of the world were on Dayton. It was impossible for Americans to imagine a greater clash of celebrities. What might be the equivalent today? Maybe a trial in Florida, say, of someone violating that state's prohibition on towns and cities taking action to fight climate change, with temporary law degrees granted to Donald Trump to argue for the prosecution and Rachel Maddow for the defense. Or perhaps Maddow would take the role of the columnist H.L. Mencken, who gave the Dayton case the name that stuck—"the Monkey Trial"—and whose stream of caustic commentary set the tone for much of the press coverage while he kibitzed with his friends at the defense table. When the defense team moved into a vacant local mansion, it became known as the Monkey House.

Wineapple describes Dayton's preparations for a flood of visitors:

Drinking fountains were installed every fifty feet around the town square, arc lights were strung from the maple trees to accommodate nighttime prayer meetings, and newly painted benches were placed near the courthouse. The interior...was repainted pale yellow, the windows were washed until they sparkled.

The biology textbook at issue quickly sold out; one enterprising citizen told an inquiring reporter he could find a copy "if you are willing to pay the price." Some urged that Dayton build an outdoor stadium for the trial. Instead, officials ordered forty-five loudspeakers—a new technology—to broadcast the proceedings to the overflow crowd on the courthouse lawn.

The townspeople relished their moment of fame with a boosterish enthusiasm that seemed far stronger than any feelings they had for or against evolution. Before the trial began, the defense team tried to get the case transferred to federal court, which would have meant moving it out of town. When a judge turned them down, a jubilant local businessman put a sign in his drugstore's window: "Dayton Keeps It."

These were the days of fully staffed newspapers, which sent 160 reporters and columnists to Dayton. Some fifty camera operators shot both still photos and newsreel footage. A microphone near the witness stand brought the trial to a national radio audience. Extra police from Chattanooga directed traffic. Fearing that the crowd packing the courtroom might make its sagging floor collapse (white plaster was starting to crumble out of the ceiling below), the judge moved the trial onto the courthouse lawn, where spectators donned straw hats. Vendors sold ice, cool drinks, sandwiches, and monkey watch fobs; preachers held forth on corners; street performers offered the chance to be photographed with chimpanzees. Hotel and boardinghouse owners made a killing. The local congressman suggested that, if need be, the War Department could provide tents and cots.

Even in Tennessee the anti-evolution law was not without its critics, Wineapple explains: “A group of university students...petitioned the legislature to consider a few more bills” to “amend the law of gravity, for instance, and do something about the excessive speed of light.” Others joined in: the Black journalist George Schuyler interviewed a gorilla at the Bronx Zoo, he said, who was appalled to be related to people:

Nobody had ever seen us carry on war, lynching each other, filling up jails, or working our little children.... Did you ever hear of monkeys allowing one of their race to appropriate all of the trees in the jungle, and then pay rent to him?

Two events no one anticipated gave the trial an extraordinary double climax. The judge denied Darrow permission to hear testimony from all but one of a group of eminent scientists he had brought to Dayton to question about evolution. But Darrow found a brilliant alternative. He asked to examine a witness about the Bible—and that witness was a man who proudly believed that it should be taken literally: Bryan, who rose to the bait. If he did not testify, Bryan said, “it will go out to the world that I am afraid to let these atheists and enemies of God’s Word question me.”

Bryan found himself in one awkward spot after another as the two men sweated in the heat of the courthouse lawn. “Do you believe Joshua made the sun stand still?” Darrow asked. Of course, Bryan said, but then he had to concede that the earth went around the sun, not the reverse. Then Darrow turned to the great Flood, from which Noah’s ark rescued the only survivors. The flood, Bryan insisted, according to the calculations of an eminent bishop, had happened 4,262 years earlier. But, Darrow asked, what about civilizations known to be more than six thousand years old?

Moving on to the story of creation, Darrow asked Bryan: If God made the sun only on the fourth day, how were the days measured up to that point? Bryan got into still deeper water when, surprisingly, he said that the six days of creation might not have been days of twenty-four hours. “Now, if you call those periods, they may have been a very long time,” Darrow prompted. “They might have been,” Bryan conceded, finally acknowledging that creation “might have continued for millions of years.” One such query followed another: If the serpent had been condemned by God to forever slither on its belly, Darrow asked, how had it gotten around before then? On its tail?

Nonetheless, after only nine minutes of deliberation, the jury found Scopes guilty. He had, after all, clearly violated the law against teaching evolution. He was fined \$100.

Then came the second dramatic flourish that ensured the trial a place in legend: five days after it ended, Bryan, who had stayed on in Dayton to do some speaking, died in his sleep. “I firmly believe,” a local minister told a crowd of shocked mourners, “that William J. Bryan went to an untimely death as a martyr fallen in the defense of the Son of God.” Mencken took a different view: “God aimed at Darrow, missed him, and hit Bryan.”

Though Darrow lost the legal case, it is tempting to feel satisfied by his brilliant rhetorical triumph over Bryan. But ominously similar divisions still run through our country, deeper than ever. And they have been exploited, as never before, by Donald Trump and a raft of other right-wing politicians.

“There is no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville nearly two centuries ago. “Thus the human mind is never left to wander across a boundless field.... It is checked from time to time by barriers which it cannot surmount.” That is certainly one continuity in the American culture wars; another, closely related, is suspicion of science. “Scientific precedents have very little weight with them,” Tocqueville said of Americans; he would not have been surprised to see the Anti-Vaccination Society of America founded less than four decades after he wrote this, and angry arguments about anti-vaxxers in the headlines today.

When Darrow managed to put a single scientist on the witness stand, Bryan mocked him as someone who had “unrolled degree after degree.” What scientists of Bryan’s day saw as the search for truth, in evolutionary biology and much else, fundamentalists saw as contempt for their faith and, by extension, for them.

Another continuity, and a dangerous one, given the disproportionate power rural states have in the Senate and the Electoral College, is that the culture wars are still largely between big cities—what Bryan scornfully referred to as the “cultured crowd”—and the rest of the country. Although Bryan was selling real estate in Florida at the time of the trial, he always portrayed himself as a man of Nebraska, which he had represented in Congress. His opponent had been born in a small town in Ohio, but Bryan pointedly referred to him in court as “my distinguished friend from Chicago,” where Darrow had spent most of his working life. And partly due to Mencken’s acid pen, the public largely viewed the Scopes trial as a clash between educated people and unlettered hicks. Mencken hated organized religion and saw the South as “almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert.”

Their dignity profoundly stung, the objects of that scorn resented it. When at one point the courtroom crowd cheered Bryan, Darrow noted contemptuously, “Great applause from the bleachers.” “From those

whom you call ‘yokels,’” Bryan replied. “I have never called them yokels,” Darrow said. That may be true, but Mencken and others who followed his lead certainly had, and repeatedly so. Such insults were keenly felt—as they are today. Hillary Clinton’s dismissal of some Trump supporters as “deplorables” may have cost her the 2016 election.

One more continuity in our culture wars is that, one level down, they are often about race. Today right-wing rage is aimed at affirmative action and at school curricula that emphasize the centrality of slavery and racism in American history, like *The New York Times’s* 1619 Project. A century ago much of the fury provoked by Darwin’s theory of evolution was against the idea that we are all descended from monkeys. Not only was “monkey” a common term of opprobrium for Black people, but for many whites, the thought that we might all have a common ancestor of any sort was horrifying. It was much more comforting to believe that the people on Noah’s ark were white and that Blacks—God’s curse upon Ham’s descendants—came later.

Finally, culture wars are fueled by the fear of losing ground. This was widespread a hundred years ago, and the theory of evolution, overturning centuries of biblical certainty, played into that fear. Many Americans of that era—above all, white Protestant men—felt threatened by the millions of Catholic and Jewish immigrants who had flooded into the country in the preceding half-century. Women could now vote, and millions of them had recently come into the labor force—a flow accelerated by World War I—with employers sometimes finding them more reliable than men. Many women no longer included the word “obey” in their wedding vows, and birth control, even when still illegal, was giving them more power over their reproductive lives. Men sensed that their traditional status was menaced. One sign of this is that the American divorce rate, although low by today’s standards, more than tripled between 1890 and 1920.

Further upending tradition, mechanical tractors and harvesters were greatly shrinking the number of Americans on family farms, with their clearly defined male and female roles stretching back centuries. And the giant new plants that produced that machinery, millions of automobiles, and so much more were bringing jobs to industrial centers like Darrow’s Chicago, not to small towns like Dayton, Tennessee.

The Scopes trial was only one sign of these tensions. A much more refined expression of them came five years later from the Southern Agrarians: the dozen writers—all white men—who published the famous essay collection *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. Although few if any of them would have contested the theory of evolution, they vigorously defended small-town and farm life and the South, largely ignoring the heritage of slavery.

Today the country is once again roiled by unsettling changes, and the fiercest culture warriors come from the parts of it that have lost out: regions like the Rust Belt, Appalachia, whose coal mines have shut down, and the southern and rural areas that have missed out on the tech boom enriching coastal cities like Seattle, Boston, and San Francisco. And today, again, it is men in these parts of the country who feel most under threat, as the election has just shown us.

The United States of 1925 could be a violent place. Seventeen Black people were lynched that year, and Klan membership was near its peak. However, one surprise for the reader of Wineapple's book is that for all its drama, the Scopes trial provoked no such violence, even rhetorically. Despite their disagreements, Darrow and Bryan had known each other for years, and Darrow had supported Bryan in two presidential campaigns. Bryan volunteered as prosecutor out of Christian belief, not vindictiveness; he even offered to pay Scopes's fine. Scopes readily agreed to be arrested and be the defendant in a case testing the new Tennessee law. Local businessmen offered to put up his bail, since no one wanted their children's teacher in jail.

Despite the impression given by Mencken and other journalists that the townspeople were hillbillies hostile to anything modern and scientific, they welcomed both sides. The Dayton Progressive Club gave banquets for both Darrow and Bryan. Scopes himself attended the one for the Great Commoner, sitting across from the man Mencken had dubbed the "Fundamentalist pope." "Bryan asked him if he was going to finish his corn and potatoes, and if not, he would," Wineapple writes. It was all amazingly friendly.

Why the difference in tone between today's bitter cultural battles and the one that took place in Tennessee in 1925? One factor, surely, was that no one was trying to turn the Scopes trial into a political campaign weapon. Bryan had not given up hope of making a final run for president, but he was a fundamentally decent man who was not planning to reach the White House on a wave of venom against his enemies. In today's Florida, for example, Governor Ron DeSantis clearly hoped to do exactly that. Besides his attacks on any discussion of global warming, he introduced a bill allowing parents to sue school districts that teach "critical race theory" (defined quite broadly), signed a law banning abortions after six weeks, and purged the leadership of the state university system's honors college. Reporters recently observed a dumpster on campus filled with discarded books from its now-closed Gender and Diversity Center. The governor's reach for the presidential nomination failed, but all over the country candidates for everything from the presidency to school boards have weaponized culture war issues like trans rights, library books, and vaccines. By comparison, the Scopes trial looks as mannerly as a high school debate tournament.

Wineapple does not take the story past the trial, but it's notable that this past summer Dayton held its thirty-fifth annual Scopes Festival, a weeklong series of events whose centerpiece is *Destiny in Dayton*, a play based on the trial and staged at the courthouse. Jurors are chosen from the audience. For extra fees, you can buy T-shirts and “a delicious 1925-style meal” on the courthouse lawn with the cast. Will our current culture wars soon be commemorated in the same cheerful spirit? It seems hard to imagine.

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Adam Hochschild's most recent book is *American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis*. (January 2025)