Intelligently Designed: How Creationists Built the Campaign against Evolution

by Edward Caudill
Champaign (IL): University of Illinois Press, 2013. 216 pages

reviewed by Adam R Shapiro

If one were to teach a course on the history of the American evolution wars, one could do worse than to set as a text Edward Caudill's *Intelligently Designed*. For the newcomer to the field, or one who has only come to it since the Ken Ham/Bill Nye debate, it's an engagingly written overview of nearly a century of contestation. Caudill is exactly right when he says that creationism's history must be told “not just as a science-religion issue, but as a political movement.” From its origins in the 1920s to the present, organized antievolutionism has never just been about whether Darwin was right, but about a cultural politics “against broader social change.”

As an introductory text, the book functions very well. In part this is because it strips away many of the details, names, and nuances that are found in most of the scholarly histories that have preceded it. In its introduction, *Intelligently Designed* acknowledges its debts to such texts as Ronald L Numbers's exhaustively detailed *The Creationists*, Edward J Larson's Scopes trial history *Summer for the Gods*, Michael Kazin's biography of William Jennings Bryan, *A Godly Hero*, and Barbara Forrest and Paul R Gross's deconstruction of “intelligent design” *Creationism's Trojan Horse*. Indeed the footnotes are laden with references to these and other secondary texts. In itself that's not a problem, but if the book is arguing for an original interpretation of the events that these books recount, it's not apparent. Instead, these works (and others) are mostly taken at face value, punctuated with primary references that will mostly seem familiar to people already versed in the subject. Consequently, the text has inherited some of the flaws of the secondary literature it draws from (such as Kazin's view of Bryan as religiously pious but theologically unsophisticated, a figure whose antievolutionism was an instance of misplaced religious progressivism).

In Caudill's account, everything begins with the Scopes trial, the 1925 court case involving a schoolteacher—John Scopes—who was willingly charged with violating Tennessee's antievolution law. More particularly, it comes down to the two men who most famously opposed each other in that trial, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan. After stating that the evolution “issue still exists pretty much as Bryan framed it,” the book devotes an entire chapter to the trial itself, or at least to Darrow and Bryan. Yet in earlier descriptions of Southern culture and debates between modernism and fundamentalism, the narrative flows freely from one side of 1925 to the other, mentioning such diverse incidents such as the publications of *The Fundamentals* in the early 1910s to the Vanderbilt Agrarians' *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930. Are these all exemplars of a similar cultural attitude, or did anything change across these years? Specifically, did the Scopes trial actually change anything?
Echoing the arguments of several other historians who saw the rise of fundamentalism and antievolutionism as not just a result of science–religion incompatibility, but a specific reaction to the perceived threat of Modernism, the book identifies as “the national leader of antievolutionism” one of the most complex personae in its history—William Jennings Bryan. Although Bryan’s antievolutionism had many influences, from studies showing that students taught evolution lost their faith to rifts within his own Presbyterian denomination to theological concerns over the nature of miracle and redemption, Caudill (drawing primarily from Kazin) describes the thrice-presidential nominee long emblematic of a religious progressivism as a man motivated primarily by horror at the purported social applications of Darwinism.

“Bryan and other fundamentalist leaders knew the difference between Darwin and social Darwinism, but did not differentiate” (page 18). Unfortunately, neither does Caudill, and later the book equates Darwinism with evolution without clarification. Few biologists of the period would have reduced all of evolution to “Darwinism.” Even the anti-Darwinist Charles Hodge, whose writing Bryan quoted from liberally, made it quite clear in his writings that “Darwinism” was only one particularly atheistical interpretation of evolution. At the same time, Darwin’s name was being associated with biological theories that had differed substantially from that laid out in the *Origin of Species* (this is even more ubiquitous in the later twentieth century). This history often leaves complex theories in science or theology named but undifferentiated. Concepts are often slurred under the shorthand of well-worn names such as “Darwinism,” “inerrancy,” “literalism,” “evolution,” and “creationism.” This seems to be excused by the claim that Bryan himself treated “did not distinguish among ‘evolution,’ ‘natural selection,’ ‘Darwinism,’ and ‘social Darwinism’” (page 149). But it’s precisely in the slippage of some of these terms that the real contestation was going on, and it should be clear that later iterations of the evolution controversies were not using these terms in the same exact way.

Subsequent chapters repeat the summarized history of major developments: the 1960s publication of Whitcomb and Morris’s *The Genesis Flood*, the (mythologized) restoration of evolution to schoolbooks with the advent of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, and the Supreme Court ruling in *Epperson v Arkansas*. Balanced treatment and the court ruling in *McLean v Arkansas* (misspelled; one of several unchecked typos.) By the time the reader reaches “Intelligent design and resurgent creationism,” a clear pattern emerges. Creationists make up some case against evolution. They follow the populist appeal to values that comes straight out of the playbook of the Great Commoner Bryan. They lose (a court case, an election, a textbook adoption). Then they regroup and try all over again.

The book ends with a discussion of the concept of “useful myths.” *Inherit the Wind* has been debunked as a historical account of the Scopes trial (which it never claimed to be); as a result, viewed as an indictment of fundamentalism, it backfires: fundamentalists view it as a prime example of misrepresentation and persecution by a Hollywood liberal elite. The myth that the Scopes trial was a defeat for fundamentalism is gone, given that fundamentalism is stronger than ever. Though many of these myths have long been overthrown by scholars and activists, they linger in the consciousness of the uninvolved. But this conclusion reinforces another myth: that the debate is essentially the same over the past century, that to understand an already distorted persona of William Jennings Bryan gives insights into the motives and techniques of creation science and “intelligent design” today.
The grand myth in Caudill's book is that the history of cultural beliefs can be explained by the agency of the activist organizations lobbying for and against that belief. This tells us that the rise of belief in a young earth or other forms of Darwin-doubting is due to the efforts of a “campaign against evolution.” The book’s introduction promises “a history of how creationism won so many converts.” What follows is a detailed synthesis of organized creationism that says little about the converts themselves. Ultimately, this top-down view of cultural change may be one that activist organizations (on both sides) subscribe to, self-servingly, but serious cultural historians would question the presumption that cultural reform comes from on high in this way. It is a historiographical weakness for Intelligently Designed to reaffirm this top-down myth. Moreover, it’s not a vision of cultural change shared by Bryan, the populist reformer, the Great Commoner. Perhaps it is in this very shift from grassroots majoritarianism to the top-down opinion making of organized antievolution that creationism today has most diverged from Bryan.

About the Author

Adam R Shapiro is a lecturer in intellectual and cultural history at Birkbeck–University of London. He is the author of Trying Biology: The Scopes Trial, Textbooks, and Antievolutionism in American Schools (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Author’s Address

Adam R Shapiro
Department of History, Classics, and Archaeology
Birkbeck–University of London
28 Russell Square, room G10
London WC1B 5DQ
United Kingdom
a.shapiro@bbk.ac.uk

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