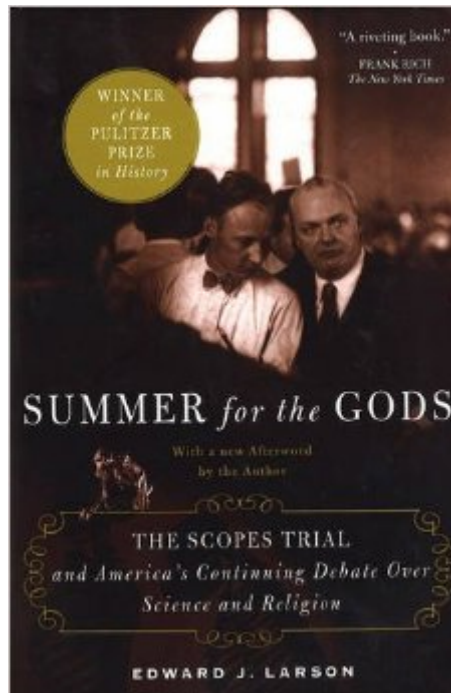


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Summer For The Gods: The Scopes Trial And America's Continuing Debate Over Science And Religion



Synopsis

In the summer of 1925, the sleepy hamlet of Dayton, Tennessee, became the setting for one of the 20th century's most contentious dramas: the Scopes trial that pitted William Jennings Bryan and the anti-Darwinists against a teacher named John Scopes into a famous debate over science, religion, and their place in public education. That trial marked the start of a battle that continues to this day in Dover, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Cobb County, Georgia, and many other cities and states throughout the country. Edward Larson's classic, *Summer for the Gods*, received the Pulitzer Prize in History in 1998 and is the single most authoritative account of a pivotal event whose combatants remain at odds in school districts and courtrooms. For this edition, Larson has added a new preface that assesses the state of the battle between creationism and evolution, and points the way to how it might potentially be resolved.

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; First Trade Paper Edition edition (October 2, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 046507510X

ISBN-13: 978-0465075102

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (100 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #66,766 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #22 in [Books > Textbooks > Education > History & Theory](#) #51 in [Books > Law > Legal History](#) #61 in [Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > History](#)

Customer Reviews

Edward Larson has accomplished something wonderful with this book. In only 266 pages (318 including footnotes and index), he has captured the flow of cultural issues surrounding science, education, and religion in the early twentieth century, the political goals and maneuvering of the parties involved, the actual Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee with the denouement of the appeal, the falsifying of the events involved in the popular culture, and the ongoing cultural impact of the issues involved in this trial. As I read I found myself marveling at how Larson so richly captures the cultural forces coming together like tectonic plates and crashing into the Scopes trial. I haven't seen as fair a treatment of the issues involved for all the varying parties (there were many more

self-interested folks than Darrow and Bryan) on any other subject. To have that time before the trial captured in such a beautiful way is very valuable. As others have noted, the notion of the trial started as a publicity stunt to promote the hard luck town of Dayton, TN. The ACLU wanted a narrowly defined test case to overturn the laws forbidding the teaching of evolution. Darrow and his crowd wanted to attack religion more than work out the civil liberties issues involved, Bryan cared more about the rights of the parents as taxpayers to control what their children were taught. Remember, universal public education was still a rather new thing in 1925 and parents then, as now, want to have the education support them in raising their children. The education establishment then, as now, feels a responsibility to teach what they think best. Bryan and many others were also concerned about the political uses to which evolution had recently been put in the name of survival of the fittest. It isn't a simple issue and shouldn't be turned into a cartoon. Especially since we are in some ways still grappling with these issues. Yes, Bryan was also a Fundamentalist (although some were more Fundamental than him because he didn't insist on the strict 6 days of 24 hours for the Creation), but imposing that belief wasn't his goal. Clarifying the truth of the trial versus the popular perceptions in our culture provided by "Only Yesterday" and "Inherit the Wind" is a very valuable service provided by this book. However, the culture seems to want the oversimplification and distortions of "Inherit the Wind" more than the truth of Scopes being a willing participant in a test case more or less on a lark. Or that Scopes never really "taught" evolution. He had used the textbook provided to him by the school and it discussed evolution, but he may never have gotten to that section since he wasn't the regular biology teacher. He taught physics, math, and football and was substituting in the biology class. The book has a number of very nice pictures that also help capture the period of the trial and the characters involved. One especially small quibble is that the book does not address the difference between the anti-clerical activities in Great Britain and their political nature because of the state power of the Church and the anti-clerical activities in the United States that were really anti-religion. In fact, a great deal of the fundamentalist backlash against evolution came out of this anti-religion sentiment. I think it a reasonable view to say that most of the reaction against evolution wasn't from a considered rejection of the theory, but a reaction against being attacked by those who wanted to free America of religion. We didn't have a state church, although most in power were also believers (or publicly posed as believers). The anti-clerical movement was transplanted but to somewhat different effect here than in Europe where evolution was not seen as necessarily inconsistent with Faith (as it has become to be viewed here). But this is a trivial point compared to many wonderful insights this book provides.

The Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 combined two great American virtues: 1.) Individual Rights and 2.) The need to make a quick buck. One of the aspects of Larson's book that really comes through is how staged the whole trial was. From the initial meeting of the town fathers with Scopes to convince him to be a Defendant, to the State's decision to nolle prosequere the conviction after it was overturned on a technicality, most everything was merely thespian. One of the most insightful stories that Larson relates is when the team of ACLU defense lawyers arrived in Dayton for trial preparation, a young man started to help them with their luggage out of the trunk. One of the lawyers shouted: "Hey boy, what are you doing with those suitcases!" Little did the lawyer know that that boy was John Scopes, the teacher that was charged with teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school. As Larson writes: "The defenders, along with everyone else, had forgotten the defendant." The author writes in this great concise book that the Scopes Monkey trial was less about Scopes, Darrow or Bryan and more about emerging fundamentalism versus a growing American concern of individual rights and liberties. As such, Dayton and John Scopes were essentially bit players in a staged battle between forces that still determine how Americans feel and think to this day. Not only does Larson concern himself with the broader sociological effects of the trial, he also talks about the ACLU's and the prosecution's trial strategy, which, as a lawyer, I found fascinating. Contemporary history has interpreted the Scopes Trial as the high water mark of Fundamentalism, being that the Butler Act and other similar legislation has been struck down as unconstitutional. "Summer" makes this very plain that this in fact was the opening salvo in the Fundamentalist battle and not the death throes. It is not a stretch to argue that the beginnings of the Mega-Church and the Fundamentalist college movement began in Dayton in 1925. Thus, as H.L. Mencken wrote that year: the fundamentalists and "Bryan started something that it will not be easy to stop."

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