The Scopes 'Monkey Trial' vs. "Inherit the Wind"

Author: Curt Sewell  
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This piece was originally written as a review of the TV Movie, "Inherit the Wind," which came out in March of 1988. Thus, as of this present date (October 1999), it's not exactly up-to-date, because there have been other versions produced. However, I think they all follow the same set of basic errors, so that what I've pointed out here is probably still correct.

Curt Sewell, October 1999

The Scopes 'Monkey Trial' TV Movie  
The March 20 TV movie, Inherit the Wind, was made to portray the 1925 "Scopes Monkey Trial." The original 1960 version of this movie has been shown in countless school classrooms across the nation, and is said to be historical. It has influenced many people against creationism. But it had so many gross distortions that, in all fairness, some clarification must be made. From just seeing the movie, almost any reasonable person would conclude that "religious fundamentalists" are totally unreasonable, while evolutionists are rational thinkers.

In the discussion below, several parts of the movie are compared with the official transcript of the trial -- The World's Most Famous Court Trial, (Cincinnati, Ohio: National Book Co., 1925), The Great Monkey Trial, by Sprague de Camp, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1968), and other historical books. I've condensed it from a longer article by Dr. David N. Menton, in BSA Contrast, Jan-Feb 1985. The first major discrepancy concerns the beginning of the case.

MOVIE: A minister, lawyer, and policeman go into a classroom where Cates (representing John Scopes) is teaching evolution. They place him under arrest, and take him off to jail.

FACT: The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) wanted a test case to nullify the Butler Act, which said that no public school teacher could deny the Biblical creation
account and teach that man was descended from apes, so they placed a notice in the Chattanooga Daily Times newspaper saying, "We are looking for a Tennessee teacher who is willing to accept our services in testing this law in the courts." A local mine operator, George Rappleyea, had a grudge against churches, and persuaded Scopes to agree to be arrested. Rappleyea's telegram to the ACLU is on record.

FACT: Scopes was not a biology teacher; he was the football coach. He only substituted for two weeks for the regular biology teacher, Mr. Ferguson, who was ill. During this time, the schedule called for a class on evolution, but Scopes is quoted as telling William E. Hutchinson of the International News Service, "There's something I must tell you. It's worried me. I didn't violate the law ... I never taught that evolution lesson. I skipped it. I was doing something else the day I should have taught it, and I missed the whole lesson about Darwin, and never did teach it. Those kids they put on the stand couldn't remember what I taught them three months ago. They were coached by the lawyers."

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MOVIE: Cates was shown as being held in jail during the entire time of the trial. He is portrayed as a dedicated teacher, willing to be prosecuted for standing up for the truth.

FACT: Scopes was arrested on a warrant sworn out by Rappleyea, and then was immediately released on $1000 bail. He was never put in jail.

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MOVIE: In several spots, lawyers and a witness refer to a book by Darwin being used in class.

FACT: No Darwin book was ever used in the classroom -- the class textbook was Civic Biology by Hunter.

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MOVIE: The prosecuting lawyer, Matthew Brady (representing William Jennings Bryan) is shown as a pompous, ignorant bigot. Most people would naturally dislike this character.

FACT: Bryan was the likeable and highly respected leader of the Democratic Party for many years; three times he was the national Democratic presidential nominee; he served as Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson; and he was known as the best orator in America for thirty years. He had a long record as successfully fighting for liberal legislation; he was credited with creation of the Department of Labor, and was one of the leaders in obtaining women's suffrage (right to vote). The trial transcript shows that his manner in the courtroom was always courteous.

In contrast, defense attorney Clarence Darrow was cited for contempt of court, and the transcript shows that several times he was condescending and rude toward witnesses and Judge Raulston.

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MOVIE: On the stand, Brady testified that he had never read any of Darwin's books. He expressed contempt for any knowledge outside the Bible. Brady would not allow Darwin's books to be placed in evidence.

FACT: Actually, Bryan had read Origin of Species in 1905 (20 years earlier). He had published several well-researched articles, criticizing technical aspects of evolution theory. The actual transcript shows Bryan asking witnesses well-thought-out technical
questions about evolution, showing that he had a good understanding of it. Bryan himself entered Darwin's Descent of Man into evidence, to show that it did indeed teach that man descended from apes (transcript, page 176).

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**MOVIE:** Cates' fiancé, Rachel Brown, is put through an ordeal on the witness stand. Brady browbeats her until she is in tears, asking questions about Cates' religious beliefs.

**FACT:** The transcript shows that there were no female witnesses at all. Scopes had no fiancé, but had dated several local girls.

**MOVIE:** Brady had been made an honorary colonel; Drummond objected to this title of respect for his opponent, so he was hastily given a title of 'temporary honorary colonel.'

**FACT:** This courtroom scene did not occur. In Tennessee the title of 'Colonel' was often used for all officers of the court. The transcript shows Darrow and Bryan both being addressed in this way. Incidentally, Bryan was actually a real Colonel in the U.S. Army.

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**MOVIE:** Drummond objects to a courtroom announcement of a prayer meeting that night, and objects to a banner over the courthouse entrance saying "Read Your Bible Daily."

**FACT:** History shows there was no such announcement. Darrow did object that each day's court session was opened with prayer; but this was normal practice in Tennessee at that time, and is still true in some courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

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**MOVIE:** The defense lawyer, Henry Drummond (representing Clarence Darrow), got Brady on the witness stand, asked him questions about his Bible beliefs, and by questioning miracles led him to make a complete fool of himself. He even got him to say that all sex was 'original sin.' The next day Drummond waived his right to a summation speech, and the jury retired for deliberation.

**FACT:** The transcript shows that nothing at all was said about sex.

**FACT:** Bryan did not claim literal 24-hour days for the period of creation. The following exchange is in the record:

  Darrow: "Mr. Bryan, could you tell me how old the earth is?"
  Bryan: "No, sir, I couldn't."
  Darrow: "Could you come anywhere near it?"
  Bryan: "I wouldn't attempt to. I could possibly come as near as the scientists do, but I had rather be more accurate before I give a guess."

**FACT:** Bryan agreed to go on the stand to explain his Bible beliefs, on the condition that Darrow would also become a witness to explain his agnostic and evolution beliefs. The judge had also agreed to this condition (transcript, page 284). Darrow did put Bryan through quite an inquisition. When he finished, and it should have been Bryan's turn to question Darrow, Darrow surprised everyone by suddenly announcing that his client pleaded guilty (abstract, page 306), and requested Judge Raulston to issue a directed verdict of guilty. This automatically stopped the trial. Bryan objected, wanting to question Darrow, but it was too late; Scopes was already guilty -- the trial was over. The jury did not ever retire for deliberation.
MOVIE: Brady, frustrated in his attempt to give a summation, made a pitiful speech to an emptying courtroom, fell over, and died.

FACT: Bryan died in his sleep five days later. His summation speech, although not given in court, was published as part of the official trial transcript. As might be expected from a man with Bryan's reputation as a great orator and good lawyer, his summation was a moving speech, with a number of citations showing that Scopes was guilty. He argued effectively against several technical points in Darwin's "Descent of Man."

This was written by Curt Sewell, based on the much longer article Inherit The Wind: A Hollywood History of the Scopes Trial," by David N. Menton, Ph.D.

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Why Is "Inherit the Wind" So Widely Used?
Curt Sewell, 1999

Even though "Inherit the Wind," in all of its forms, is called a "documentary-drama," rather than a historical reconstruction, it's consistently been used as a devise to persuade its viewers to consider those who believe in evolution to be reasonable and
intelligent people, while those who believe in the miracles of the Bible are rude and ignorant "fundamentalists." It portrays the continuing conflict as "science vs. religion."

If this isn't the case, then why is it repeatedly shown in history, social science, or science classes in public schools? "Inherit the Wind" certainly doesn't show any true facts of either science or history -- it's distorted in almost every scene, it's strictly a propaganda hit-piece.

The net effect of this mass distortion is very prejudicial against creationists and Bible-believers. Polls show that this includes over half of the population of our country, so this prejudice is against a large fragment of students.

It's actually one more illustration of the apparently deliberate distortions and deceptions used by evolutionists to persuade people not to believe in the God of the Bible, or his miraculous creation. Other such deceptions include:

Their confusing misuse of the terms "microevolution" and "macroevolution," and their confusing application of these terms in regard to 'proving' the case for large-scale evolution in general.

For example, creationists and evolutionists alike all believe in microevolution -- as used by horticulturists and animal breeders (using intelligent selection) and also as occurring in nature -- Darwin's finches and many others (using natural selection). These almost all utilize genetic variability as the raw material for change -- the versatility put into the gene pool by the Creator. None of these changes have led to new Families, and few if any to new Genera. Dogs remain dogs, corn remains corn, finches remain finches. Even after thousands of generations of fruit-fly experimentation, they all remain fruit-flies. Most show degeneration, none show real improvement.

But evolutionists say that this fact of change through gradual time, which is commonly seen, proves that macroevolution also occurs -- that this same process has operated over extreme time to produce "molecules-to-man" evolution. However, not a single new Phylum, Class or Order has ever been observed to form. These all appear suddenly in the fossil record, as if they had been suddenly created.

A second major deception lies in the series of pictures, said to represent stages of embryonic recapitulation in the human embryo. These were first made by Dr. Ernst Haeckel over 100 years ago. But Haeckel had faked them, and despite this, they are still shown in many textbooks, even though they've been known to be completely misleading for many decades.

The third completely misleading 'evidence of evolution' is the series of horse fossils, again shown in many textbooks. Knowledgeable evolutionists have lamented their use, saying that they represent fossils that have no relationship with each other, and the earliest, Eohippus (dawn horse), was not a horse.

Finally, there are the deliberate fakes or hoaxes -- Piltdown man, Java man, Nebraska man, and probably Peking man.

It remains true that the primary evidence favoring macroevolution lies in the fertile imagination of the leaders of evolutionary theory. They are masters of 'just-so stories.' Why should they do this?
Their philosophy, or basic world-view, drives them. If one refuses to accept the idea of a supernatural creator, the only alternative is to claim some natural process. There's no other choice. Macroevolution is their only hope.