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Inherit the Wind: A Historical Analysis (Part 3)

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(Continued from the March issue)

HISTORICAL COMMENT: Reverend Jeremiah Brown is a fictitious character and the prayer meeting is also fictitious. Earlier in the play, the mayor of the city identified Rev. Brown as the spiritual leader of the community. Since this is a fictitious character, the authors are free to depict him as they please. One might expect the city's spiritual leader to be a humble man of God who treats others with compassion and love; instead, the authors chose to introduce Rev. Jeremiah Brown as a mean-spirited man who calls down hellfire on his own daughter.

INHERIT THE WIND: Scopes' fiancée "Rachel Brown" is called as a witness and is badly mistreated by Bryan, who forces her to testify against her own boy friend by insisting that she repeat deeply personal conversations between her and Scopes (which Bryan had pried out of her in "confidence" before the trial). Bryan, always the fanatic, loses his self control and becomes cruel and merciless in his questioning of the frightened young lady. Darrow, on the other hand, magnanimously agrees not to cross-examine Rachel lest she be further discomfited after Bryan's unconscionable abuse (play script, pages 19, 46, 47).

HISTORICAL COMMENT: No women participated in the trial. Scopes did not have a special girl friend or fiancée at this time though he dated several Dayton girls. Bryan was courteous at all times in his handling of witnesses, as the trial transcript reveals. Darrow, on the other hand, was at times condescending and contemptuous in his treatment of witnesses, jurists, opposing lawyers and even the judge. Darrow was, in fact, cited for contempt of court for repeatedly interrupting and insulting judge Raulston (trial transcript, page 212).

INHERIT THE WIND: On page 54, Darrow questions Bryan on the topic of sex:

DARROW: "...You're up here as an expert on the Bible. What's the Biblical evaluation of sex?"

BRYAN: "It is considered Original Sin." (play script, page 54)

HISTORICAL COMMENT: Nothing was discussed about sex in the trial.

INHERIT THE WIND: While on the stand, Bryan stated that it was a literal fact that, "...the Lord began the Creation on the 23rd of October in the Year 4,004 B.C. at — uh, 9 A.M.!" (play script, page 56)

HISTORICAL COMMENT: Bryan did not claim to know how old the earth was. From the trial transcript (page 296) we read:

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."*

Later, Darrow questions him again on the age of the earth:

DARROW: *"Have you any idea how old the earth is?"* (trial transcript page 298)

BRYAN: *"No."*

INHERIT THE WIND: When the Judge excuses Bryan from the stand, Bryan slips into a frenzy:

BRYAN: *"I believe in the truth of the Book of Genesis!"* (With both clenched fists he pounds the air, rhythmic hammer blows of conviction as he fervently recites the books of the Old Testament.)

After court is adjourned, the spectators begin to leave while Bryan continues to beat the air with clenched fists. (play script, pages 59, 60)

HISTORICAL COMMENT: This was all fiction. Bryan never went into a frenzy, nor did he recite the books of the Bible. This was just another attempt to depict Bryan as a raving religious lunatic (trial transcript, p.304).

INHERIT THE WIND: The "prisoner," John Scopes, is found guilty and Darrow is visibly shaken by this great injustice against his client. Bryan, on the other hand, is vindictive and complains bitterly about the paltry \$100 fine leveled against John Scopes for a crime of such great magnitude: *"Your Honor, the prosecution takes exception!. Where the issues are so titanic, the court must mete out more drastic punishment -"* (play script, page 66)

HISTORICAL COMMENT: Violation of the Butler Act was punishable by a fine of no less than \$100 and no greater than \$500; imprisonment was not a provision of the law. Bryan was not the least bit concerned about the fine nor was anyone else; indeed, Bryan himself had offered to pay Scopes' fine. All of Scopes' expenses relating to the trial were covered by various vested interests as was the tuition for his graduate education after the trial (trial transcript, page 310).

INHERIT THE WIND: The play builds to a noisy and chaotic climax as Bryan loses all sense of dignity and reason and goes into an incoherent tirade in an attempt to read his concluding statement. The crowd is bored and walks out, while Bryan's wife looks on in horror at what had become of her once sane and caring husband. Finally, overcome by religious zeal, Bryan mindlessly continues with his closing remarks and collapses in the throes of death on the courtroom floor. As he is carried out, in a strange, unreal voice, he begins what appears to be an inaugural speech as the new president of the United States. Minutes later, his death is announced (play script, pages 65-69).

HISTORICAL COMMENT: Neither Bryan nor Darrow ever attempted to give the customary closing argument to the jury. Once Darrow accomplished his purpose of ridiculing Bryan's beliefs in Biblical miracles, he asked the judge to instruct the jury to find Scopes guilty, and in so doing, eliminated the need for any closing arguments (trial transcript, page 306). Bryan had put a great deal of effort into his closing statement. This maneuver by Darrow prevented Bryan from giving what was a well-supported scientific and religious argument against the theory of evolution. Bryan was quite anxious that the text of his speech be made available to the public and he made provision for its publication only one hour before his death. The speech was cogently argued and hardly the raving of a mad man unless, of course, all Bible-believing Christians are to be dismissed as "mad men" (trial transcript pages 321-339).

Finally, Bryan did not die in the court house in a raving frenzy. Bryan died in his sleep of unknown causes five days after the trial.

CONCLUSION: There is considerable evidence to suggest that the play is not simply inaccurate (in the way of "Hollywood history"), but rather is highly biased in its intent. The historical inaccuracies are systematic and of a kind that presents a consistent bias of slanderous proportions against a particular class of people and their beliefs. Specifically, people who believe in the miracles recorded in the Bible, and especially the Biblical

account of creation, are portrayed in an outrageously uncomplimentary way. On the other hand, those who are critical or virtually unbelieving with regard to the miracles of the Bible, are portrayed as eminently reasonable people who must suffer the abuse, threats and ignorance of the fundamentalist Christians around them.

The Encyclopedia Britannica includes the following comments in its definition of "**propaganda**":

Propaganda is the more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions ...The propagandist has a specified goal or set of goals... To maximize his effect, he may omit pertinent facts or distort them...Comparatively deliberate selectivity and manipulation also distinguish propaganda from education. The educator tries to present various sides of an issue — the grounds for doubting as well as the grounds for believing the statements he makes, and the disadvantages as well as the advantages of every conceivable course of action. Education aims to induce the reactor to collect and evaluate evidence for himself and assists him in learning the techniques for doing so (Encyclopedia Britannica, page 171).

One would be hard pressed to find a play or movie that more closely exemplifies the definition cited above.

Some may argue that criticisms of the type presented in this study are inappropriate for a documentary-drama because historical accuracy is only the inadvertent victim of attempts to "liven up" the plot. It is typical, for example, to introduce a fictional love story in "Hollywood history." The evidence suggests, however, that the inaccuracies encountered in the play *Inherit the Wind* are substantive, intentional and systematic. It is actually quite easy to see a pattern in the inaccuracies and from this one can make a reasonable guess as to the motive. Christians, and particularly William Jennings Bryan, are consistently lampooned throughout the play, while skeptics and agnostics are consistently portrayed as intelligent, kindly and even heroic. I simply cannot escape the conclusion that the writers of the play, *Inherit the Wind*, never intended to write a historically accurate account of the Scopes trial, nor did they seriously attempt to portray the principal characters and their beliefs in an unbiased and accurate way.

A more detailed analysis of the play is now available in pamphlet form entitled, *Inherit the Wind, A Hollywood History of the Scopes Trial*. Discounts are offered for bulk purchases. Visit www.answersingenesis.org to buy this pamphlet.

Other articles by Dr. Menton can be found on the World Wide Web at: www.gennet.org/facts

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