

JOURNALISM

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A Sportswriter Covers the Scopes Monkey Trial: A Study of W.O. McGeehan's Reporting from Tennessee

Some of the biggest names in American journalism gathered in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925 to cover the John T. Scopes "monkey" trial. At issue in the trial was a legal challenge to a Tennessee law that made it a misdemeanor for public schoolteachers to proclaim as truth the belief "that man has descended from a lower order of animals." In the newspapers, the issues became simplified as Darwinism vs. fundamentalist Christianity. In the courtroom, it was seen as a battle of high-price attorneys: agnostic Clarence Darrow vs. fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan. To cover the trial, the *New York Herald Tribune* assigned its sports editor, W.O. McGeehan.

What results when a sportswriter covers a civil trial? How did McGeehan frame the issues? What were his stories like? Significantly, what was the reading public's reaction to his stories? This essay attempts to answer those questions by examining the text of McGeehan's reports from Tennessee, as well as letters to the editor that were printed in subsequent issues of the *Herald Tribune*.

The media historian Marvin N. Olasky has observed that the reporters from major city newspapers who attended the Scopes trial were antipathetic toward fundamentalist Christianity. Olasky argues that this antipathy led to coverage of the trial, its issues, and its participants that said more about journalists' biases than the situation that existed in reality. What occurred among reporters at the trial was an example of pack journalism that resulted in stories that ridiculed the people of Dayton.

Because of his background as a sportswriter, McGeehan was not quite a member of the city-side journalistic pack. His ridicule took a special form and I am especially interested in the story he wrote covering Bryan's climactic address to the court. Throughout his account, McGeehan uses athletic tropes similar to those used in boxing coverage. Indeed, McGeehan frames the story as if it was an oratorical slugfest between Bryan and Darrow, and he carries the prizefight metaphor from the beginning to the end of the piece. Beyond that, he uses the same literary techniques in his trial story as he did in a story covering the heavyweight championship fight between Jack Dempsey and Luis Angel Firpo in 1923.

The result is a highly readable, entertaining, and decidedly skewed piece of journalism. Readers both praised and objected to McGeehan's coverage. Damon Runyon, journalistic luminary and one of McGeehan's sportswriting colleagues, maintained that covering a big murder trial was exactly like covering a championship fight, and he liked to think he was adept at doing both. It may be that his analogy, or his versatility, did not apply to McGeehan's coverage of the Scopes trial.