



The Truth About Inherit the Wind

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In the middle of the hot summer of 1925, the famous "Monkey Trial" took place in Dayton, Tennessee, a small town of about eighteen hundred people in the Cumberland Valley. A young teacher named John Scopes stood accused of violating the Butler Act, a measure passed earlier that year to restrict the teaching of evolution in state-funded schools. The defense featured the famous attorney Clarence Darrow, and the prosecution starred the celebrated orator, populist, and three-time Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. Nearly two hundred reporters descended upon the town, including H. L. Mencken of the Baltimore *Evening Sun* (which helped underwrite Scopes' defense). Newspapers and magazines carried innumerable articles and cartoons on the case, and telegraph operators wired stories to Europe and Australia. For the first time news of an American trial was nationally broadcast by radio, while thousands of people came to Dayton itself to take in what became a virtual carnival, complete with sideshows.

Thirty years later, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee set what they saw as the essence of the whole extraordinary episode in their play *Inherit the Wind*, which has since become a classic of the American theater. An acclaimed 1960 movie version, directed by Stanley Kramer and starring Spencer Tracy and Frederic March, is widely available in video stores, while the original play is frequently performed in theaters around the country. Altogether, *Inherit the Wind* supplies the view most Americans have of the Scopes Trial, and it often surfaces in response to some development in the never-ending quarrels between evolutionists and creationists. When the play was revived on Broadway in 1995 by Tony Randall's National Actors Theater, Randall-citing recent renewed efforts by the Tennessee state legislature to restrict the teaching of evolution-asserted that the play is "much more timely today than when it was written."

There is finally something shallow about the highminded social realism in much twentieth-century American drama, with its progressive and open-ended vision of life. Lawrence and Lee's skillful and often riveting collaboration in *Inherit the Wind* is no exception. As the play opens, Bertram Cates—a courageous and idealistic young teacher in Hillsboro, Tennessee—is imprisoned in the town jail for teaching evolution to his high school biology class. Matthew Harrison Brady, populist icon, three-time Democratic presidential candidate, and leader of the crusade against evolution, arrives in Hillsboro to prosecute the case, where he is greeted by the mayor and a large, enthusiastic crowd singing "Give me that old-time religion."

Also arriving in Hillsboro, however, is E. K. Hornbeck of the Baltimore *Herald*, who has championed Cates in his columns and is greatly and haughtily amused at the spectacle of ignorance and bigotry before him. Speaking in a kind of ironic poetry-patter, he constantly mocks Brady and the pious provincialism that supports him: "Ahhhh, Hillsboro-Heavenly Hillsboro / The buckle on the Bible Belt." Hornbeck announces that the lone, embattled Cates will have a defender, courtesy of the *Herald*—the great Henry Drummond, who sidles into town later that evening with little notice. Brady is adored and applauded as he pontificates about the evils of evolution and gobbles large amounts of food, but poor Drummond is shunned by the townspeople.

In the course of the trial, Brady starts out confidently, full of self-righteousness and ready rhetoric about "the Revealed Word." Not only are the courtroom spectators clearly with Brady, but the judge excludes Drummond's scientific witnesses on the grounds that evolution itself is not on trial. Desperate for some way to challenge the law under which Cates stands accused, Drummond decides to put Brady on the stand as an expert on the Bible, and Brady accepts the challenge with gusto. The ensuing examination turns the case around: Drummond exposes Brady's untenable literal acceptance of the Bible, not to mention his understanding of himself as a self-anointed prophet. The crowd begins to laugh at Brady, and, after the courtroom empties, he seeks comfort in the bosom of his mothering wife.

Though the jury brings in the inevitable guilty verdict, it is clear that Drummond has triumphed—and along with him, freedom of thought. The judge charges Cates a token fine of one hundred dollars. Protesting the light punishment, Brady tries to make what he considers an all-important closing speech, but the judge, embarrassed at the negative publicity the town has received, precipitately ends the trial. Sputtering and shouting, Brady collapses and is taken from the courtroom and shortly afterward dies.

Along the way, the play develops a conventional subplot concerning Cates' fiancée, Rachel Brown, who at first wants him to recant. Tricked by Brady into testifying about private discussions that tend to incriminate Cates as a nonbeliever, she eventually sees her mistake and finds the strength to stand beside him. Her father Jeremiah is a fire- and-brimstone preacher who, in a vengeful prayer meeting the first night of the trial, nearly scares the wits out of his daughter until the more benign Brady intervenes. The film version of *Inherit the Wind* shows the town's populace burning Cates and Drummond in effigy and throwing rocks through the window of Cates' cell. The play itself lacks these incidents, but indicates that the townspeople's response to Cates is ugly and hateful. As Drummond puts it, "You murder a wife, it isn't nearly as bad as murdering an old wives' tale."

And yet, in discussing Brady's death after the trial, Drummond repudiates the journalist Hornbeck's scathing ridicule. As Drummond sees it, Brady was a once-great man who had ceased to move forward. When Drummond, in defense of Brady, shows that he too knows the Bible, Hornbeck charges him with being even more religious than Brady was. In its closing scenes, the play emphasizes again what it suggested throughout: Brady's fundamentalism is

wrong, but so is Hornbeck's godless cynicism. The enlightened and humane Drummond's intention was not to tear down legitimate belief but only to fight ignorance and bigotry. In the last scene he picks up Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and the Bible, weighs them thoughtfully in his hands, and exits confidently with both books in his briefcase.

While *Inherit the Wind* remains faithful to the broad outlines of the historical events it portrays, it flagrantly distorts the details, and neither the fictionalized names nor the cover of artistic license can excuse what amounts to an ideologically motivated hoax. The film, for example, depicts Cates arrested in the act of teaching evolution by a grim posse of morally offended citizens, while in fact no effort was made to enforce the Butler Act. What actually brought the issue to light-never mentioned in play or film-was that the American Civil Liberties Union advertised for someone to challenge the law. Several Dayton citizens, hoping the publicity would benefit their town, approached Scopes as a possible candidate. Scopes was actually a mathematics teacher and athletic coach and had only briefly substituted as a biology teacher. He did not remember teaching evolution, but he had used the standard textbook, Hunter's *Civic Biology*, which contained a short section on the subject. Scopes was surprised to hear how relatively knowledgeable the student witnesses were, and he speculated that they must have picked up what they knew somewhere else and come to associate it with his class. Scopes himself knew little beyond the rudiments, and the defense thought it best to keep him off the stand, where his lack of knowledge (not to mention his uncertainty as to whether he had taught the subject) might prove embarrassing.

Far from being imprisoned, let alone hung in effigy, Scopes was free after his indictment. After traveling to New York to meet the ACLU Executive Board that included Norman Thomas and Felix Frankfurter, he lived in his Dayton boarding house, continuing to have friendly intercourse with the townspeople and greeting the visitors streaming into town. In fact, there was no prison sentence connected to violation of the Butler Act. Bryan actually argued against even a monetary fine, and-far from demanding a harsher penalty for Scopes-offered to pay the defendant's fine himself. Scopes attended a dinner given by the Dayton Progressive Club in honor of Bryan's arrival, and Bryan, famous for remembering people, recognized Scopes as one of a gaggle of giggling graduates he had addressed at a high school commencement six years earlier. Bryan's kindness and sincerity were acknowledged even by his enemies, and he spoke amiably to Scopes, insisting they could be friends despite their disagreement.

As for Darrow, he was greeted on his arrival in Dayton by a crowd about as large and friendly as the one that had greeted Bryan-not, as Drummond is, by a little girl screaming "Devil" in the play or a scowling mountaineer in the film. Darrow was feted at a Progressive Club dinner just as Bryan was. Being a folksy, small-town type himself, Darrow gained the good graces of the locals, and many of the spectators at the trial showed support for the defense. As a result of the perceived importance of the case, Darrow had at his side a defense team that included Arthur Garfield Hays of the ACLU, the famed international divorce lawyer Dudley Field Malone (who had served as Bryan's Undersecretary of State in the Wilson Administration), and constitutional expert John Randolph Neal. Scopes later wrote that he couldn't have done better if he'd had all the money in the world.

In *Inherit the Wind*, Cates loses his teaching job. As he makes his closing statement before being sentenced, mentioning that he is a schoolteacher, an old crone shrills out, "Not any more you ain't!" But Scopes reported in his memoir that his job was still open to him even after the verdict. People involved in his defense offered him a scholarship for graduate school, however, and he went to the University of Chicago to study geology. He believed that a later fellowship was denied him because of the trial controversy, but he did have an active career as a geologist.

The essential plot elements of *Inherit the Wind*-the lonely stand of the brave individualist against the small-minded bigotry of the townspeople, Cates' fear and trembling as he waits in his prison cell, the threat of ruin hanging over his head ("The Scopes character and his fiancée play each scene as if he were on the way to the electric chair," wrote one film reviewer)-are pure fabrication. Far from living in fear, Scopes went swimming during one hot lunchtime recess with two of the young assistant prosecutors (including Bryan's son). The reprimand Scopes received from defense attorney Hays when they were late getting back to the courtroom may have been the roughest treatment he received.

So, too, *Inherit the Wind* distorts its Bryan figure. The play does allow a certain benignity, color, and agility to the man, if only to give Drummond a worthy adversary, but in many ways it belittles him. Years after the trial, the playwrights met with Hays, who may have influenced their picture of Bryan. But many journalistic accounts even at the time depicted a past-his-prime Bryan trailing clouds of fundamentalist ignorance and, like Brady, squirming in distress on the witness stand under his adversary's questioning. Many reporters seemed to share the prejudices of Mencken, who ridiculed Bryan in print as "a tinpot pope in the coca-cola belt." The historian R. M. Cornelius, who has written a great deal on the Scopes Trial, reports, "A review of the trial press coverage reveals that the typical newsman had both an ear for a good story and a mouth hungry for Bryan's blood." One reporter never even attended the trial sessions, remarking, "I don't have to know what's going on; I know what my paper wants me to write." During the famous cross-examination by Darrow only six reporters were present; the others were taking a long lunch, thinking that the most important portions of the trial had passed. (Scopes later helped the absentee reporters file their stories.) The number of reporters dwindled during the trial, and even Mencken did not stay through the whole eight days.

A review of the actual transcript reveals that Bryan was often exuberant, funny, discerning, and focused during the trial. It also shows, contrary to *Inherit the Wind*, that he was familiar with Darwin, and may even have understood the evolutionary doctrine better than his adversaries, or at least had a better idea of what was really at stake. He did have some embarrassing moments during the ninety minutes of Darrow's relentless questioning, but he often gave as good as he got.

Bryan was not a biblical literalist. He volunteered to Darrow-it was not wormed out of him, as the play suggests-that the "days" in the biblical account of creation were not twenty-four hour days; he cited Genesis 2:4, in which the word "generations" seems to be used as a substitute for "days." He did not insist that the "sun stood still" in Joshua 10:13, but explained that the Bible was using the language of the time. At the same time he did not yield on his belief in miracles and the primacy of divine power. If his supporters felt disappointment over Bryan's testimony-the play makes much of the crowd's turning on him-it was not because he looked stupid as a defender of crude fundamentalism, but because he wasn't a defender of crude fundamentalism.

Bryan's real mistake was to take the stand at all, but he seemed to feel he had to accept Darrow's challenge to testify or implicitly admit the indefensibility of his position, and he later felt that he had at least stood his ground. "These gentlemen," he said on the stand, "came here to try revealed religion. I am here to defend it, and they can ask me any questions they please." For his part, Darrow realized that neither the constitutionality of the Butler Act nor the truth of evolution could be settled in Dayton, but he relished the publicity he could gain for his cause: "Preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States," as he memorably put it.

But it is certainly not true that Bryan and his beliefs were crushed in Dayton. Scopes himself,

even while sporadically trying to render a portrait of a broken man, remarked that the Great Commoner seemed amazingly buoyant during the trial, always remaining "the exuberant Bryan who could survive any defeat." And while the antievolutionary cause may have suffered embarrassment, the guilty verdict was overturned a year later only on a technicality. Several state laws similar to the Butler Act were not declared unconstitutional until 1968.

It is true that Bryan was not able to deliver the lengthy closing statement he considered his life's "mountain peak," but not because the judge cut short the trial. Rather, after the cross-examination of Bryan (which was stricken from the record the following day), Darrow stated his willingness to accept a guilty verdict in order to move to appeal. This obviated the need for closing statements. Darrow later admitted that the defense had purposely wanted to deprive Bryan of his closing statement for fear of his legendary oratorical powers.

Moreover, Bryan did not have a mortal stroke in the courtroom, but died five days after the trial. His death may have been due partly to exhaustion and stress, but he also suffered from a diabetic condition that he did not carefully watch. He passed away peacefully during an afternoon nap and after a heavy meal. (The irreverent line spoken by the cynical Hornbeck at Brady's death-"He died of a busted belly"-was actually Darrow's private remark on hearing that Bryan had died.) But as historian Lawrence W. Levine puts it, if Bryan was destroyed by the trial, "he did a masterly job of concealing it during the five days of life remaining to him." Bryan took heart in the legal victory and set himself to the fight with renewed vigor. He traveled, gave speeches, and arranged for publication of the address he had not been permitted to deliver. Scopes himself denied that the trial killed Bryan, though perhaps because he did not want his side to bear the onus.

Even in small things, *Inherit the Wind* goes out of its way to diminish Bryan. Drummond derides the honorary title of "Colonel" that Hillsboro bestows upon Brady, protesting, "I am not familiar with Mr. Brady's military record." In fact, Bryan had been a colonel in the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War (though he never saw combat). The play's Brady is mothered by a wife who cradles him in her bosom, murmuring, "Baby, Baby," though Bryan's wife was actually a semi-invalid of whom he was protective and solicitous.

These systematic alterations serve a single, obvious end: to ridicule Bryan and his followers for their backwardness and religious prejudice. The stage directions instruct, "It is important to the concept of the play that the town is visible always, looming there, as much on trial as the individual defendant." The thinker is in jail, while the "morons" (as Mencken called them) roam free-led by Brady, "the idol of all Morondom" (as Darrow later termed Bryan). The stage directions indicate the time of the play as "Not too long ago," and the playwrights' note- always included in any production's program-declares ominously, "It might have been yesterday. It could be tomorrow." The trial, as Arthur Garfield Hays put it, "was a battle between two types of mind-the rigid, orthodox, accepting, unyielding, narrow, conventional mind, and the broad, liberal, critical, cynical, skeptical, and tolerant mind."

But was it really so simple? Since much of Bryan's political progressivism is in keeping with the playwrights' own views, they split the Bryan figure in two-the "enlightened" progressive champion of the common man versus the "bigoted" religious fundamentalist. Drummond, who had supported Brady in two of his presidential bids (as Darrow had supported Bryan in real life), says at Brady's death, "A giant once lived in that body. But Matt Brady got lost. Because he was looking for God too high up and too far away." In fact, the two sides of Bryan, the democratic and the religious, were complementary. According to historian LeRoy Ashby, Bryan was sustained by "the combined heritages of evangelical faith and the republicanism of the nation's revolutionary era." The democracy he worked for was built upon "the virtuous citizen,"

and he worried that Darwinism "would cause people to lose a sense of God's presence. . . . It justified an economic jungle and 'discourages those who labor for the improvement of man's condition.'" Convinced as he was that belief in God and in man's spiritual nature was vital to human progress and a just social order, Bryan was troubled by numerous reports he had received of young people who had lost their faith under the tutelage of skeptical, even atheistic, professors. Bryan believed in separation of church and state, but, according to Ashby, he felt such stories of lost faith indicated "that the state was in fact teaching against religion, and that atheists and evolutionists were enjoying something against which democratic reformers had long battled-special privileges."

Although *Inherit the Wind* presents a Bryan torn by fear of change, it was actually Darrow who was caught in contradictions. Darrow was an agnostic determinist-the play's suggestion that Drummond may be "more religious" than Brady is another fabrication-who believed that human beings are driven by forces beyond their control. Yet in the Scopes Trial he defended the individual mind and freedom of thought. Darrow's questions to Scopes' students-"Did it hurt you any?", Do you "still believe in church although you were told all life comes from a single cell?" (the play adds "Haven't murdered anybody since breakfast?")-were simply disingenuous. One year earlier, Darrow had defended Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, two brilliant university students who murdered a boy for the intellectual experience of committing the perfect crime. At Dayton, Bryan read out Darrow's famous excuse for the earlier defendants: "Is there any blame attached because somebody took Nietzsche's philosophy seriously and fashioned his life on it? . . . Your Honor, it is hardly fair to hang a nineteen-year-old boy for the philosophy that was taught him at the university." As Richard Weaver commented on Bryan's use of the Leopold and Loeb record: "To Darrow's previous position that the doctrine of Nietzsche is capable of immoral influence, Bryan responded that the doctrine of evolution is likewise capable of immoral influence."

Both the play and the movie version of *Inherit the Wind* vastly oversimplify religion's relation to evolution. The play insists that there is no contradiction between Christianity and Darwinism. "It is only a matter of the method He has chosen in creation," Maynard M. Metcalf, a zoologist from Oberlin College, declared in expert testimony permitted at the trial (though not before the jury). As the play's Cates puts it, "Living comes from a long miracle, it didn't just happen in seven days." The defense, both actual and fictional, wanted to isolate an ignorant, biblical literalism as the only kind of religion that disputes evolution. And, indeed, they have been joined in this view by many mainstream religious leaders in the seventy years since. This understanding has been challenged more recently, however, by such credible figures as Phillip E. Johnson of the University of California, and William B. Provine, an historian of science from Cornell. A leading adherent of Darwinian evolution, Provine has observed that "prominent evolutionists have joined with equally prominent theologians and religious leaders to sweep under the rug the incompatibilities of evolution and religion." Provine insists that evolution finds no intelligent design operating in nature and "no such thing as immortality or life after death." In fact, according to Provine, "we're produced by a process that gives not one damn about us."

Peter Steinfels, the *New York Times* religion reporter, heard Provine speak at a symposium on the Scopes Trial held at Vanderbilt University in 1995 and concluded: "It is easy to look back at the battle between rural piety and city cynicism waged seventy years ago in the Dayton courthouse, and feel superior. But maybe those people were right in thinking that something very important was at stake." The man who has been made a laughing stock thanks in part to *Inherit the Wind* seems actually to have understood all this in 1925. "The evolutionists have not been honest with the public," declared Bryan (who was, for what it's worth, a member of the

American Academy for the Advancement of Science). He cautioned that "Christians who have allowed themselves to be deceived into believing that evolution is a beneficent, or even a rational, process have been associating with those who either do not understand its implications or dare not avow their knowledge of these implications." In *Inherit the Wind*, Drummond gives a tough-sounding speech about the tradeoffs of progress, instructing the jury that every advance of civilization requires that something be surrendered: "Darwin moved us forward to a hilltop, where we could look back and see the way from which we came. But for this view, this insight, this knowledge, we must abandon our faith in the pleasant poetry of Genesis." Yet, by play's end, Drummond is purveying some pleasant poetry of his own, indicating that Darwin and the Bible are compatible for all but a few religious fanatics.

Even the certainty of the doctrine of evolution was considerably oversimplified in both the real Scopes Trial and the fictional version in *Inherit the Wind*. Professor Metcalf testified at the real trial, "It is impossible for a normal human being, cognizant of the facts, to have the slightest doubt about the fact of evolution," and the fictional Drummond argues, "What Bertram Cates spoke quietly one spring afternoon in the Hillsboro High School is . . . incontrovertible as geometry in every enlightened community of minds."

But is it? Bryan shrewdly described evolution as a hypothesis-"millions of guesses strung together"-rather than proven theory. And he knew what was missing: "There is not a scientist in all the world who can trace one single species to any other." Nearly a century and a half after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, the proof for Darwin's theory remains spotty, according to Phillip E. Johnson and others. Bryan sounds at least reasonable when he argues, "If the results of evolution were unimportant, one might require less proof in support of the hypothesis, but before accepting a new philosophy of life, built upon a materialistic foundation, we have reason to demand something more than guesses."

Ultimately, however, the truth of evolution is not the theme of *Inherit the Wind*, but the "right to think," and even the "right to be wrong." (The film adds a "right to be lonely" for the misanthropic Hornbeck.) What the play seeks ultimately to defend are the larger prerogatives of "the broad, liberal, critical, cynical, skeptical, and tolerant mind." After the trial, Cates' fiancée Rachel, who has left her father's joylessly pious household, recites the lesson she has learned as she joins the forces of the enlightened:

You see, I haven't really thought very much. I was always afraid of what I might think-so it seemed safer not to think at all. But now I know. A thought is like a child inside our body. It has to be born. . . . Bad or good, it doesn't make any difference. The ideas have to come out- like children.

Of course, such a simple choice between bigotry and enlightenment is central to the contemporary liberal vision of which *Inherit the Wind* is a typical expression. But while it stands nominally for tolerance, latitude, and freedom of thought, the play is full of the self-righteous certainty that it deplores in the fundamentalist camp. Some critics have detected the play's sanctimonious tone-"bigotry in reverse," as Andrew Sarris called it-even while appreciating its dramatic quality and well-written leading roles. The play reveals a great deal about a mentality that demands open-mindedness and excoriates dogmatism, only to advance its own certainties more insistently-that promotes tolerance and intellectual integrity but stoops to vilifying the opposition, falsifying reality, and distorting history in the service of its agenda.

In fact, a more historically accurate dramatization of the Scopes Trial than *Inherit the Wind* might have been far richer and more interesting-and might also have given its audiences a genuine dramatic tragedy to watch. It would not have sent its audience home full of moral superiority and happy thoughts about the march of progress. 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. The antievolutionist crusade to control what is taught in the schools may not have been the answer, and Bryan's own approach may have been too narrow. But the real tragedy lies in the losing fight that he and others like him waged against a modernity increasingly deprived of spiritual foundations.

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