The Scopes “Monkey Trial” was one of the most famous battles in history between evolution and creationism. In 1925, Dayton, Tennessee, public schoolteacher John Scopes was taken to court for teaching evolution, which had earlier been banned by the state of Tennessee. The ensuing court battle pitted two titans against each other: William Jennings Bryan, a former Democratic presidential candidate, and famed lawyer and rationalist Clarence Darrow.

Many inaccuracies and misconceptions have arisen regarding this famous event, and most of them have their origins in the enormously popular play and movie, Inherit the Wind. An article appearing in the April 2005 issue of the journal Smithsonian has cleared up some of these myths. One of the myths is that Scopes was the victim of a fundamentalist witch-hunt. According to Smithsonian:

“Influenced in no small part by the popular play and movie Inherit the Wind, most people think Dayton ended up in the spotlight because a 24-year-old science teacher named John Scopes was hauled into court there by Bible-thumping fanatics for telling his high-school students that humans and primates shared a common ancestry. In fact, the trial took place in Dayton because of a stunt. Tennessee had recently passed a law that made teaching evolution illegal. After the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) announced it would defend anyone who challenged the statute, it occurred to several Dayton businessmen that finding a volunteer to take up the offer might be a good way to put their moribund little town on the map.

“One morning in early May, the enterprising boosters interrupted a tennis game Scopes was playing behind the high school and invited him to join them at Robinson’s Drug Store on Main Street. After treating him to a soft drink at the soda fountain, they asked the young teacher if he had ever used the state’s standard biology textbook, which contained a section on evolution. Scopes said yes. The men then told him what they were up to and wanted to know if he was willing to be arrested for teaching evolution. Although Scopes, a recent graduate of the University of Kentucky, certainly believed Darwin’ theory, it’s unclear whether he ever actually taught it in his classroom.
Nevertheless, he amiably agreed to go along with the scheme and then returned to the tennis court” (Kemper 2005: 52, 54).

Another inaccuracy about the trial is that Clarence Darrow, who defended Scopes, was an impartial lawyer advocating free speech and separation of church and state. In fact, Darrow was strongly agenda-driven, as he himself admitted openly: “Nothing will satisfy us but broad victory, a knockout which will...prove that America is founded on liberty and not on narrow, mean, intolerable and brainless prejudice of soulless religiomaniacs” (Ibid. 57).

Other misconceptions have been cleared up by the Smithsonian article as well: “In the 1960 film version of Inherit the Wind, the Bryan-based character (played by Fredric March) melts down on the [witness] stand—becomes pathetic and incoherent. Actually, Bryan acquitted himself quite well, answering Darrow (Spencer Tracy in the movie) with wit and clever evasion” (Ibid. 58). After all the ruckus, John Scopes never spent any time in jail; he was fined $100, but that conviction was later overturned on a technicality (Ibid.). Thus, he was never the victim of an intolerant witch-hunt as portrayed in pop culture.

Ironically, the Darwin-based material Scopes taught from was not exactly pure science. According to The New Yorker, “Scopes’ textbook called for eliminating ‘feeble-mindedness’ through eugenics” (Anonymous 2006: 83). Thus, the simple scenario of the Scopes Monkey Trial as pitting evil, fundamentalist fanatics against good, science-based Darwinians does not hold up under scrutiny.

Reference:

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