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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

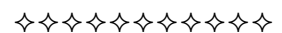
EVENTS CALENDAR

October Program

Saturday 14 October
2 p.m.
Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

The Great Monkey Trial

John Blanton will present a warmed over review of global warming. What's changed since we last did this four years ago? For one, it's warmer.



"NTS Social Dinner /Board Meeting

Saturday, October 28
7:30 p.m.
Good Eats
6950 Greenville Avenue in
Dallas

Check the **NTS Hotline** for more
information at
214-335-9248.

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1925. Subsequently he grew to be a prolific writer of fact and fiction.
 Late in his life he settled in the Dallas area and became one of us,
 occasionally talking at our meetings and meeting us socially, along with
 his charming wife Catherine. We came to call him "Sprague."

Prior to that, in 1968, Sprague de Camp published *The Great Monkey
 Trial*, undoubtedly the most meticulously researched popular book on
 the topic.

From official records of the trial, news files, personal interviews, and
 two visits to Dayton, Sprague compiled an enlightened and colorful
 account of The Great Monkey Trial. Interviews included Scopes and
 also George Rappleyea, the Dayton outsider who supported evolution
 and instigated the whole fur ball that became the "trial of the century."

From its social and political background, through the run up, the trial
 itself, and the final unraveling, Sprague gives a historian's eye to the
 events, at the same time exposing a level of detail not found in some
 romance potboilers. Sprague admits to having to fill in where first-hand
 accounts differ, but direct quotes are extensive and well documented.
 Twenty-one pages of end notes and a bibliography over six pages long
 testify to Sprague's thoroughness. The index runs over thirteen pages.

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

Casey at bat

I am reminded of Ernest Lawrence Thayer's classic poem.

Kevin Padian is president of the National Center for Science Education. He is also a leading dinosaur paleontologist. His testimony in last year's Dover, Pennsylvania, creationism lawsuit was crucial to the victory over creationism. His summary in the January–April 2006 issue of *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* contains a telling remark:

"Creationists, including the 'intelligent design' proponents, had boasted for years that their science was legitimate, that they were victims of discrimination, and that they would win if they ever got their day in court. Well, they got their day in court."

References

- 1 L. Sprague de Camp, *The Great Monkey Trial*. P. 390. Doubleday & Company, 1968
- 2 *Ibid.*, P 493.

The book

If you want your own copy of *The Great Monkey Trial* you will need to scramble for it. The book has been long out of print, and the publisher doesn't see profit in another press run.

My daughter, in a brilliant tactical move, perceived my need for this book and purchased a second hand copy for me over the Internet, thereby firmly locking in her inheritance. My copy is a first edition and well used. I have read it twice, most recently for this review while on vacation in Arizona.

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.

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.

Well, not exactly from us. He had a copy of a copy. When he started to read from his copy of copy I recognized it as an old friend. I shortly found the original reference on our Web side. I blush to say that I wrote it. Back in 1992. Who says that memory fades with age.

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

- 1 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/1992/1992may/may1992.htm#ageless>

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.
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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

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