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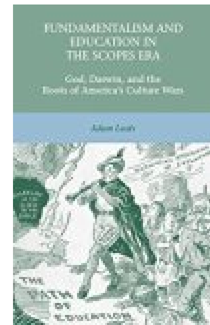
Adam Laats. *Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era: God, Darwin, and the Roots of America's Culture Wars.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 258 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-62372-9.



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Histories of education in the 1920s must treat the Tennessee trial of John Scopes for teaching evolution in the state's public schools. The trial drew out the participation of celebrity lawyers William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow; made national headlines in its time; and formed the basis for political stereotypes and popular culture ever since. Though the Tennessee law was upheld in court (Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution), it has been seen as a watershed moment in the history of education as well as in the broader cultural battle between religion and science.[1]

Adam Laats argues that the trial should not be seen as an isolated incident but rather as part of a broader movement of U.S. fundamentalists "to exert control over American education" (p. 3). Tennessee was only one of twenty-one states that debated evolution–five states passed laws prohibiting its teaching, including two after the Scopes trial. Beyond evolution, Protestant fundamentalists called for daily Bible reading in public schools (passed in eleven states); put pressure on textbook publishers; and supported proposed legislation that would have banned everything from atheism to disrespect for the Bible to the teaching of "any nefarious matter" (West Virginia). The ultimate goal, Laats argues, was to guarantee public school promotion of the Protestant faith and to preclude every challenge to evangelical Christianity. The movement ultimately failed to achieve all of its political objectives but nevertheless established a network of seminaries, institutes, colleges, and K-12 schools dedicated to Protestant education.

Laats organizes the book as an hourglass, moving from fundamentalism generally, to fundamentalist campaigns before the Scopes trial, to fundamentalist campaigns after the Scopes trial, to the broader impact of such activities on fundamentalism. Laats begins with two chapters that sketch the varieties of U.S. fundamentalist experience. Participants in the movement reacted to Charles Darwin's scientific theories, higher criticism among biblical scholars, and contemporary currents of theological modernism. Laats follows George Marsden (*Fundamentalism in American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* [2006]) closely here, repeating Marsden's emphasis on the theological acceptance of premillennial dispensationalism: the belief that Jesus would return triumphantly and destroy the wicked before the promised one thousand years of peace (instead of returning peacefully after they had gradually been converted). Laats helpfully points out that fundamentalist Protestants responded to these issues in a variety of ways, some using the term "fundamentalism" as a strict boundary to keep opponents out while others employed it more ecumenically to unite believers from conservative, Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Catholic traditions.

The three chapters in the book's second part trace fundamentalist campaigns through the Scopes trial. For fundamentalists, the problems began at the university level where professors trained in German skepticism corrupted the minds of the growing numbers of young people who were flocking to college campuses. The first clash came in 1921 in Wisconsin where William Jennings Bryan called on the president of the University of Wisconsin to stop the teaching of evolution and to sign a statement reaffirming his belief in the book of Genesis, the virgin birth, and biblical miracles. The additional of-

fer of one hundred dollars if the president would sign a statement that he had descended from an ape foreshadowed the public spectacles that would follow. Making the link from public education to state legislatures, fundamentalists published widely and lobbied for twenty-five education reform bills over the next four years, only nine of which were limited to evolution. In Laats's view, the Scopes trial represented the logical outgrowth of this movement, and he hews closely to the narrative of the trial established by Edward J. Larson and Jeffrey P. Moran (*The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents* [2002]). The encounter did not symbolize the outright rejection of science by fundamentalists but rather their dismissal of newer science in favor of the traditional, nineteenth-century view of science as the endeavor to classify facts within an overarching scheme. In fact, Laats observes that fundamentalists came to the Scopes trial (and every other fight) with lists of experts though many had questionable credentials.

Three more chapters trace fundamentalist activities after the Scopes trial. Embracing the negative stereotype that satirized their lack of worldly wisdom, fundamentalists continued to push legislation and pressure book publishers. Furthermore, they established a variety of interest groups, such as the Bible Crusaders, Defenders of the Christian Faith, and the Supreme Kingdom. Finding that they could not control public colleges, fundamentalists strengthened ties with existing institutions–such as the Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College–and created their own, including Bryan College, Bob Jones University, and the Dallas Theological Seminary. The most successful K-12 initiative mandated Bible reading in public schools and organized direct action campaigns that delivered free Bibles to classroom teachers.

The book closes with two chapters that survey the impact of political engagement on fundamentalism. Laats catalogs the different visions of the movement that emerged from the 1920s and ultimately concludes that political participation "tore the fundamentalist movement apart" (p. 190). Many who had been active under the banner of fundamentalism abandoned the label.

Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era does a fine job of placing the Scopes trial within the broader fundamentalist agenda of the 1920s. It is important to see the broader pattern of fundamentalist reform efforts largely because such activities are so often seen as a fluke or "culture war" outburst, as when the Kansas State Board of Education removed evolution in the 1990s or, more recently, when the Texas State Board of Education endowed its U.S. history standards with a "Christian nation" narrative. Now, as then, educators, historians, and policymakers must not fail to understand the breadth, depth, and longevity of this significant element of U.S. culture and politics.

Laats's contextualization of the Scopes trial within the 1920s makes one curious about the longer back story. The variety of fundamentalist perspectives he traces also operated within the broader context of U.S. Christianity at a time when Christian activists were active in politics (Bryan was the secretary of state under President Wilson), society (through the Social Gospel and other faith-based reform movements), and culture (Charles Sheldon's best-selling books invited an earlier generation to ask, what would Jesus do?). Christians and fundamentalists had been active in promoting patriotism and empire; activists had mobilized to enact Prohibition in the decade before and surely drew on this experience as attention shifted to the public schools.

Laats's conclusion that education reform left the fundamentalist movement "torn apart" likewise seems a strain and may in some part account for his disclaimer in the preface that his work was "not motivated by a desire to defend or attack fundamentalism" (pp. vii, 6, 190). However, the demise of fundamentalism after Scopes is a well-worn part of the secularization thesis that has been revised of late. A spate of new scholarly work on fundamentalism acknowledges a momentary humiliation after Scopes and a temporary retreat from the cultural spotlight, but fundamentalists certainly did not disappear. Laats himself documents the ways that fundamentalists successfully lobbied for Bible reading; forged a new political interest group; and created their own schools and educational networks as an alternative to publicly funded education. He might also have mentioned other ways that fundamentalists took their message to the air waves and continued to shape popular culture through mass media.[2]

These limitations of context aside, *Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era* convincingly makes the case that the Scopes trial–and the history of education in the 1920s–must be situated within the broader context of fundamentalist activities of the era. Fundamentalists–and, indeed, Protestants, in general–exerted an important influence on public education from elementary through university levels. And historians cannot separate church from state in their narratives of the past without leaving scholars all the more impoverished in the future.

Notes

[1]. See Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4; and Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

[2]. See Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Douglas Carl Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalism and Mass Culture, 1920-1940* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001); Tona Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and James Ault, *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church* (New York: Vintage 2005).

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