

— CHAPTER NINE —

RETELLING THE TALE

THE MODERN SCOPES legend emerged during a thirty-year period bracketed by the appearance of two enormously popular creative works. The process began in 1931, when *Harper's* magazine editor Frederick Lewis Allen published his surprise best-seller, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*, and culminated in 1960 with the release of *Inherit the Wind*, a popular motion picture based on a long-running Broadway play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. Far more than anything that actually happened in Dayton, these two works shaped how later generations would come to think of the Scopes trial.

In writing *Only Yesterday*, Allen never specifically intended to shape public perceptions of the trial; as the country sank into the Great Depression, he simply sought to relate the happier days of the Roaring Twenties in a lively, journalistic fashion. Without any formal training in historical methods but with a reporter's knack for chronicling events, Allen drew up a calendar for the decade and used old almanacs and periodicals to fill in top news stories for each month. He then transformed his outline into a fast-paced narrative. As the major news story of mid-1925, the Scopes trial became the feature event of a middle chapter in Allen's book.

Allen presented the trial in cartoonlike simplicity. The growing "prestige of science" sapped the "spiritual dynamic" from modern America, he asserted. Fundamentalists, in reaction, clung to "the letter of the Bible and refused to accept any teaching, even of science, which seemed to conflict with it." Modernists, in contrast, "tried to reconcile their beliefs with scientific thought; to throw overboard what was out of date." Skeptics, "nourished on outlines of science," abandoned religion. "All through the decade the three-sided conflict reverberated. It reached its climax in the Scopes case in the summer of 1925," Allen wrote. "In the eyes of the public, the trial was a battle between Fundamentalists on the one hand and twentieth-century skepticism (assisted by Modernism) on the other." Subplots, he suggested, included "rural piety" versus urban sophistication and the South against the North. The defense's fight for individual liberty and the prosecution's appeal to majoritarianism disappeared from Allen's version of events, as did the ACLU and the WCFA. His account pit Darrow against Bryan in a bitter, farcical encounter set amid a media frenzy in the circuslike atmosphere of Dayton boosterism. "The climax—both of bitterness and of farce—came on the afternoon of July 20th," when Bryan "affirmed his belief" in various Old Testament miracles under Darrow's withering interrogation. "The sort of religious faith which he represented could not take the witness stand and face reason as a prosecutor," Allen concluded. "Theoretically, Fundamentalism had won, for the law stood. Yet really Fundamentalism had lost . . . and the slow drift away from Fundamentalist certainty continued."¹

In *Only Yesterday*, Allen reduced fundamentalism to antievolutionism and antievolutionism to Bryan. Both reductions grossly oversimplified matters and forced Allen to reconstruct the story. For example, he wrote that under Darrow's questioning, "Bryan affirmed his belief that the world was created in 4004 B.C.," whereas Darrow actually wrung out a concession that the Genesis days of creation represented long periods of time, leading to Darrow's triumphant claim that "Bryan had contradicted his own faith." Also, Allen never mentioned Bryan's forced admission on the stand of his ignorance about science, which earlier commentators viewed as so important in debunking antievolutionism. Allen noted only the Commoner's blind faith in the Bible. Yet equating Bryan with fundamentalism enabled Allen to become the first published commentator to transform Bryan's personal humiliation at

Dayton into a decisive defeat for fundamentalism generally. Of course, he could not cite much hard evidence to support his claim that Americans were losing their religion. Indeed, he conceded, "If religion lost ground during the Post-war Decade, the best available church statistics gave no sign of the fact." He dismissed such statistics as superficial, however. "In the congregations," he maintained, "there was an undeniable weakening of loyalty to the church and an undeniable vagueness as to what it had to offer them."² This had been true in his own life, but to extrapolate it to all Americans—and to suggest that the Scopes trial contributed to the process—was sheer speculation.

Allen never claimed to offer more than he delivered. "This book is an attempt to tell, and in some measure to interpret, the story of what in the future may be considered a distinct era in American history," he wrote in the preface. "One who writes at such close range, while recollections are still fresh, has a special opportunity to reveal the fads and fashions and the follies of the time [and] . . . leave to subsequent historians certain events . . . the effect of which . . . may not be fully measurable for a long time."³ This approach struck a responsive chord in the thirties. Allen geared his book for a popular audience and cautiously hoped for modest success, but nostalgia for the twenties propelled sales beyond his wildest dreams. It quickly became a best-seller and ultimately sold over a million copies—more than any other nonfiction book of the decade. More remarkably, it influenced historians and remained widely used as a college history text for more than half a century. "No one has done more to shape the conception of the American 1920s than Frederick Lewis Allen," the historian Roderick Nash later observed about Allen's book. It "has been the font at which most subsequent writers about the decade initially drank." Owing to Allen's method of "seizing on the decade's most glamorous aspects and generalizing from a few headlines," Nash added, "the book's most enduring bequest to later historians has been the idea that older American values, traditions, and ideals meant little or nothing to the 1920s."⁴

By portraying the Scopes trial as a decisive defeat for old-time religion, Allen fit the episode neatly into his general conception of the twenties as a time when America repudiated its Victorian traditions. As a result, readers accepting Allen's interpretation saw the trial as a step in the triumph of reason over revelation and science over superstition in modern America. Darrow might welcome such a verdict, but it did

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not particularly serve the interests of the ACLU, which had instigated the trial as a means to fight for freedom rather than against religion. In fact, Allen's presentation of fundamentalism as a vanquished foe frustrated ongoing ACLU efforts to portray it as a persistent threat to individual liberty. Moreover, it may have encouraged evolutionists to let down their guard. The Harvard biologist Ernst Mayr immigrated into the United States in the year that Allen's book appeared. "Looking back that far, my impression is that I thought that this trial was the end of the fundamentalist attacks on evolution," he later wrote. "I believe my interpretation was widely shared by American evolutionists. As a result not much time and effort was spent by evolutionists in America to prove the fact of evolution and to refute the claims of the fundamentalists."⁵

In addition to attributing a decisive outcome to the trial, *Only Yesterday* perpetuated various misconceptions about events at Dayton. For example, not only did Allen pass along an altered version of Bryan's trial testimony, he sharpened the entire episode. Darrow's drawn-out questions "about Jonah and the whale, Joshua and the sun," and the like, now appeared in rapid-fire succession, without any indication of Bryan's various answers, and the dramatic call for Bryan to take the stand occurred "on the spur of the moment," according to Allen, instead of as a carefully planned maneuver. He seriously confused the trial's origins. In his account, the idea for the lawsuit came from Rappleyea and Scopes, not the ACLU; Scopes then intentionally broke the law and "was arrested" while Rappleyea "secured for Scopes the legal assistance of Clarence Darrow" and others. Allen surely did not mean to distort the story—he simply relied on inaccurate news accounts and his own faulty memory. Through his book, this version of events passed into the Scopes legend.⁶

Later writers adopted Allen's verdict and accepted his depiction of events. Gaius Glen Atkins relied heavily on *Only Yesterday* in writing his semipopular 1932 account, *Religion in Our Times*. The journalist Mark Sullivan did the same for his 1935 best-seller, *Our Times: The United States, 1900–1925*. Both books presented the trial as the decisive event in the history of American fundamentalism. For Atkins, it "marked the furthestmost advance of the movement." Sullivan called it the "explosive climax" of the fundamentalist controversy. Both portrayed Darrow's interrogation of Bryan as the turning point when, as

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Atkins put it, religion was "made to look ridiculous." Science and critical thought triumphed, he concluded: "The Scopes trial marked the end of the age of *Amen* and the beginning of the age of *Oh Yeah!*"⁷ William W. Sweet revised his widely used collegiate religious studies text, *The Story of Religion in America*, to reflect the new view. The 1930 edition of his book depicted the trial as a media event that did not reach the "broad issues" raised by fundamentalism. According to the 1939 edition, however, the trial resolved these issues in the public mind. "Bryan said evolution . . . made God unnecessary, denied the Bible and destroyed all belief in the supernatural," Sweet wrote. "Darrow attempted to make Bryan look ridiculous and submitted him to a mocking examination. It was Fundamentalism's last stand." The Scopes trial became a watershed event. Secular commentators generally concurred with the novelist Irving Stone's 1941 analysis that the Darrow-Bryan clash "dealt a deathblow to Fundamentalism."⁸

Although Allen unintentionally misinterpreted events leading up to and including the trial itself, ongoing developments led later commentators to follow him. By the 1930s, fundamentalist political activity had decreased to such an extent that outside observers thought the movement had died. The Scopes trial offers a convenient explanation for this development, but the timing doesn't quite fit. Riley, Straton, and other fundamentalist leaders initially perceived the trial as a victory for their side; none seemed despondent about it at the time. Furthermore, antievolution activism increased noticeably for several years following the verdict, with additional states imposing restrictions. Fundamentalist church membership continued to grow during the twenties and on into the future. While it is true that open warfare between fundamentalists and modernists quieted down during the late 1920s, and that the political crusade to outlaw teaching evolution ended by 1930, at most the Scopes trial contributed only indirectly to any apparent decline of fundamentalism.

Each side went to Dayton confident that a full airing of the issues would aid its cause. "I am expecting a tremendous reaction as the result of the information which will go out from Dayton," Bryan wrote shortly before the trial. The defense made similar pretrial predictions about its prospects, such as Scopes's observation, "There is no doubt in my mind that through this open, frank discussion, a better understanding will result." Each side left Dayton confident that it had achieved its

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objective.⁹ On this issue, discussion did not resolve disagreement; each side so deeply believed in its position that further information simply increased its vehemence.

By focusing attention on the topic of teaching evolution, the Scopes trial encouraged both sides—with the result that, by the end of the decade, most states or localities where fundamentalists held political power had imposed antievolution restrictions by law, administrative ruling, or school board resolution. This included most of the South and some of the West. In the North, however, efforts to outlaw teaching evolution met with stiff resistance and humiliating defeat. In 1927 alone, antievolution bills lost in over half a dozen northern states. The most stunning setback occurred in Riley's home state of Minnesota where, despite an all-out blitz by fundamentalists, the bill lost by an eight-to-one margin in the state legislature. "This dismal failure was a crushing blow," Riley biographer William Vance Trollinger, Jr., wrote, and it "signalled the end of William Bell Riley's efforts to secure antievolution legislation."¹⁰ The campaigning ended, however, only after it became obvious that each side had reached the geographical limit of its influence. All of the commentators who later pronounced that fundamentalism had died in Dayton (such as Allen, Atkins, and Sullivan) came from the North, where the trial had set back antievolutionism. Southerners saw it differently. During the thirties, for example, the North Carolina sociologist Howard W. Odum could still report about his region that "upon all questions, political, financial, educational, scientific, and technical, the judgement of religion and scripture was likely to be invoked."¹¹ Furthermore, once in place, no southern antievolution restriction was repealed for over forty years.

Alternative reasons existed for the decline in antievolution activity at the time. By the thirties, fundamentalists had less reason for concern about teaching evolution than before the Scopes trial. Not only had many states and school districts limited such instruction, but their restrictions influenced the content of high school biology textbooks everywhere. To serve the southern market and in response to heightened sensitivity about the topic, national textbook writers became increasingly less dogmatic in their presentation of Darwinism. This process began even before the trial. Worried about sales of its biology text, for example, one major publisher sought an endorsement from Bryan by offering to present evolution as a "theory" rather than

"dogma." Bryan welcomed the suggestion, but responded, "It would take a great deal in the way of elimination and addition to make it clear that evolution is presented only as a hypothesis."²² After the Scopes trial, many biology textbooks underwent such revision.

The evolution of George W. Hunter's *Civic Biology* exemplified the process. The Tennessee Textbook Commission dropped the book from its approved list shortly after Scopes's indictment for using it. A year later, the book's publisher deleted a six-page section on evolution from copies of the text sold in some southern states, and Hunter began work on revising the entire book. He cut out the section title, The Doctrine of Evolution, and deleted charts illustrating the evolution of species. A revised passage about the "development of man" looked back only to "races of man who were much lower in their civilization than the present inhabitants" rather than to subhuman species, and included the biblically orthodox addition, "Man is the only creature that has moral and religious instincts." A paragraph on "natural selection" remained, but with every sentence qualified as something that Darwin "suggested," "believed," or "said." Hunter no longer hailed Darwin as "the grand old man of biology," and the phrase about Darwin, "his wonderful discovery of the doctrine of evolution," became "his interpretation of the way in which all life changes." Indeed, the inflammatory word *evolution* disappeared altogether from the post-Scopes version of the text, and equivocation replaced certainty wherever evolutionary concepts remained. Other schoolbook writers followed Hunter's example.²³ By the time Hunter finished, antievolutionists had little grounds for complaint, though they scarcely would admit it.

Fundamentalists continued to complain about Darwinism, of course, even if they stopped crusading against teaching evolution. Moreover, fundamentalism did not die. To the contrary, it attracted an ever-increasing number of adherents nourished on a steady diet of antievolution books, articles, and tracts published by conservative Christian presses. Riley continued to churn out antievolution pamphlets long after he gave up crusading for antievolution legislation. He often appeared with Harry Rimmer, an itinerant evangelist and self-proclaimed scientist who wrote dozens of antievolution booklets during the decade following the Scopes trial. On at least two occasions, these two popular antievolution speakers entertained large fundamentalist audiences by debating the relative merits of the "day/age" and

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“gap” theories for reconciling a literal reading of the Genesis account with geological evidence of a long earth history. Neither ever wavered in his commitment to the Adam and Eve account of human creation, however.

At the same time, the Adventist science educator George McCready Price gained an increased following among fundamentalists for his creationist theory of flood geology that dispensed with any need for stretching the age of the earth beyond the under 10,000 years provided by an ultraliteral reading of the Genesis account of creation and Noah’s Flood. “In the years after the Scopes trial,” the historian of creationism Ronald L. Numbers noted, Price “emerged as one of the two most popular scientific authorities in fundamentalist circles, the other being Rimmer. In addition to appearing regularly in Adventist magazines, his prose frequently graced the pages of the most widely read fundamentalist periodicals.” As for Rimmer, the leading conservative Christian publisher, William B. Eerdmans, reprinted his antievolution booklets in a series of books that sold over 100,000 copies during the 1940s and 1950s. Although Rimmer and Price rarely championed antievolution laws, they laid a solid foundation of antievolutionism among American fundamentalists during the post-Scopes era.¹⁴

Antievolutionism managed to survive and flourish even as commentators pronounced it dead and gone because its proponents focused their efforts inward, within the fundamentalist church, rather than outward, toward the general public. Beyond the church, people did not hear about Rimmer and Price during the thirties in the way they had heard about Bryan and Riley during the twenties. The leading evangelical historian, George M. Marsden, attributed this development to the Scopes trial. “It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of ‘the Monkey Trial’ at Dayton, Tennessee, in transforming fundamentalism,” Marsden wrote. “The rural setting . . . stamped the entire movement with an indelible image. Very quickly, the conspicuous reality of the movement seemed to conform to the image thus imprinted and the strength of the movement in the centers of national life waned precipitously.”¹⁵ Fundamentalism, which began amid revivals in northern and West Coast cities, appeared increasingly associated with the rural South. The national media ceased covering its normal activities. Conservatives lost influence within mainline Protestant denominations. The string of legislative defeats for antievolution bills in northern states

made further political activity outside the South seem futile. After the Scopes trial, elite American society stopped taking fundamentalists and their ideas seriously.

Indeed, *fundamentalism* became a byword in American culture as a result of the Scopes trial, and fundamentalists responded by withdrawing. They did not abandon their faith, however, but set about constructing a separate subculture with independent religious, educational, and social institutions. The historian Joel A. Carpenter traced these activities in the development of fundamentalist colleges and schools, conferences and camps, radio ministries, and missionary societies during the 1930s. The founding of Bryan College in Dayton fit the pattern perfectly. As membership in mainline Protestant associations shrank during the Great Depression, it surged ahead in most fundamentalist denominations—a phenomenon that Carpenter attributed to the role these churches played in providing “ordinary people with a compelling critique of modern society.”¹⁶

Antievolutionism continued to feature prominently in this critique and remained a virtual tenet of Protestant fundamentalism in the United States. Rimmer, Price, and other antievolutionists spoke widely at fundamentalist churches and conferences. Their followers taught science at fundamentalist colleges and schools, which typically required all teachers and students to affirm their belief in biblical inerrancy. Bryan College twice invited Rimmer to become its president and welcomed Price to speak on campus.

Just as fundamentalists built their own religious institutions parallel to the traditional Protestant structures that shunned them, they sought to build separate institutional structures for propagating creationist scientific theories. “During the heady days of the 1920’s, when their activities made frontpage headlines, creationists dreamed of converting the world; a decade later, forgotten and rejected by the establishment, they turned their energies inward and began creating an institutional base of their own,” Numbers observed.¹⁷ Price co-founded the creationist Religion and Science Association in 1935, for example, but soon left to form the stricter Deluge Geology Society. For a time, antievolutionism also found a home within the American Scientific Affiliation, a professional association of evangelical science educators created in 1941. These organizations and their journals provided an independent institutional base for creationism outside mainstream science. By the 1940s, a fundamen-

talist subculture had formed in the United States, with a creationist scientific establishment of its own.

Although the Scopes trial helped push fundamentalists out of mainstream American culture, they seemed almost eager to go. A separatist streak marked elements of conservative American Protestantism ever since the Pilgrims set foot on Plymouth Rock in 1620. Some distinct creationist sects, such as the Amish and Jehovah Witnesses, always isolated themselves from secular society. Others, such as the Mormons and some ultra-Orthodox Jews and Christians, tended to live in their own communities. The African-American church never had much contact with America's lily-white scientific establishment. Many strands that united under the fundamentalist banner during the early part of the century, including dispensational premillennialism and the holiness movement, had strong tendencies to renounce modern society. Their Bible told them that they were "not of this world" and that "God made foolish the wisdom of this world."¹⁸ Bryan, Riley, and Straton prodded fundamentalists to carry their light to the world, but when the world rejected that light and martyred their champion at Dayton, the next generation of fundamentalist leaders—including John R. Rice, Carl McIntire, and Bob Jones, Sr.—called them back to separation. In the words of a popular hymn of the thirties, fundamentalists gladly sang,

Just a few more weary days and then, I'll fly away;
To a land where joys will never end, I'll fly away.
. . . When I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away."¹⁹

In the meantime, they felt little need to submit to the dominant culture and quietly built an ever larger and more intricate subculture of their own.

America's social elite ignored these developments for decades and institutionalized its view of the Scopes trial. Following Frederick Lewis Allen, the trial became an increasingly significant symbolic victory for liberal progress over the forces of reaction. Yet Allen dealt only with the 1920s. Political historians covering a broad sweep of modern American history faced a dilemma: Bryan stood at the center of two supposedly watershed events in American history—the populist revolt of the 1890s and the Scopes trial of the 1920s—but he had shifted sides. The same historians who deified the young Bryan of the nineties demonized the elderly Bryan of the twenties.

Richard Hofstadter, a leading American historian of the mid-twentieth century, set the tone. "Bryan decayed rapidly during his closing years. The post-war era found him identified with some of the worst tendencies in American life—prohibition, the crusade against evolution, real-estate speculation, and the Klan," Hofstadter wrote in his 1948 classic, *The American Political Tradition*. "As his political power slipped away, Bryan welcomed the opportunity to divert himself with a new crusade," he explained. "The Scopes trial, which published to the world Bryan's childish conception of religion, also reduced to the absurd his inchoate notions of democracy." In short, Hofstadter described Bryan as "a man who at sixty-five had long outlived his time." Later historians would reconstruct a more balanced picture of Bryan, showing that he never truly changed during his political career, but the Hofstadter view reigned for a generation and influenced American history textbooks even longer.²⁰

The Scopes trial became a popular topic for historians during the fifties. In 1954, for example, Norman F. Furniss made it the pivotal event in his book on the fundamentalist controversy.²¹ Two years later, William E. Leuchtenburg's influential book, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914–1932*, cast antievolutionism as a peril to progress and the Scopes trial as the purgative. Ray Ginger contributed the first authoritative book-length study of the trial in 1958. Furniss and Leuchtenburg relied heavily on Allen's depiction of events at Dayton and interpretation of the outcome. For Leuchtenburg, "the campaign to preserve America as it was, to resist the forces of change, came to a head in the movement of Protestant Fundamentalism climaxed by the Scopes trial." In the end, he concluded, "The antievolutionists won the Scopes trial; yet, in a more important sense, they were defeated, overwhelmed by the tide of cosmopolitanism."²² Ginger titled a concluding chapter, "To the Losers Belong the Spoils," and drew the lesson from Bryan's "fatal error of tactics: if a person holds irrational ideas and insists that others should accept them because of their authoritative source, he should never agree to be questioned about them."²³ In his 1955 book, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, Hofstadter reasserted, "The pathetic postwar career of Bryan himself, once the bellwether for so many of the genuine reforms, was a perfect epitome of the collapse of rural idealism and the shabbiness of the evangelical mind."²⁴

Hofstadter's collegiate American history textbook (which appeared

in various editions with several co-authors beginning in 1957) presents the standard historical interpretation of the Scopes trial. In Hofstadter's work, fundamentalism appears alongside the Red Scare, the Ku Klux Klan, immigration restrictions, and Prohibition in a section on the "intolerance" that darkened the 1920s. The subsection "Fundamentalism" consists solely of a summary description of the Scopes trial. Ever since, nearly every American history survey text has lumped fundamentalism with reactionary forces during the 1920s and featured similar depictions of the Scopes trial. Many continue to perpetuate Allen's account that, as one popular textbook asserts, Scopes intentionally "lectured to his class on evolution and was arrested." Most reduce the trial to an emotional encounter between Darrow and Bryan that resulted in a decisive moral defeat for fundamentalism. Leuchtenburg's textbook called it "nineteenth-century America's last stand." Another text adopted the title "Only Yesterday" for its chapter on the twenties, concluding its account of the trial with the observation, "Darrow and company had won a signal victory by making fundamentalism henceforth the butt of ridicule." As in many of the texts, the ACLU and all of Darrow's co-counsel entirely lost their place in history.²⁵

Once Riley, Straton, and other antievolution leaders associated with prosecuting the Scopes case passed from the scene, fundamentalists did little to contest the popular interpretation stamped on the trial by secular commentators and historians. Bent on separating their movement from the general culture, the next generation of fundamentalist leaders largely ignored the trial and its impact on society—a development that later, more worldly fundamentalists would come to deplore.²⁶ Fundamentalist students increasingly attended separate academies and colleges that, typically, did not utilize textbooks that either criticized or contradicted their faith. Most likely, only a few fundamentalists actually read what secular authors wrote about the Scopes trial, and most of them probably did not care.

Even creationist science lecturers and writers abandoned the prosecutors of John Scopes. During the late 1920s, Harry Rimmer and Arthur I. Brown defended Bryan's efforts at Dayton, but they did so less in later years.²⁷ The position of George McCready Price changed even more dramatically. A week before the trial, he advised Bryan to concentrate on the "utterly divisive and 'sectarian' character" of teaching evolution: "This you are capable of doing, I do not know of any

one more capable." Yet Price turned against Bryan after the Commoner testified that the days of creation in Genesis represented ages of geological history. At first, Price simply commented that Bryan "really didn't know a thing about the scientific aspects of the case." By the 1940s, however, Price even surpassed secular commentators in describing the trial as a crushing defeat for fundamentalism, "which may be regarded as a turning point in the intellectual and religious history of mankind." He blamed the entire disaster on "poor Bryan, with his day-age theory of Genesis."²⁸ Later fundamentalist proponents of a more recent creation agreed. Price's successor at the helm of the "scientific" creationist movement, Henry M. Morris, commented, "Probably the most serious mistake made by Bryan on the stand was to insist repeatedly that he had implicit confidence in the infallibility of Scripture, but then to hedge on the geological question, relying on the day/age theory."²⁹ Of course, Bryan simply testified to what he and many prominent fundamentalists of his day believed. Nevertheless, late-twentieth-century fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell maintained that Bryan "lost the respect of Fundamentalists when he subscribed to the idea of periods of time for creation rather than twenty-four hour days."³⁰

During the period of fundamentalists' self-imposed isolation from the broader culture, it took threats to repeal the Tennessee antievolution statute to arouse even Bryan College stalwarts to defend the memory of Bryan's role at the trial. The first such threat came in 1935, when a 22-year-old Tennessee state representative—described in the press as a "pipe-smoking Vanderbilt law student"—offered legislation to repeal the statute. Bryan College teachers and students beseeched legislators with letters and petitions condemning the repealer. Sue Hicks, then a state representative, warned his colleagues that "repeal of the law might endanger" the college. Another lawmaker declared on the state house floor, "I believe that God looked down from high Heaven on Dayton when William Jennings Bryan was there sacrificing his blood not only in the interests of man, but in the interests of his God." A third representative maintained, "A law that was good enough for William Jennings Bryan is good enough for me." The proposal lost by a vote of 67 to 20.³¹ Seventeen years later, a second effort to repeal the statute raised a similar outcry from Bryan College. Its longtime president, Judson A. Rudd, sent copies of Bryan's closing arguments to every member of the state legislature with a note stating that "the arguments advanced by

Mr. Bryan [are] as sound today as when presented twenty-five years ago."³² Once again, the repeal effort failed.

Even though Rudd's letter defended Bryan, it suggests a further reason why midcentury fundamentalists abandoned the Commoner. "We are asking you to use your vote and influence to retain this historic and important law," Rudd wrote in this 1951 letter. "It is even more important today that we withstand the efforts of atheistic communism to deny the dignity of man and to undermine the Christian foundations of our country." To the extent that fundamentalists entered the political fray during the middle part of the century, their main concerns were with communism, which came to a peak in the early 1950s when the fundamentalist leader Carl McIntire actively supported Senator Joe McCarthy's crusade against Communist influences in America's political, education, cultural, and religious institutions.³³ From the outset, most leading fundamentalists (except Bryan) tended to lean toward the conservative end of the political spectrum, but now the movement swung hard right. Its new leaders had little inclination to defend a liberal Democratic politician such as Bryan, especially when they could blame their perceived setback at Dayton on his willingness to compromise on an ultraliteral interpretation of Genesis. Even in the early 1920s, when leading fundamentalists enlisted Bryan to aid in their fight against teaching evolution, the historian Ferenc M. Szasz observed, "it is doubtful if many of them ever voted for him. The officials of Moody Bible Institute on his death admitted that they never had." Only much later, when some evangelicals began reclaiming their heritage of social activism, did a few seek to restore Bryan's reputation.³⁴

During the fifties, McCarthy-era assaults on individual liberty heightened liberal interest in fundamentalism and the Scopes trial. In particular, the sociologist of religion James Davison Hunter noted, these assaults "and the participation of conservative Protestants in them alerted the academy and the broader liberal culture to certain propensities within the conservative Protestant subculture."³⁵ The Scopes trial came to symbolize a moment when civil libertarians successfully stood up to majoritarian tyranny. This is apparent in Ray Ginger's 1958 book about the trial, which concludes by comparing Darrow's interrogation of Bryan with "the Senate hearings regarding Joseph R. McCarthy, where the line of questioning was weak and compromised, but the mere fact that McCarthy could be forced to answer questions at all

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caused millions of people to see him in a new way.”³⁶ Similarly, Leuchtenburg’s interest in the perils of prosperity during the 1920s grew out of his concern about the perils of prosperity during the 1950s—with antievolutionism standing in for anticommunism. Furthermore, Furniss began and ended his book on fundamentalism in the twenties with references to political repression of domestic dissent during the fifties.

Again, Richard Hofstadter helped set the tone. His most extensive analysis of the Scopes trial appeared in the landmark study, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. “Although this book deals mainly with certain aspects of the remoter American past, it was conceived in response to the political and intellectual conditions of the 1950’s,” he stated at the outset. “Primarily it was McCarthyism which aroused the fear that the critical mind was at a ruinous discount in this country.” Several chapters of this book discuss episodes of religious anti-intellectualism, one of which focuses on fundamentalism during the 1920s. “It was in the crusade against the teaching of evolution that the fundamentalist movement reached its climax and in the Scopes trial that it made its most determined stand,” Hofstadter wrote in this chapter. Yet he described the trial as a momentous defeat for fundamentalists. “The Scopes trial, like the Army-McCarthy hearings thirty years later, brought feeling to a head and provided a dramatic purgation and resolution. After the trial was over, it was easier to see that the anti-evolution crusade was being contained,” Hofstadter concluded.³⁷

One significant distinction between the interpretation given the Scopes trial by historians of the 1950s and that given it by Allen and other commentators during the 1930s involves its seriousness. Both eras saw the trial as a defeat for fundamentalism, but Allen presents it primarily as a media spectacular. His account of the trial appears sandwiched between lighthearted descriptions of the mah-jongg craze and Red Grange’s gridiron exploits in a chapter titled, “The Ballyhoo Years.” In the shadow of McCarthyism, historians of the fifties inevitably placed it alongside the Red Scare, even though fundamentalists did not initiate or disproportionately participate in that earlier assault against alleged domestic Communists. Ballyhoo gave way to bogeymen.

Such grim fascination with the Scopes trial as a foreshadowing of McCarthyism inspired the single most influential retelling of the tale, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee’s play, *Inherit the Wind*. In con-

trast to Allen's comic portrayal of the trial, Lawrence and Lee presented it as present-day drama. "*Inherit the Wind* does not pretend to be journalism," they wrote in their published introduction for the play, "It is not 1925. The stage directions set the time as 'Not too long ago.' It might have been yesterday. It could be tomorrow." In writing this, they did not intend to present antievolutionism as an ongoing danger—to the contrary, they perceived that threat as safely past; rather, their concern was the McCarthy-era blacklisting of writers and actors (the play opened on Broadway in 1955). "In the 1950s, Lee and his partner became very concerned with the spread of McCarthyism," a student who interviewed him reported. "Lawrence and Lee felt that McCarthyism paralleled some aspects of the Scopes trial. Lee worried, 'I was very concerned when laws were passed, when legislation limits our freedom to speak; silence is a dangerous thing.'" Tony Randall, who starred in the original Broadway cast, later wrote, "Like *The Crucible*, *Inherit the Wind* was a response to and a product of McCarthyism. In each play, the authors looked to American history for a parallel."³⁸

For their model, Lawrence and Lee took Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, a play loosely based on the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Anderson had claimed "a poet's license to expand, develop, and interpolate, dramatize and comment," Lawrence and Lee later explained. "We asked for the same liberty . . . to allow the actuality to be the springboard for the larger drama so that the stage could thunder a meaning that wasn't pinned to a given date or a given place."³⁹

The play was not history, as Lawrence and Lee stressed in their introduction. "Only a handful of phrases have been taken from the actual transcript of the famous Scopes trial. Some of the characters of the play are related to the colorful figures in that battle of giants; but they have a life and language of their own—and, therefore, names of their own." For their two starring roles, the writers chose sound-alike names: Bryan became Brady and Darrow was Drummond. The role of the Baltimore *Sun*'s H. L. Mencken was expanded to become the Baltimore *Herald*'s E. K. Hornbeck. Scopes became Cates. Tom Stewart diminished into a minor role as Tom Davenport. Malone, Hays, Neal, Rappleyea, and the ACLU disappeared from the story altogether, as did the WCFA and all the hometown prosecutors. Dayton (called Hillsboro) gained a mayor and a fire-breathing fundamentalist pastor who subjugated townspeople until Darrow came to set them free with his cool reason.

Scopes acquired a fiancée—"She is twenty-two, pretty, but not beautiful," the stage directions read, and she is the fearsome preacher's daughter. "They had to invent romance for the balcony set," Scopes later joked.⁴⁰ It may not have been accurate history, but it was brilliant theater—and it all but replaced the actual trial in the nation's memory. The play wove three fundamental changes into the story line (in addition to countless minor ones), all of which served the writers' objectives of debunking McCarthyism.

The first change involved Scopes and Dayton. Ralph Waldo Emerson once described a mob as "a society of bodies voluntarily bereaving themselves of reason." In *Inherit the Wind*, Cates becomes the innocent victim of a mob-enforced antievolution law. The stage directions begin, "It is important to the concept of the play that the town is always visible, looming there, as much on trial as the individual defendant." In the movie version, the town fathers haul Cates out of his classroom for teaching evolution. Limited to a few sets, the play begins with the defendant in jail explaining to his fiancée, "You know why I did it. I had the book in my hand, Hunter's *Civic Biology*. I opened it up, and read to my sophomore science class Chapter 17, Darwin's *Origin of Species*." For innocently doing his job, Cates "is threatened with fine and imprisonment," according to the script.⁴¹ This change provoked trial correspondent Joseph Wood Krutch. "The little town of Dayton behaved on the whole quite well," he wrote in rebuttal. "The atmosphere was so far from being sinister that it suggested a circus day." Yet, he complained, "The authors of *Inherit the Wind* made it chiefly sinister, a witchhunt of the sort we are now all too familiar with." Scopes never truly faced jail, Krutch reminded readers, and the defense actually instigated the trial. "Thus it was all in all a strange sort of witch trial," he concluded, "one in which the accused won a scholarship enabling him to attend graduate school and the only victim was the chief witness for the prosecution, poor old Bryan."⁴²

Second, the writers transformed Bryan into a mindless, reactionary creature of the mob. Brady was "the biggest man in the country—next to the President, maybe," the audience heard at the outset, who "came here to find himself a stump to shout from. That's all." In the play, he assails evolution solely on narrow biblical grounds (never suggesting the broad social concerns that largely motivated Bryan) and denounces all science as "Godless," rather than the so-called false science of evolu-

tion.⁴³ "Inherit the Wind dramatically illustrates why so many Americans continue to believe in the mythical war between science and religion," Ronald Numbers later wrote. "But in doing so, it sacrifices the far more complex historical reality."⁴⁴

On the witness stand, Brady responds even more foolishly than Bryan did at the real trial. In *Inherit the Wind*, Brady steadfastly maintains on alleged biblical authority that God created the universe in six twenty-four-hour days beginning "on the 23rd of October in the Year 4004 B.C. at—uh, at 9 A.M.!" The crowd gradually slips away from him as he babbles on, reciting the names of books in the Old Testament. "Mother. They're laughing at me, Mother!" Brady cries to his wife at the close of his testimony. "I can't stand it when they laugh at me!" At a Broadway performance of the play, the constitutional scholar Gerald Gunther became so outraged that, as he later wrote, "for the first time, I walked out of a play in disgust." He explained, "I ended up actually sympathizing with Bryan, even though I was and continue to be opposed to his ideas in the case, simply because the playwrights had drawn the character in such comic strip terms." Even though Bryan in fact opposed including a penalty provision in antievolution laws, the play ends with his character ranting against the small size of the fine imposed by the judge, then fatally collapsing in the courtroom when the now hostile crowd ignores his closing speech. *"The mighty Evolution Law explodes with a pale puff of a wet firecracker,"* the stage directions explain, just as McCarthyism itself died from ridicule.⁴⁵

Just as Lawrence and Lee debunked Brady-Bryan in the eyes of the audience, they uplifted Drummond-Darrows. In *Inherit the Wind*, the Baltimore *Herald* engages the notorious Chicago attorney to defend Cates. Drummond makes his entrance in a *"long, ominous shadow,"* the stage directions instruct, *"hunched over, head jutting forward."* A young girl screams, "It's the Devil!" but he softens as the play proceeds. "All I want is to prevent the clock-stoppers from dumping a load of medieval nonsense in the United States Constitution," he explains at one point; "You've got to stop 'em somewhere."⁴⁶

Drummond remains a self-proclaimed agnostic, but loses his crusading materialism. At the play's end, it is Hornbeck who delivers Darrows's famous line that Bryan "died of a busted belly" and ridicules the Commoner's fool religion. Drummond reacts with anger. "You smart-aleck! You have no more right to spit on his religion than you have a

right to spit on my religion! Or lack of it!" he replies. The writers have Drummond issue the liberal's McCarthy-era plea for tolerance that everyone has the "right to be wrong." The cynical reporter then calls the defense lawyer "more religious" than Brady, and storms off the stage. Left alone in the courtroom, Drummond picks up the defendant's copy of *The Origin of Species* and the judge's Bible. After "balancing them thoughtfully, as if his hands were scales," the stage directions state, the attorney "jams them in his briefcase, side by side," and slowly walks off the now-empty stage.⁴⁷ "A bit of religious disinfectant is added to the agnostic legend for audiences whose evolutionary stage is not yet very high," the radical *Village Voice* sneered in its review.⁴⁸

At the time, most published reviews of the stage and screen versions of *Inherit the Wind* criticized the writers' portrayal of the Scopes trial. "History has been not increased but almost fatally diminished," the *New Yorker* drama critic complained. "The script wildly and unjustly caricatures the fundamentalists as vicious and narrow-minded hypocrites," the *Time* magazine movie review chided, and "just as wildly and unjustly idealizes their opponents, as personified by Darrow." Reviews appearing in publications ranging from *Commonweal* and the *New York Herald Tribune* to *The New Republic* and the *Village Voice* offered similar critiques.⁴⁹

Both the play and movie proved remarkably durable, however, despite the critics. After opening at New York's National Theater early in 1955, the stage version played for nearly three years, making it the longest-running drama then on Broadway. A touring cast took the play to major cities around the country during the late fifties. The script gained new life as a screenplay in 1960, resulting in a hit movie starring Spencer Tracy, Fredric March, and Gene Kelly. John Scopes attended its world premiere in Dayton, and thereafter promoted the movie across the country at the studio's behest. "Of course, it altered the facts of the real trial," Scopes commented, but maintained that "the film captured the emotions in the battle of words between Bryan and Darrow." Sue Hicks, the only other major participant to attend the premiere, reacted quite differently to the film. He called it "a travesty on William Jennings Bryan" and nearly purchased television time to denounce it.⁵⁰ Since its initial release, the movie has appeared continually on television and video, while the play has become a staple for community and school theatrical groups. By 1967, trial correspondent Joseph

Wood Krutch could rightly comment, "Most people who have any notions about the trial get them from the play, *Inherit the Wind*, or from the movie."⁵¹

All of which bothered Krutch, who had led the liberal media to Dayton. "The play was written more than a generation after the event and its atmosphere is that of the 40's and 50's, not the 20's. This makes for falsification because one of the striking facts about the whole foolish business is just that it was so characteristic of the 20's," he wrote. "That the trial could be a farce, even a farce with sinister aspects, is a tribute to the 20's when, whatever the faults and limitations of that decade, we did not play as rough as we play today." Bryan, for example, offered to pay Scopes's \$100 fine; McCarthy, in contrast, destroyed careers and wrecked lives without remorse. Left unchecked, fundamentalist intolerance might have worsened but, given their natures, Bryan and other fundamentalist leaders of the twenties simply were less malign than the McCarthyites. In history classrooms, however, *Inherit the Wind* became a popular instructional tool for teaching students about the twenties. In 1994, for example, the National Center for History in Schools published instructional standards. As a means to educate high school students about changing values during the 1920s, it recommended that teachers "use selections from the Scopes trial or excerpts from *Inherit the Wind* to explain how the views of William Jennings Bryan differed from those of Clarence Darrow."⁵²

As Krutch noted in 1967, "The events [at Dayton] are more a part of the folklore of liberalism than of history." The astronomer and science popularizer Carl Sagan recognized this when he observed that, even though the Scopes trial may have had little lasting impact on American culture, "the movie *Inherit the Wind* probably had a considerable national influence; it was the first time, so far as I know, that American movies made explicit the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the book of Genesis." Calvin College scientist Howard J. Van Till, who led the fight against antievolutionism within the evangelical church during the later part of the twentieth century, also stated that "folklore [about the Scopes trial] has had a greater impact [on American culture] than the actual historical particulars have had," but he does not so readily concede that *Inherit the Wind* monopolized that folklore. "While many members of the scientific academy might think of the Scopes trial as an episode in which Clarence Darrow artfully exposed

the ignorant and narrow-minded dogmatism of North American Fundamentalism," he suggested from his experience, "many members of the conservative Christian community might think of it as an episode in which William Jennings Bryan was skillfully manipulated by a skilled but unprincipled lawyer representing an antitheistic scientific establishment."³³

Ever since *Inherit the Wind* first appeared, conservative Christians have displayed greater interest in countering the popular impression created by it than by the trial. Creation-science leader Henry M. Morris, for example, could attribute the troubles of Bryan at Dayton to his testimony about the age of the earth but, in *Inherit the Wind*, Brady espouses a reading of Genesis every bit as literal as Morris's own. Reflecting on the problems this has caused his movement, Morris discussed a 1973 lecture tour that he gave in New Zealand. "There was a great deal of interest," he complained, "but in city after city, either during my visit or immediately afterward, the government-controlled television channels kept showing the Scopes trial motion picture, *Inherit the Wind*, over and over." Advocates of creation-science and critics of Darwinism have repeatedly attempted to explain how *Inherit the Wind* does not fairly represent their position.³⁴ The trial itself became, as the historian of religion Martin E. Marty later described it, "One final irrelevancy," by which he meant that it gained significance "as an event of media-mythic proportions"—that is, not for what actually occurred, but through its "acquired mythic character." For the general public since 1960, that mythic character largely came through *Inherit the Wind*.³⁵

The mythic Scopes legend remained constant from *Only Yesterday* through post-World War II history textbooks to *Inherit the Wind*. The Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould summarized and criticized it as follows: "John Scopes was persecuted, Darrow rose to Scopes's defense and smite the antediluvian Bryan, and the antievolution movement then dwindled or ground to at least a temporary halt. All three parts of this story are false." Gould expressed greatest concern about the third error, which may have lulled evolutionists into a false sense of security. He noted in 1983, "sadly, any hope that the issues of the Scopes trial had been banished to the realm of nostalgic Americana have been swept aside by our current creationist resurgence."³⁶

Yet the third part of this story had constituted the central lesson of

the Scopes legend on which all versions concurred: The light of reason had banished religious obscurantism. In the 1930s, Frederick Lewis Allen presented the Scopes trial as a critical watershed, after which "the slow drift away from Fundamentalist certainty continued." By the fifties, antievolutionism appeared to have safely run its course. "Today the evolution controversy seems as remote as the Homeric era to intellectuals of the East," Hofstadter wrote. Lawrence and Lee left no doubts about their verdict on the Scopes trial. When the defendant asks if he won or lost, Drummond assures everyone, "You won. . . . Millions of people will say you won. They'll read in their papers tonight that you smashed a bad law. You made it a joke!" Certainly the play's actors had no doubts about this verdict. "When we did *Inherit the Wind* in 1955, the religious right was a joke, a lunatic fringe," Tony Randall later wrote. Reviewing the movie version in 1960, *The New Republic* noted, "The Monkey Trial is now a historical curiosity, and it can be made truly meaningful only by treating it as the farce that it was." While these secular interpreters of the trial contemplated the triumph of reason, however, antievolutionism continued to build within America's growing conservative Christian subculture. As Randall ruefully observes, "Sometimes we wonder if anyone ever learns anything."⁵⁷