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H. L. Mencken. *A Religious Orgy in Tennessee: A Reporter's Account of the Scopes Monkey Trial.* Introduction by Art Winslow. Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2006. xxii + 206 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-933633-17-6.

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Extremism and Evolution: Mencken on the Scopes Trial

When the famous journalist H. L. (Henry Louis) Mencken alighted from his train in the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, in July 1925, he expected to find a squalid backwater. Instead, he discovered "a country town full of charm and even beauty" (p. 29). His assessment of the town did not dull his caustic pen as he reported on the events of the Scopes trial. The town, Mencken reported, was plagued by its population of "yokels," "hillbillies," and "the lower orders," and "ignorant," "dishonest," "cowardly," "ignoble," and "immortal vermin" (pp. 11-13, 45, 62). Mencken had reluctantly abandoned the civilized environs of Baltimore to report firsthand on the latest "Trial of the Century." At issue in the Scopes trial was a recent Tennessee law that had prohibited the teaching of any idea–including but not limited to evolution–that threatened the dominant Protestant theology.

Mencken had built his career as a sharp-tongued opponent to all such established orthodoxies. His irreverent wit and remorseless iconoclasm had made him, perhaps along with Walter Lippmann, the most famous name in Jazz Age American journalism. He did not come to Dayton with an eye to evenhanded reporting. Rather, he hoped to use his fame and talent to assist in the decapitation of the viper of Protestant fundamentalism. To a great extent, he succeeded. The image of both the Scopes trial and of fundamentalism, in both academic historiography and popular culture, remained mired for decades in the partisan stereotype Mencken described.

Due to his lasting influence, this new collection of Mencken's Scopes trial reporting is a welcome addition. It collects seventeen short pieces, fifteen from the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, one that appeared in *The Nation*, and one from the Mencken-founded *American Mercury*. It includes ten pages of trial photos and an excerpt of the most dramatic part of the trial: the interrogation of prosecution attorney William Jennings Bryan by defense attorney Clarence Darrow. The editors have also added in a few helpful notes that do not get in the way of Mencken's steamroller style but help fill in modern readers on some obscure references from 1920s popular culture.

Mencken's essays will not give much new information about the trial to historians already familiar with it but they do provide a useful glimpse into Mencken's eclectic ideology and mercurial style. His attacks on the opponents of evolution education, for instance, demonstrate Mencken's penchant for lumping together his intellectual opponents without concern for factual accuracy. In reporting on "The Tennessee Circus," for example, he calls all conservative Protestants "Ku Klux theologians" (p. 3). This in spite of the fact that the leader of the prosecution and Mencken's bête noire, Bryan, opposed the powerful 1920s Ku Klux Klan.

Even more intriguing is Mencken's vision of the nature of humanity. The Scopes trial gave Mencken a perfect opportunity to vent his spleen against the foibles of the U.S. masses. He concluded that most U.S. citizens remained "Homo Neanderthalensis" (p. 11). The problem at the root of the Scopes trial, Mencken argued, was that "the great majority of men" consistently and stupidly fought against "every step in human progress" (p. 12). At times, Mencken's raw elitism still has power to shock. In denouncing the "lower orders," who supported antievolution laws, he explained that "the human race is divided

into two sharply differentiated and mutually antagonistic classes, almost genera" (pp. 13, 16). To Mencken, the great unwashed needed more than just a bath; they "almost" represented a lower species entirely.

For all his scorn of biblical literalists, Mencken defended the right of every person to believe in inanity, in "imbecilities" (p. 120). However, these essays show the limits Mencken placed on those rights. No person, no matter how stupidly devoted to religion, could be allowed to "inflict [those beliefs] upon other men by force.... He has no right to demand that they be treated as sacred" (p. 120). For Mencken, this was the crux of the issue in Dayton. The Scopes trial served as a showdown between the enlightened, secular few and the masses with their "simian gabble" (p. 129).

Thus, Mencken had no truck with the notion that education should be rooted in the culture and experiences of children. He did not agree that schooling should be germane to children's lives outside of school. Rather, these essays reveal that Mencken determined to use education as a weapon to combat U.S. citizens' stubborn and intractable small-mindedness. For Mencken, there was a right answer. It lay in the spread of secular civilization and enlightenment. Education was the only hope to cure backward peoples of their inferior ways.

Mencken's relentless prose in these essays helped push Protestant fundamentalists into narrower stereotypes than many fundamentalists would have liked. Mencken's essays were vicious indictments of fundamentalism and did more to discredit it than long efforts by more temperate critics. The title of this collection, taken from a column in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, from July 11, 1925, gives one example of Mencken's tactics. By calling the trial a "Religious Orgy," Mencken snatched away fundamentalists' high moral ground. Calling it an "orgy" may have been utterly untrue, unfair, and baseless. But it was powerful and effective nonetheless.

Mencken mercilessly attacked what he called fundamentalist religion in these essays. He described for his Baltimore readers a religious service in which one woman denounced the reading of books. Another "brother" argued that "education was a snare. Once his children could read the Bible, he said, they had enough. Beyond lay only infidelity and damnation. Sin stalked big cities. Dayton itself was a Sodom" (p. 54). Their religious meeting, in Mencken's telling, soon degenerated into a mere "barbaric grotesquerie," with one "female ox in gingham" going into inspired convulsions (pp. 55, 57).

Mencken argued that the dull-witted "fundamentalist mind" could no longer even understand opposition to its religious beliefs (p. 75). It had created a stark Manichean universe of good and evil, and Mencken believed all civilization remained outside fundamentalism's narrow boundaries. Fundamentalists, Mencken noted, "believe, on the authority of Genesis, that the earth is flat and that witches still infest it" (p. 97). He argued that "everyone" knew "Evangelical Christianity ... is founded upon hate" (p. 105).

Mencken argued in his essays on the Scopes trial that such backward, evil notions derived their power from cultural stagnation. The East Tennesseans that he met in Dayton did not dissuade him from this opinion. Mencken informed readers that such "Tennessee mountaineers" had not been "debauched by the refinements of the toilet" (pp. 85, 128). They were nothing more than "gaping primates from the upland valleys of the Cumberland Range" (p. 129). Mencken lumped his vicious critiques of Appalachian culture and his savage contempt for conservative Protestantism into a wholesale denunciation of fundamentalism. His charges against Protestant fundamentalism became part of the legacy of the Scopes trial.

Ironically, one of those lasting charges was that the antievolution side in the Scopes trial represented the side of extremism. The irony derives from the fact that it was Mencken himself who delivered some of the most extreme language of the trial. For instance, the day after prosecution leader Bryan died, Mencken delivered a stinging eulogy in one of his *Sun* columns. Instead of respecting his opponent, even grudgingly after Bryan's sudden death, Mencken attacked the late Bryan with renewed vigor. Mencken compared Bryan to "a dog with rabies" (p. 106). He mocked Bryan's wife, at the time of the Scopes trial suffering from a degenerative autoimmune disorder, as "old and crippled" (p. 107). Bryan, even after death, was "one of the most tragic asses in American history ... broken, furious, and infinitely pathetic" (p. 108).

For a long while, Mencken's deeply flawed but compelling caricature of the fundamentalist movement and the Scopes trial held sway even among academic historians. The first academic historian to tackle the subject was Stewart G. Cole, whose *History of Fundamentalism* appeared in 1931. Cole repeatedly described the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, a leading umbrella group for fundamentalists, as a "cult." He referred to the leaders of the movement as "disturbed men." Referring to the Bible schools, he wrote that "their passion for saint-

liness often leads to near hysteria ... a psychotic condition."[1]

Cole's argument was supported and given greater legitimacy by H. Richard Niebuhr's influential essay in the 1931 *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. In his analysis, one that was to hold sway in academic and popular understanding for almost forty years, fundamentalism became a largely rural phenomenon. Further, fundamentalists did well in certain areas because rural people and preachers had no access to educational institutions and because they lived in a "static" social environment. The movement was seen as a lack of something; in this case, it was a lack of exposure to the ideas of modern urban culture.[2]

The next widely read academic history of the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s came in 1954. Norman F. Furniss, in *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931*, concluded that the movement was made up of ill-educated, violent, and rural thugs. He argued, for example, that "violence in thought and language was another outstanding feature of the fundamentalist movement." This violent thought, according to Furniss, was a product of "ignorance, even illiteracy." Furniss, in agreement with Cole and Niebuhr, assumed that the fundamentalist movement had largely disappeared after the 1920s.[3]

George Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (1980) put paid to some of the excesses of Mencken and his contemporaries about the nature of fundamentalism. Edward Larson's *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (1997) and Ronald Numbers's *Darwinism Comes to America* (1998) give a more balanced account of the trial itself. Other works, such as Virginia Brereton's *Training God's Army: The American Bible School, 1880-1940* (1990), William Vance Trollinger's *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (1990), and my own *Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era: God, Darwin, and the Roots of America's Culture Wars* (2010), help flesh out the history of early fundamentalism as an educational movement.

Nevertheless, stereotypes of the antievolution movement and the Scopes trial remain powerful. It is a testament, at least in part, to the vivid and arresting prose of Mencken that such ideas reverberated so powerfully across so many generations. Historians who are only familiar with Marsden's or Larson's accounts should take some time with this collection of Mencken's work. It will illuminate the vicious vision of this most famous trial in U.S. educational history by the nation's most famous skeptic.

Notes

[1]. Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1931), 251, 304, 306.

[2]. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Fundamentalism," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 526-527.

[3]. Norman F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 28, 36.

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