

Henry Louis Mencken, *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 16, 1925
Dayton, Tenn., July 16. --

Two things ought to be understood clearly by heathen Northerners who follow the great cause of the State of Tennessee against the infidel Scopes. One is that the old mountebank, Bryan, is no longer thought of as a mere politician and jobseeker in these Godly regions, but has become converted into a great sacerdotal figure, half man and half archangel -- in brief, a sort of
5 fundamentalist pope. The other is that the fundamentalist mind, running in a single rut for fifty years, is now quite unable to comprehend dissent from its basic superstitions, or to grant any common honesty, or even any decency, to those who reject them.

The latter fact explains some of the most astonishing singularities of the present trial -- that is, singularities to one accustomed to more austere procedures. In the average Northern jurisdiction
10 much of what is going on here would be almost unthinkable. Try to imagine a trial going on in a town in which anyone is free to denounce the defendant's case publicly and no one is free to argue for it in the same way -- a trial in a courthouse placarded with handbills set up by his opponents -- a trial before a jury of men who have been roweled and hammered by those opponents for years, and have never heard a clear and fair statement of his answer.

But this is not all. It seems impossible, but it is nevertheless a fact that public opinion in Dayton
15 sees no impropriety in the fact that the case was opened with prayer by a clergyman known by everyone to be against Scopes and by no means shy about making the fact clear. Nor by the fact that Bryan, the actual complainant, has been preparing the ground for the prosecution for months. Nor by the fact that, though he is one of the attorneys of record in the case, he is also present in the
20 character of a public evangelist and that throngs go to hear him whenever he speaks, including even the sitting judge.

I do not allege here that there is any disposition to resort to lynch law. On the contrary, I believe that there is every intent to give Scopes a fair trial, as a fair trial is understood among
25 fundamentalists. All I desire to show is that all the primary assumptions are immovably against him -- that it is a sheer impossibility for nine-tenths of those he faces to see any merit whatever in his position. He is not simply one who has committed a misdemeanor against the peace and dignity of the State, he is also the agent of a heresy almost too hellish to be stated by reputable men. Such reputable men recognize their lawful duty to treat him humanely and even politely, but they also recognize their superior duty to make it plain that they are against his heresy and believe absolutely
30 in the wisdom and virtue of his prosecutors.

In view of the fact that everyone here looks for the jury to bring in a verdict of guilty, it might be expected that the prosecution would show a considerable amiability and allow the defense a rather free plan. Instead, it is contesting every point very vigorously and taking every advantage of
its greatly superior familiarity with local procedure. There is, in fact, a considerable heat in the trial.
35 Bryan and the local lawyers for the State sit glaring at the defense all day and even the Attorney General, A.T. Stewart, who is supposed to have secret doubts about fundamentalism, has shown such pugnacity that it has already brought him to forced apologies.

The high point of yesterday's proceedings was reached with the appearance of Dr. Maynard M. Metcalfe, of the Johns Hopkins. The doctor is a somewhat chubby man of bland mien, and during

40 the first part of his testimony, with the jury present, the prosecution apparently viewed him with great equanimity. But the instant he was asked a question bearing directly upon the case at bar there was a flurry in the Bryan pen and Stewart was on his feet with protests. Another question followed, with more and hotter protests. The judge then excluded the jury and the show began.

45 What ensued was, on the surface, a harmless enough dialogue between Dr. Metcalfe and Darrow, but underneath there was very tense drama. At the first question Bryan came out from behind the State's table and planted himself directly in front of Dr. Metcalfe, and not ten feet away. The two McKenzies followed, with young Sue Hicks at their heels.

50 Then began one of the clearest, most succinct and withal most eloquent presentations of the case for the evolutionists that I have ever heard. The doctor was never at a loss for a word, and his ideas flowed freely and smoothly. Darrow steered him magnificently. A word or two and he was howling down the wind. Another and he hauled up to discharge a broadside. There was no cocksureness in him. Instead he was rather cautious and deprecatory and sometimes he halted and confessed his ignorance. But what he got over before he finished was a superb counterblast to the fundamentalist buncombe. The jury, at least, in theory heard nothing of it, but it went whooping into
55 the radio and it went banging into the face of Bryan.

Bryan sat silent throughout the whole scene, his gaze fixed immovably on the witness. Now and then his face darkened and his eyes flashed, but he never uttered a sound. It was, to him, a string of blasphemies out of the devil's mass -- a dreadful series of assaults upon the only true religion. The old gladiator faced his real enemy at last. Here was a sworn agent and attorney of the science he
60 hates and fears -- a well-fed, well-mannered spokesman of the knowledge he abominates. Somehow he reminded me pathetically of the old Holy Roller I heard last week -- the mountain pastor who damned education as a mocking and a corruption. Bryan, too, is afraid of it, for wherever it spreads his trade begins to fall off, and wherever it flourishes he is only a poor clown.

65 But not to these fundamentalists of the hills. Not to yokels he now turns to for consolation in his old age, with the scars of defeat and disaster all over him. To these simple folk, as I have said, he is a prophet of the imperial line -- a lineal successor to Moses and Abraham. The barbaric cosmogony that he believes in seems as reasonable to them as it does to him. They share his peasant-like suspicion of all book learning that a plow hand cannot grasp. They believe with him that men who know too much should be seized by the secular arm and put down by force. They dream as he does
70 of a world unanimously sure of Heaven and unanimously idiotic on this earth.

This old buzzard, having failed to raise the mob against its rulers, now prepares to raise it against its teachers. He can never be the peasants' President, but there is still a chance to be the peasants' Pope. He leads a new crusade, his bald head glistening, his face streaming with sweat, his chest heaving beneath his rumpled alpaca coat. One somehow pities him, despite his so palpable
75 imbecilities. It is a tragedy, indeed, to begin life as a hero and to end it as a buffoon. But let no one, laughing at him, underestimate the magic that lies in his black, malignant eye, his frayed but still eloquent voice. He can shake and inflame these poor ignoramuses as no other man among us can shake and inflame them, and he is desperately eager to order the charge.

In Tennessee he is drilling his army. The big battles, he believes, will be fought elsewhere.