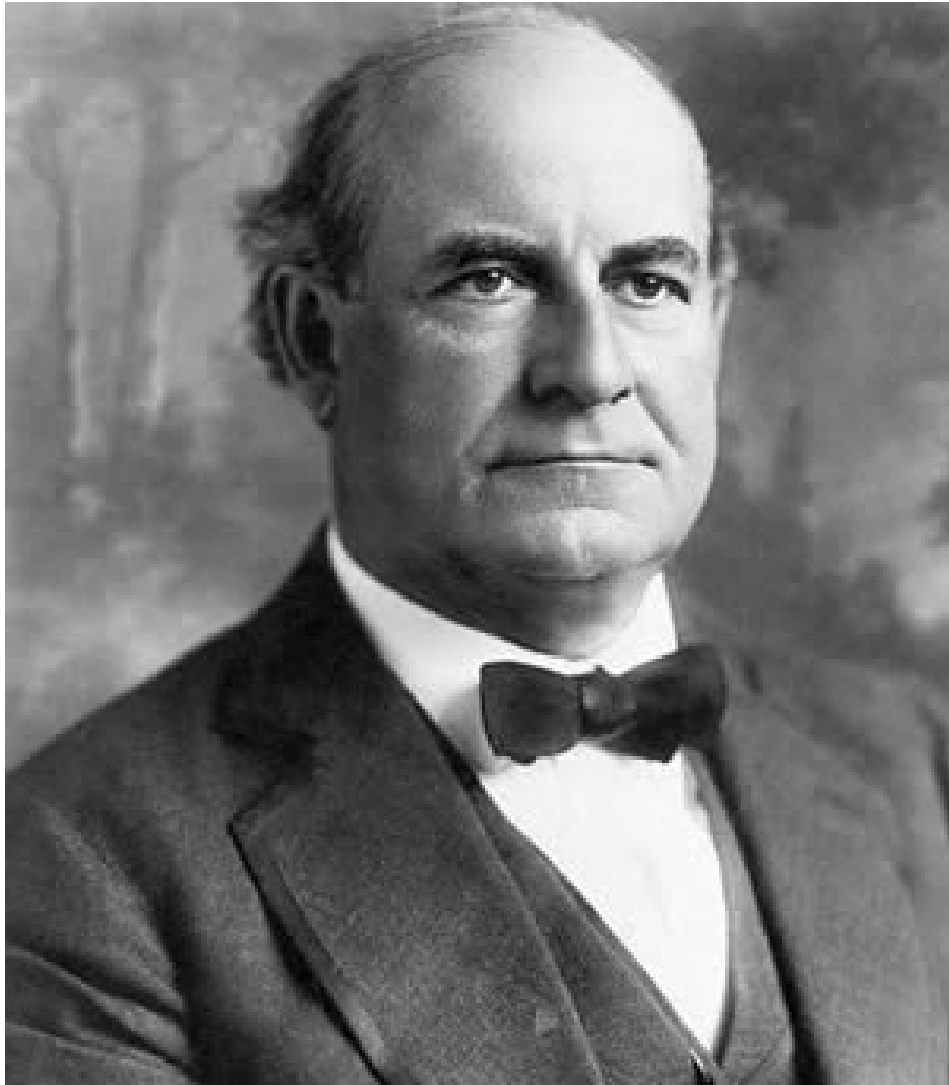


**The Last Stand of
William Jennings Bryan**
by
William Shepherd



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William Jennings Bryan spent most of his career as a courageous reformer and became America's greatest populist. Bryan was the *Great Commoner* whose influence continues to mystify the Northeastern intellectual establishment which has never fathomed the very different traditions of Midwestern populism, as represented by Bryan.

Bryan won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1896, just one year beyond the minimum age of thirty-five, with his populist rallying cry for abolition of the gold standard: 'You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.'¹ He ran for the presidency twice more, and lost, in noble campaigns for reform, particularly for Philippine independence and against American imperialism.

Bryan was a pacifist who resigned as Woodrow Wilson's secretary of state because he sought a more rigid neutrality in the *Kaiser War* (1914-18). For decades Bryan stood at the forefront of most progressive victories in his time: woman's suffrage, the direct election of senators, the graduated income tax.

Then in 1924 he joined forces with the biblical fundamentalists to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools in what appeared to the liberal elites to be an effort to stifle academic freedom and the freedom of thought that he had advocated in so many other contexts.

Bryan's biographers have always sought to explain this away with the familiar psychological tale of the young Turk who was transformed in old age. Many of the books about Bryan have the words 'retreat' and 'decline' in the title of their last chapter. But there is a minority view...and this is in the ascendancy...which holds that Bryan neither transformed nor retreated. Indeed his last stand was an extension of the populist thinking that had inspired his life.

Bryan's other progressive triumphs would probably have occurred without him. But the legislative attempt to curb evolution would have floundered much sooner without the legendary Bryan energy and enthusiasm. No one else in the fundamentalist movement had the legal skill or the political clout to make things happen. Out of Bryan's active involvement arose a living legacy, not just one more issue lost in the mists of history. Without Bryan, there never would have been anti-evolution laws or a *Supreme Court* decision.

Furthermore the issue has not gone away. Indeed it is resurgent once again as a new wave of creationists and biblical literalists ride forth under the banner of *Intelligent Design*. But how can a move to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools be deemed progressive? And how did Bryan link his previous efforts to this new strategy? Stephen Jay Gould addresses these two questions in *Rock of Ages*² and suggests that Bryan's attitude to evolution rested upon three errors:

'He made the common mistake of confusing the fact of evolution with the *Darwinian* explanation of the mechanism; he misinterpreted natural selection as a martial theory of survival by battle and destruction of enemies; and he fell into the logical error of arguing that *Darwinism* implied the moral virtuousness of such deathly struggle.'

Bryan would not have accepted this. He saw himself as a principled opponent of *Social Darwinism*. In *Prince of Peace* (1904), he wrote:

'The *Darwinian* theory represents man as reaching his present perfection by the operation of the law of hate - the merciless law by which the strong crowd out and kill off the weak. If this is the law of our development then, if there is any logic that can bind the human mind, we shall turn backward toward the beast in proportion as we substitute the law of love. I prefer to believe that love rather than hatred is the law of development.'

Gould's case however rests on his belief that, while the first two errors were simply misunderstandings, the third error, and the source of Bryan's emotional and political commitment to the cause, represents Bryan's confusion of scientific with moral truth.

In 1906, Bryan told the sociologist E.A. Ross that '[the Darwinian] conception of man's origins would weaken the cause of democracy and strengthen class pride and the power of wealth,' thereby indicating the relationship between

¹ While many still remember the style of the speech, few recall its substance. 'We say in our platform that the right to coin money and issue money is a function of government...those who are opposed to this proposition tell us that the issue of paper money is a function of the bank and that government ought to go out of the banking business. I stand with Jefferson...and tell them, as he did, that the issue of money is a function of the government and that the banks should go out of the governing business...when we have restored the money of the Constitution, all other necessary reforms will be possible, and...until that is done there is no reform that can be accomplished.' [Ed]

² Stephen Jay Gould discusses Bryan's involvement in the 1925 *Scopes Trial* in *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (pages 150-170 in the Jonathon Cape 2001 UK edition) in a chapter entitled *The Passion and Compassion of William Jennings Bryan* that derived from an earlier essay, in *Bully for Brontosaurus* (W.W. Norton, 1991), entitled *William Jennings Bryan's Last Campaign*. [Ed]

evolution and his other political concerns. He persisted in this uneasiness, as did many other political philosophers, until the Kaiser War erupted a decade later, when two events galvanized him into action.

First, he learned that the martial view of Darwinism had been invoked by most German intellectuals and military leaders as a justification for war and future domination. Second he feared the growth of moral weakness in the face of German militarism. Bryan united these new fears with all his previous doubts into a campaign against the teaching of evolutionary science in the classroom. Bryan's campaign strategy had three distinct strands linking it to his populist past.

Firstly, regarding Bryan's concerns for peace and compassion and against militarism and murder, he wrote: 'I learned that it was *Darwinism* that was at the basis of that damnable doctrine that might makes right that had spread over Germany.'

Secondly, regarding fairness and justice towards farmers and workers and against exploitation for monopoly and profit, Bryan argued that *Darwinism* had convinced so many entrepreneurs about the virtue of personal gain that government now had to protect the weak and poor from an explosion of anti-Christian moral decay. Bryan wrote:

'In the United States pure food laws have become necessary to keep manufacturers from poisoning their customers; child labor laws have become necessary to keep employers from dwarfing the bodies, minds and souls of children; anti-trust laws have become necessary to keep overgrown corporations from strangling smaller competitors, and we are still in a death grapple with profiteers and gamblers in farm products.'

Thirdly, regarding the rule of majority opinion against imposing elites, Bryan cited studies showing that only 15 percent of college male freshmen harboured doubts about God, but that 40 percent of graduates had become sceptics. *Darwinism* and its immoral principle of domination by a selfish elite had fuelled this scepticism.

Bryan railed against this insidious undermining of morality by a minority of intellectuals, and he vowed to fight fire with fire. If they worked through the classroom, he would respond in kind and ban their doctrine from the public schools. The majority of Americans did not accept the doctrine of human evolution, and had a democratic right to proscribe its teaching.

Gould believed that this third argument 'strikes at the heart of academic freedom' and remarked that scientific questions cannot be decided by majority vote, although this seems to miss Bryan's point which exalted the basic rights of townships to run their own affairs and went well beyond the political struggle for states rights.

'The taxpayers have a right to say what shall be taught...to direct or dismiss those whom they employ as teachers and school authorities...the hand that writes the paycheck rules the school, and a teacher has no right to teach that which his employers object to.'

But what of the influence of *Darwinism* on militarism and domestic exploitation? Bryan often stated that two books had altered the character of his opposition to the *Doctrine of Social Darwinism* from laissez-faire to vigorous action: *Headquarters Nights* by Vernon Kellogg (1917) and *The Science of Power* by Benjamin Kidd (1918).

Vernon Kellogg was an entomologist who held a professorship at Stanford and co-authored a major textbook, *Evolution and Animal Life*, with Darwin's leading disciple in America, David Starr Jordan, *President of Stanford*. During the *Kaiser War* while America maintained official neutrality, Kellogg became a high official in the international non-partisan effort for Belgian relief, a cause officially tolerated by Germany. In this capacity, he was posted at the headquarters of the *German Great General Staff*, the only American on the premises.

Night after night he listened to dinner discussions and arguments, sometimes in the presence of the Kaiser himself, among Germany's highest military officers. *Headquarters Nights* is Kellogg's account of these exchanges. He arrived in Europe as a pacifist, but left committed to the destruction of *German Militarism* by force.

Kellogg was appalled, above all, at the justification for war and German supremacy advanced by these officers, many of whom had been university professors before the war. They not only proposed an evolutionary rationale but advocated a false and particularly crude version of natural selection, defined as inexorable, bloody battle. Here is Kellogg in *Headquarters Nights*:

'Professor von Flussen is a *Neo-Darwinian*, as are most German biologists and natural philosophers. The creed of the *Allmacht* ['all might' or omnipotence] of a natural selection based on violent and competitive struggle is the gospel of the German intellectuals; all else is illusion and anathema.

This struggle not only must go on, for that is the natural law, but it should go on so that this natural law may work out in its cruel, inevitable way the salvation of the human species. That human group which is in the most advanced evolutionary stage should win in the struggle for existence, and this struggle should occur precisely that the various types may be tested, and the best not only preserved, but put in position to impose its kind of social organization - its *Kultur* - on the others, or, alternatively, to destroy and replace them.

This is the disheartening kind of argument that I faced at *Headquarters*. Add the additional assumption that German social and political organization is the chosen type of human community life, and you have a wall of logic and conviction that you can break your head against but can never shatter - by headwork. You long for the muscles of Samson.'

This affirmed Bryan's worst fears about the polluting power of the *Darwinian Doctrine*. Benjamin Kidd, an English commentator highly respected in both academic and lay circles, wrote several popular books on the implications of *Darwinism*. In *The Science of Power* Kidd constructs a very different argument from Kellogg's.

Kidd, a philosophical idealist, believed that life can only progress by rejecting material struggle and individual gain. Like the *German Militarists*, but to excoriate rather than to praise, Kidd identified *Darwinism* with domination by force. He argued that *Darwinism* had rekindled the most dangerous of human tendencies - our pagan soul, previously but imperfectly suppressed for centuries by *Christianity* and its doctrines of love and renunciation:

'The hold which the theories of the *Origin of Species* obtained on the popular mind in the West is one of the most remarkable incidents in the history of human thought. Everywhere throughout civilization an almost inconceivable influence was given to the doctrine of force as the basis of legal authority.

For centuries the Western pagan had struggled with the ideals of a religion of subordination and renunciation coming to him from the past. For centuries he had been bored almost beyond endurance with ideals of the world presented to him by the Churches of Christendom.

But here was a conception of life which stirred to its depths the inheritance in him from past epochs of time. This was the world which the masters of force comprehended. The pagan heart of the West sang within itself again in atavistic joy.'

According to Gould, Bryan did not understand the idea of natural selection, which is not a principle of victory by mortal combat, but a theory about reproductive success, however that goal be best achieved in local environments: by combat in some circumstances, to be sure, but by cooperation in others. Gould then goes on to write that:

'Bryan never grasped the principle that factual truth, however constituted, cannot dictate, or even imply, moral truth. Any argument that facts or theories of biological evolution can enjoin or validate any moral behaviour represents a severe misuse of Darwin's great insight. Bryan continued to characterize evolution as a principle of battle and destruction of the weak, a doctrine that undermined any decent morality and deserved banishment from the classroom.'

Gould then cites 'a rhetorical flourish' near the end of Bryan's *Last Evolution Argument*, the final speech that Bryan prepared, but never had an opportunity to deliver, at the end of the *Scopes Trial*. In it Bryan was to proclaim:

'Again force and love meet face to face, and the question 'What shall I do with Jesus?' must be answered. A bloody, brutal doctrine - *Evolution* - demands, as the rabble did nineteen hundred years ago, that He be crucified.'

It may seem that Gould is hostile to Bryan but this is not the case. Gould seeks rather to understand the arguments in favour of banning the teaching of evolution. He writes for instance that 'when Bryan said that *Darwinism* had been widely portrayed as a defense of war, domination and domestic exploitation, he was right.' And Gould then gets to the crux of the matter:

'If scientists had always maintained proper caution in their interpretations, and proper humility in resisting invalid extensions of their findings into the inappropriate domains of other magisteria, then we could exonerate my profession by recognizing the inevitable misuses by nonscientists as yet another manifestation of the old adage that no good deed goes unpunished.

But the [*Doctrine on Non-Overlapping Magisteria*] cuts both ways and imposes restriction and responsibility on both magisteria. The political campaigns of American creationists do represent - as usually and correctly interpreted - an improper attempt by partisans of a marginal and minority view within the magisterium of religion to impose their doctrines upon the magisterium of science.

But, alas, scientists have also, indeed frequently, been guilty of the same offense in reverse, even if they don't build organized political movements with legislative clout.'

Many people believe that evolution validates this or that moral behaviour because scientists have told them so. When we view the behaviour thereby justified as either benign or harmless, we tend to look the other way, and give the scientist a pass for his hubris.

But fashions change, and today's benevolence may become tomorrow's anathema. The average American male reader in 1900 probably accepted racism, with his group on top, as a dictate of nature, and probably supported imperial expansion of American power. The claim that evolution justified the morality of both conclusions probably seemed to him both evident and reasonable. And if a prominent biologist advanced such a statement, then the argument became even more persuasive.

Most people today - from the subsequent perspective of Yves, Hiroshima, lynchings and genocides - consider such transgressions from evolutionary fact to social morality as both insidious and harmful. Bryan drew a valid message

from his reading. Several of the German generals who traded arguments with Kellogg had been university professors of biology. Scientists cannot claim immunity from misinterpretations, particularly from socially harmful arguments if their own colleagues become frequent proposers and perpetrators.

In *Last Evolution Argument*, Bryan charged that evolutionists had misused science to present moral opinions about the social order as though they represented facts of nature.

‘By paralyzing the hope of reform, it discourages those who labor for the improvement of man’s condition. Its only program for man is scientific breeding, a system under which a few supposedly superior intellects, self-appointed, would direct the mating and the movements of the mass of mankind - an impossible system!’

As Gould remarks, who can fault Bryan here? One of the saddest chapters in the entire history of science records the extensive misuse of data to support the supposed moral and social consequences of biological determinism, the claim that inequalities based on race, sex, or class cannot be altered because they reflect the innate and inferior genetic endowment of the disadvantaged.

Immense harm has been done...and continues to be done...by scientists who misidentify their own social preferences as facts of nature in their technical writings. Even greater mischief arises when these scientists write text-books for elementary and high-school students that promulgate their social doctrines as the objective findings of their profession.

In *Rock of Ages*, Gould concludes his discussion of Bryan’s the 1925 *Scopes Trial*,³ by citing a passage from *A Civic Biology* published in 1914 by George William Hunter, *Professor of Biology at Knox College*. This was the book that John Scopes used to teach evolution to the children of Dayton, Tennessee.

Hunter discusses Jukes and Kallikaks, the classic (and false) case offered as canonical examples of how bad heredity runs in families. Under the heading *Parasitism and Its Cost to Society - The Remedy*, Hunter writes:

‘Hundreds of families such as those described above exist today, spreading disease, immorality and crime to all parts of this country. The cost to society of such families is very severe. Just as certain animals or plants become parasitic on other plants and animals, these families have become parasitic on society.

They not only do harm to others by corrupting, stealing or spreading disease, but they are actually protected and cared for by the state out of public money. Largely for them the poorhouse and the asylum exist. They take from society, but they give nothing in return. They are true parasite.

If such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading. Humanity will not allow this, but we do have the remedy of separating the sexes in asylums or other places and in various ways preventing intermarriage and the possibilities of perpetuating such a low and degenerate race.

In another passage, two pages later, Hunter writes a paragraph under the heading ‘the races of man’ - in a textbook assigned to children of all groups in public high schools throughout America:

‘At the present time there exist upon the earth five races or varieties of man, each very different from the other in instincts, social customs, and, to an extent, structure. These are the Ethiopian or negro type, originating in Africa; the Malay or brown race, from the islands of the Pacific; the American Indian; the Mongolian or yellow race, including the natives of China, Japan and the Eskimos; and finally, the highest type of all, the Caucasians, represented by the civilized white inhabitants of Europe and America.’

William Jennings Bryan might well have said; ‘I rest my case!’ But just how good is his case a century later? Behind the spin and the bombast there is a much richer discussion about evolution taking place behind the scenes on the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Currently there are twelve distinct and plausible hypotheses and only one of these evolutionary theories is neo-Darwinism, the school based on genetic mutation and random selection that is dominant in most universities. These twelve theories were well summarised recently by the Canadian journalist Douglas Todd in an article for the *Vancouver Sun*⁴.

³ John Scopes was a young free-thinker, popular with his fundamentalist students, who worked as the physics teacher and track coach at the local high school. He had substituted for the fundamentalist biology teacher during an illness and had assigned the chapters on evolution from the class textbook, *A Civic Biology*, by George William Hunter. Scopes consented to be the stalking horse for a legal challenge to the constitutionality of the Tennessee anti-evolution law. In 1955 Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee wrote a play about this episode in American history entitled *Inherit the Wind*. Two film versions were produced: the first featured Spencer Tracy as Clarence Darrow and Fredric Marsh as William Jennings Bryan; while in the later remake for television, Kirk Douglas played Darrow with Jason Robards taking the part of Bryan.

⁴ See <http://www.vancouver.sun.com/Life/Join+real+Darwin+debate/1339617/story.html>: *Join The Real Darwin Debate* by Douglas Todd (Vancouver; February 28, 2009).

Neo-Darwinism is advanced by high-profile, anti-religious biologists such as Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*. Four of the alternative evolutionary theories to neo-Darwinism are exclusively scientific, making no reference to spirituality. For instance, one scientific theory highlights how cooperation is essential to the evolutionary process. This school is championed by American biologists such as Lynn Margulis, who shared her viewpoint with her late husband, noted astronomer Carl Sagan. Another scientific-mathematical approach to evolution is 'complexity theory', in which physicists such as Ervin Laszlo postulate that organisms have a 'self-organizing' ability. A group of evolutionary psychologists also strongly oppose Dawkins's view that selfish genes can explain everything. These social scientists are known as 'directionalists' because they see elements of purpose in life.

At the other end of the theoretical pole are those who emphasize spiritual explanations for evolution. One school is called *Intelligent Design*. It's typically proposed by evangelical Christians who find "young earth" creationism too crude. Another spiritual explanation for evolution is associated with the *New Age* movement. It supports the esoteric form of evolution promoted in 1877 by Madame Blavatsky, founder of *Theosophy*.

The final cohort of evolutionary theories creatively melds elements of both science and spirituality. The schools of thought in this category embrace both science and metaphysics in the name of developing a new synthesis on evolution. One of these evolutionary theories, 'conscious evolution', is based on the work of the dissident Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It proposes that humans are called to evolve in self-awareness. It has inspired everyone from Marshall McLuhan to Barbara Max Hubbard. 'Process philosophy' is another member of this group blending science and spirituality. Many progressive Christian theologians maintain that the divine is at the leading edge of evolution masterminding 'the creative advance into novelty'.

A final group profiled in the helpful series on the 12 theories of evolution is called 'the integrationalists' follow the lead of philosopher Ken Wilber. They attempt to thoroughly integrate science, developmental psychology and mysticism into a comprehensive form of evolutionary understanding.

It appears that William Jennings Bryan knew much more about the value of things than most of his political contemporaries who could see no further than the price of everything.