



NATIONAL
CENTER *for*
SCIENCE
EDUCATION

Published on NCSE (<https://ncse.com>)

[Home](#) > Misunderstanding the Sage of Lindcove



[1]

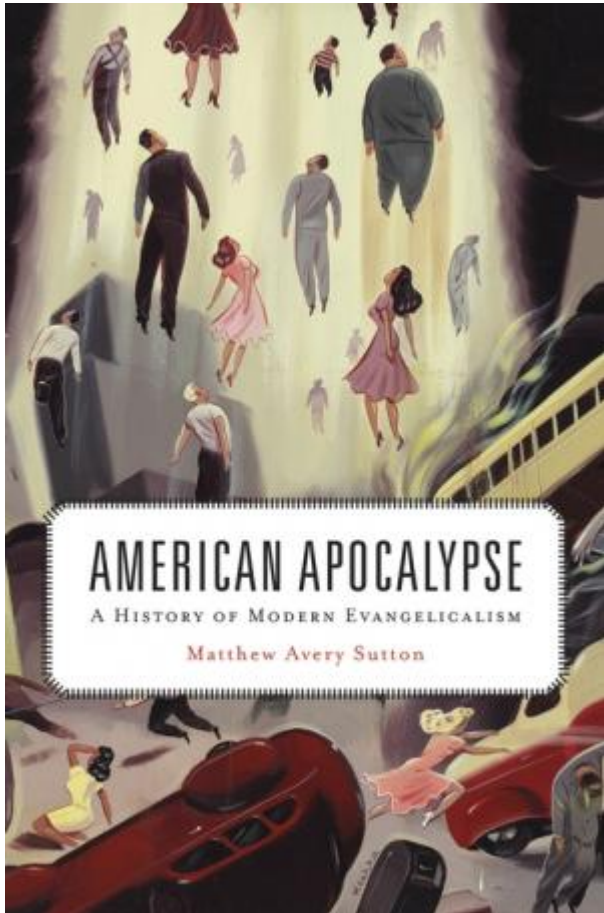
SHARE TWEET EMAIL [PRINT](#) [2]

[Anti-evolution](#) [3], [History](#) [4]

[Glenn Branch](#) [1]

08.25.2017

[Misunderstanding the Sage of Lindcove](#) [5]



Although it was published a few years ago, I don't feel embarrassed that I have only recently finished reading Matthew Avery Sutton's excellent [American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism](#) ^[6] (2014). What I feel embarrassed about is that although I bought a copy of the book when it was published, I read a copy from my local public library, because my copy is in a box somewhere. Anyhow, as its title suggests, Sutton's discussion centers on the attitude of American evangelicals toward the end-times prophecies of the Bible. Accordingly, the book addresses how they thought about and reacted to events of the day, from the Great War through the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, to 9/11, interpreting them through the lens of their premillennarian convictions. Overall, I enjoyed, and learned a lot from, *American Apocalypse*.

How do the Scopes trial and the fundamentalist assault on evolution education in general enter into Sutton's story? In his preface, Sutton announces that he thinks that "historians have exaggerated the significance of the Scopes trial," noting that Bryan himself was not really a fundamentalist and suggesting that the trial "had little to do with the trajectory of fundamentalism proper at all." Nevertheless, the second half, more or less, of chapter 5, "American Education on Trial," offers a brief but accurate sketch of the trial and its background and aftermath. But in the course of doing so, Sutton emphasizes that "evolution had not been a significant factor in the rise of the fundamentalist movement, nor had fundamentalism been at the base of Bryan's crusade, nor were fundamentalists the only Americans uncomfortable with Darwin's theories."

There is, I think, room to argue with Sutton's assessment of the connection between fundamentalism and evolution, but I don't propose to do so here: it's too complicated a topic for a blog post. But I want to discuss a paragraph, occurring toward the end of the chapter, which I found problematic. "By the late 1920s," after the Scopes trial was over (and after the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the

conviction on a technicality, a detail that Sutton fails to mention), “fundamentalists were still waging a relentless battle against evolution.”

But rather than keep beating a scientific brick wall, a few began to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the fundamentalist position. *King's Business* [a monthly periodical published by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, now Biola University] ran a series of articles, “Errors of Fundamentalist Science,” by Dudley Joseph Whitney. He cataloged the sloppy scientific work done by fundamentalists and demonstrated how their errors encouraged evolutionists to ignore them. “There are in fact many very convincing reasons for believing in at least a large amount of evolution,” he wrote, “and if in addition it happens that much of the conviction in favor of evolution comes from mistakes in fundamentalist science, an urgent need exists for the fundamentalists to correct their errors.”

A minor error here: in fact, only the first of the articles in the series was entitled “Errors of Fundamentalist Science.” When it appeared, in February 1928, it was billed as the first of three articles, and it was duly followed by “Genesis and Geology” in March 1928 and “The Basic Fallacy of Evolution” in April 1928. At least four further articles from Whitney eventually followed in *King's Business*: “The Biological Failure of Evolution” in October 1928; “How Old is the Earth?” in May 1929; “History Versus Evolution” in October 1929; and “The Problem of Early Man” in June 1930.

It's not the minor error about the titles that strikes me as problematic, though; it's Sutton's description of Whitney's project. Reading it, you might think that Whitney was primarily concerned to document and correct the errors of antievolution writers of his day; that he largely accepted the scientific consensus on evolution; even that he was a sort of evolutionary creationist *avant la lettre*. No, no, and no again. According to Ronald L. Numbers's *The Creationists* (1992), a work apparently uncited in *American Apocalypse*, Whitney (1883–1964), “a rancher and sometime farm-journal editor” in Lindcove, California, was “one of the few non-Adventist advocates of [George McCready] Price's new catastrophism,” meaning that he accepted a young earth, a worldwide flood, and evolution within (but only within) “kinds.”

In “Errors of Fundamentalist Science” in particular, Whitney is clearly not interested in correcting the errors of antievolution writers in general. His sights are trained on two specific “serious mistakes” of fundamentalists: accepting the geological evidence that life on earth is “millions of years” old and that there is a “fairly satisfactory sequence of plant and animal species” in the fossil record, and insisting that species are fixed and unchangeable. By the lights of the scientific consensus of the late 1920s and today, of course, the first is by and large not a mistake, while the second is. But Whitney is not concerned with the scientific consensus. His main concern is presenting a unified front against evolution: “I am not in any way upholding the theory of evolution,” he insists. “Quite the contrary. I am merely trying to put the opposition to it on a sound basis.”

Not long after his series of articles in *King's Business*, Whitney, with Price, started the Religion and Science Organization, which Numbers describes as “apparently the first antievolution organization in America aimed at resolving scientific and hermeneutical problems rather than restricting the teaching of evolution.” It was a big tent in some ways: the Catholic George Barry O'Toole was considered as a prospective member of its panel of officers, where he would have joined Adventists like Price and Harold W. Clark and Lutherans like [Byron C. Nelson](#) [7] and [Theodore Graebner](#) [8]. But it unequivocally repudiated the Day-Age and Pre-Adamic Ruin interpretations of the Bible and the fossil record. According to Numbers, Whitney's “basic objective in founding the RSA was to convert *fundamentalists* to flood

geology” (emphasis in original).

To my disappointment, if understandably in light of his overall approach to the history of American evangelicalism, Sutton never returns to the history of the antievolution movement in *American Apocalypse*. If he had, he might have observed that, with the rise of young-earth creationism in the 1960s and the subsequent emergence of Answers in Genesis as its most visible exponent in the 1990s, Whitney’s ambitions were largely realized. (He is not mentioned on the Answers in Genesis website, but the Institute for Creation Research’s Henry M. Morris, in *Defending the Faith* [1999], at least acknowledged Whitney—not Price—as offering “apparently the first modern defense of a modern creation.”) For Whitney’s views on evolution, at least in broad outline, are now standard fare among a significant sector of American evangelicals.

[+ read](#) [5]

Source URL: <https://ncse.com/blog/2017/08/misunderstanding-sage-lindcove-0018595>

Links

[1] <https://ncse.com/users/glenn>

[2] <https://ncse.com/printpdf/18595>

[3] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/anti-evolution>

[4] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/history>

[5] <https://ncse.com/blog/2017/08/misunderstanding-sage-lindcove-0018595>

[6] <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674048362>

[7] <https://ncse.com/blog/2015/04/haeckeling-darwin-with-full-nelson-0016259>

[8] <https://ncse.com/blog/2014/12/two-theodores-0016037>