



Even though all the names were changed, the 1960 film "Inherit the Wind" was clearly about the real-life Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, which pitted Darwin's theory of evolution against creationism in court. Spencer Tracy (left) and Fredric March (seated) played Henry Drummond and Matthew Harrison Brady, characters based on the real-life court opponents Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan. (1960) **Film re-makes: 1965, 1988, & 1999**

He who troubles his own house will inherit the wind, And the fool *will be* servant to the wise of heart. Proverb 11:29

# Monkeying with the Media

## A Case Study of the Scopes Trial and the Media's Impact

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How well do you know the facts about the 1925 Scopes trial, one of America's most famous trials of the past century? Is your knowledge based mostly on the Hollywood depiction of the "monkey" trial, or is it based on the actual accounts as recorded in the transcripts and other historical accounts?

"History is more or less bunk." That's the opinion Henry Ford expressed to a reporter from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1916. Ford was well acquainted with the media's ability to manipulate thinking about history.

A prime example of journalistic slanting began in 1925, less than a decade after Ford's assessment. That was the year of the Scopes "monkey" trial in Tennessee.

Even though that now-infamous event occurred over 80 years ago, distorted details continue to warp society's thinking concerning creation and evolution. Here's the media version many people believe:

In the sleepy town of Dayton, Tennessee, biology teacher John Scopes began teaching evolution. Angered, local fundamentalist Christians had Scopes arrested, since state law forbade the teaching of evolution. Defending free speech, Scopes valiantly went to jail. During a legal duel, agnostic Clarence Darrow defended Scopes, and the limelight-loving Christian attorney William Jennings Bryan prosecuted Scopes on behalf of the state. The young teacher emerged as a hero, and the science of evolution triumphed over the scriptural account of creation.

If this account matches what you've been told, you're a victim of disinformation. Bluntly, pro-evolution writers have made a monkey of you—in more ways than one.

The actual details of the Scopes trial are more intriguing. In March 1925 Tennessee passed new legislation called the Butler Act. That bill made unlawful the teaching in public schools "that man descended from a lower order of animals."<sup>1</sup>

Learning of this new law, the fledgling American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which had yet to win a court victory,<sup>2</sup> announced its desire to challenge the law. Newspapers carried the ACLU's press release: "We are looking for a Tennessee teacher who is willing to accept our services in testing this law in the courts."<sup>3</sup>

In the struggling town of Dayton, mine manager George Rappleyea spotted the story in the *Chattanooga Times*. Chatting with the school board chairman, a local lawyer, and others, Rappleyea suggested a scheme "to get Dayton a little publicity." They would persuade a teacher to say that he had taught evolution so that the ACLU would try their case in Dayton.<sup>4</sup>

The conspirators approached John Scopes. Would he go along with their plan? Although Scopes wasn't even the biology teacher (he was only filling in for the ill biology teacher the last two weeks of the school year), he agreed to "confess" that he had taught evolution.<sup>5</sup> After a brief trial, Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100. During the trial Scopes never took the stand and later admitted privately that he had not actually taught evolution.<sup>6</sup> Not until 42 years later did Tennessee opt to retire the Butler Act.

So how did the story get twisted? Even before the trial, many big-city journalists sided with the agnostics. As Nunnally Johnson of the *Brooklyn Eagle* later said, "For the newspapermen it was a lark on a monstrous scale .... Being admirably cultivated fellows, they were all of course evolutionists and looked down on the local fundamentalists."<sup>7</sup> H. L. Mencken of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* reported, "On the one side [believers in divine creation] was bigotry, ignorance, hatred, superstition, every sort of blackness that the human mind is capable of. On the other side was sense."<sup>8</sup> So much for objective reporting.

However, two literary works written years later would carry more widespread influence in picturing creationists as ignorant, and Darwinists as intelligent.

In 1931 Frederick Allen published *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*. Not a historian, Allen simply described the Roaring Twenties as happier times before the Depression. A portion on Scopes compressed, deleted, simplified, and misrepresented details. Even though John Scopes was found guilty, Allen concluded, "Yet really Fundamentalism had lost ... and the slow drift away from Fundamentalism certainly continued." Church statistics contradicted that claim, and the Civic Biology text used in the South was subsequently revised to delete many references to evolution. But *Only Yesterday's* tainted retelling misguided the public for years to come.<sup>9</sup>

Even more distorting is *Inherit the Wind*, a movie based on the 1955 play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee.

The playwrights never pretended to portray the Scopes trial accurately. Instead, they changed names, reversed details, injected fictional elements, and generally portrayed Darwinists as intelligent heroes. *Inherit the Wind* reduced churchgoers to loathsome caricatures that no one—including true Christians—would enjoy knowing. To this day *Inherit the Wind* continues to infect minds with falsehood through video showings and theatrical productions.

Is history bunk? Not necessarily. But in the case of the Scopes trial, the version that most people accept is certainly less fact than fiction.

## Footnotes

1. De Camp, L. Sprague, *The Great Monkey Trial*, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, NY, pp. 2, 63–64, 1968.
2. Larson, Edward J., *Summer for the Gods*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 65, 1998.
3. De Camp, p. 8.
4. Larson, pp. 88–90.
5. Olasky, Marvin and John Perry, *Monkey Business*, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, pp. 15–16, 2005.
6. De Camp, p. 432.
7. Olasky, p. 161.
8. Ibid.
9. Larson, pp. 225–228.