BOOK REVIEWS

Inside Creationism

The Creationists. The Evolution of Scientific Creationism. RONALD L. NUMBERS. Knopf, New York, 1992. xviii, 460 pp., illus., + plates. $27.50.

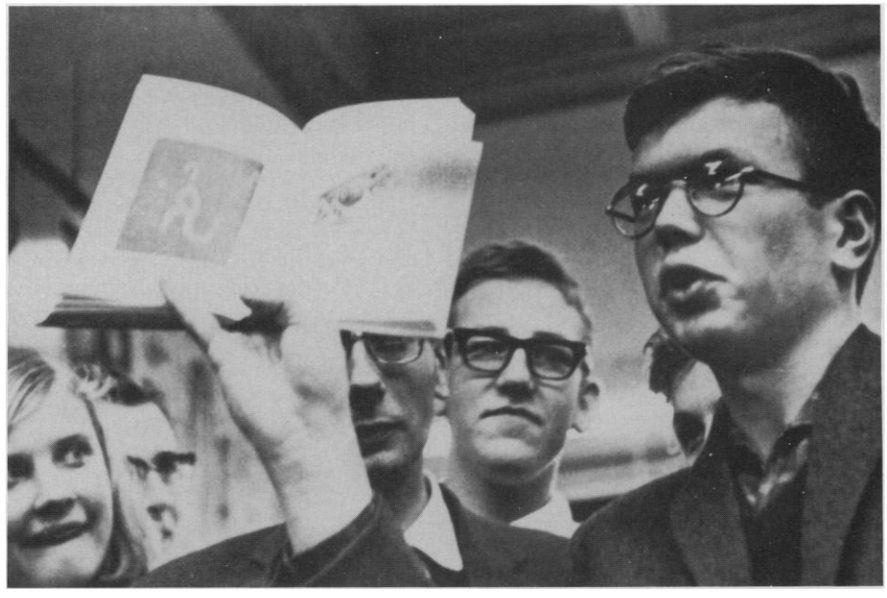
In his introduction to *The Creationists* Ronald L. Numbers describes the 1981 Arkansas statue that mandated "balanced treatment" in the teaching of creation and evolution in the state's public schools. The legislature had specific points in mind for "creation science." They included the sudden creation of the universe and all life in it from nothing; the insufficiency of mutation and natural selection for bringing about the different forms of life; separate ancestry for man and apes; the catastrophic history of the earth, including the occurrence of a worldwide flood; and a short history of the earth and its living inhabitants.

The Arkansas legislation represents for Numbers a culminating point. It symbolized a turn in the history of the creationist movement and a popularity that surprised even its major advocates. Creation science ostensibly departed from a preoccupation with the biblical record and its relation to scientific theories. It established itself as a scientific discipline of its own for which, however much it grew from Christian understandings of the world, no dogmatic sanctions were needed; it could be taught without reference to the Bible. And, so characterized, creation science prepared the way for the reentry of a religion-based science into the public schools of the country.

The Creationists recounts the history of a subculture. Numbers focuses mostly on the United States, with occasional asides in other directions. Most readers of this book, I suspect, will enter into a realm of American culture known to them mostly through certain familiar stereotypes and celebrated events such as the 1925 Scopes Trial and the recent battles over textbooks in the public schools. But they will be interested to learn of something far more complex. They will learn of major leaders and personalities legendary among the movement activists—George Frederick Wright, Harry Rimmer, George McCready Price, Dudley Joseph Whitney, John C. Whitcomb, Jr., Henry M. Morris, Walter E. Lammerts—and of publishing landmarks that give creation its own intellectual stages and paradigms—Wright's *Man and the Glacial Period* (1892), Price's *Outlines of Modern Christianity and Modern Science* (1902), Arthur I. Brown's *Evolution and the Bible* (1922), Morris and Whitcomb's *The Genesis Flood* (1961), Morris's *Scientific Creationism* (1974). The creation subculture also had its often divisive intramural warfare that produced apostates and dissenters, heresies and schisms. It has its own institutional histories as well—the Religion and Science Association, the Deluge Geology Society, the American Scientific Affiliation, the Creation Research Society. Add to this record journals and pamphlets, large collections of private records and epistolary exchanges, and then the personal accounts and reminiscences gathered in interviews with the author, and one has quite a story to tell. What results here is a chronicle derived from Numbers's prodigious research and his goal of giving the creationists their own full story.

However much the creationists wanted to constitute their ideas as an official public dogma for the United States, they lived and flourished as dissenters from what they decried as the dominant secular ethos of the nation. As an embattled minority they functioned as a self-conscious group. To that extent they had first to define their own principles and defend them. That effort dogged them throughout, and a great value of this study derives from Numbers's attention to the many faces and factions of creationism. Against a conventional wisdom that assumes that one creationist is pretty much like another, Numbers asserts that "nothing could be further from the truth." Thus Whitney, founder of the Religion and Science Association, found his group feuding about the age of the earth and other key points. "A swell gang we are," he said, "trying to fight evolution when we can agree on nothing among ourselves except that evolution is wrong." Seeking to reduce differences, the Deluge Geology Society, setting up shop in 1938, restricted its membership to those who accepted no more than "six literal days" for the creation of the world and who believed that the Noachian flood should be studied as the cause of the major geological changes since creation. But these points of consent concealed a myriad of lesser disputations. "Within a few years," Numbers reports, "members were wrangling over everything from hermeneutics to tectonics" and found themselves in intractable family quarrels.

Sometimes the disputes curiously reflected



"Nicolaas A. Rupke, as an undergraduate comparative anatomy student at the University of Groningen in 1964, introducing his classmates to George McCready Price's *Evolutionary Geology and the New Catastrophism*." Having been warned at Groningen that he would "face only misery if he pursued a career in the earth sciences," Rupke established contact with American creationists, but on finding that they "were blowing his case out of proportion . . . requested them not to publicize" it. After obtaining his degree at Groningen and spending a summer working in North America with the Adventist geologist Harold G. Coffin, he entered graduate school at Princeton in 1968. "By the time he had received his doctorate in 1972 . . . he had come to accept organic evolution and had forsaken the faith of his family." [From *The Creationists*; courtesy of Nicolaas Rupke]

"Kurt P. Wise measuring Cerion for Stephen Jay Gould as a graduate research assistant at Harvard University in 1981." Wise "embraced flood geology as a teenager after being exposed to the concept by creation scientists from Bob Jones University at a midwestern conclave for Christian youth. . . . In 1981 he graduated from the University of Chicago with honors in the geophysical sciences and immediately headed east to work with Gould. . . . Fellow graduate students sometimes taunted their creationist colleague, but the bemused Gould always treated him with respect. Proud creationists speculated that God had planted Wise 'right in the middle of S. J. Gould's paleontology program as a testimony to a man who otherwise might not have been reached.' " [From *The Creationists*; courtesy of Kurt P. Wise]

creationism's precise subcultural situation. Whitney, for example, debated Byron Nelson on the species question. The two agreed on the special creation of plants and animals and on the decisive place of the biblical flood. But whereas Nelson insisted on the fixity of species since Eden, Whitney accepted any amount of modification that seemed reasonable. For Whitney, a simple problem was the shortage of space on the Ark. "If we insist on fixity of species," he wrote to Nelson, "we make the Ark more crowded than a sardine can." Nelson had a simple answer; we need to assume the immense size of the Ark, he said. And he went on to detail how species large and small might have been accommodated in the vessel.

Numbers's account of the larger ideological and factional disputes is more significant. The creationist movement always produced its more "liberal" adherents, and the institutional divisions in the movement reflected the stress points they created. The American Scientific Affiliation best reflected them. Its founding in 1941 expressed concern by evangelicals about the quality of Christian witness produced by the conservative Deluge Geology Society. L. Lawrence Kulp, one of the first creationists trained in geology, criticized flood geology and, after doing radioisotope dating at Columbia University, influenced the American Scientific Affiliation away from Price and Rimmer. Conservatives reacted in horror, denouncing the "Kulpians" in the creationist ranks.

An intriguing subtheme runs throughout Numbers's study. Creationists often referred to "orthodox" science, meaning the body of academic and theoretical science that overwhelmingly supported evolution. Creationists had a shifting and usually ambivalent relationship to such orthodoxy. That relationship has its own story, and it points to a disturbing quality of intellectual descent in the creationist movement.

Consider that the first creationist Numbers studies, Wright, began as a Christian evolutionist, but even when he turned to creationism, under the influence of Arnold Guyot of Princeton College and two Princeton Theological Seminary scholars, he did so objecting that liberal Protestant theologians like Charles A. Briggs and popular theorists like John Fiske had run wild with evolution theory. He preferred the careful scientism of Darwin to the cosmic and speculative imagination of the bolder evolutionists.

Wright's successors in the creationist movement often felt a need to display scientific credentials, however much they recoiled from modern science. Rimmer thus styled himself a "research scientist" and in a series of newsletters presented himself as one "professionally engaged in scientific research." He could not possibly, therefore, have any hostility toward "true" science.

The movement often divided on just how much creationism should concede to science. Nelson, moving in a liberal direction and moving creation back to 100,000 years or more, told Price not to "make an ass" of himself by continuing to teach absurd ideas. The Bible, when properly interpreted, he asserted, leaves opinion free to settle on any antiquity of the human race "which a genuine science makes it necessary to grant." Later Lammerts, for the Creation Research Society, expressed embarrassment at Clifford Burdick's bogus scientific credentials, while Morris saw in the young-earth scientist Stephen A. Austin, fresh from Penn State with a doctorate in geology, the great hope for creation science's credibility.

But ironically, creationism, now defining itself in the 1970s as a genuine science, distanced itself farther from orthodox science. William Jennings Bryan at the Scopes Trial readily conceded that the "days" of Genesis might be separate long eras of time. And that accommodation at least kept creationists interested in scientific theories. But the Creation Research Society came to signify a group of flood creationists hostile to any adherents of an old earth. Whitcomb and Morris, in answering critics of their book *The Genesis Flood*, refused to be drawn into scientific debates. "The real issue," they said repeatedly, "is not the correctness of the interpretation of various details of the geological data, but simply what God has revealed in His word concerning these matters."

Perhaps this more recent retreat of the creationist movement from empirical science also explains Numbers's focus on the movement in its subculture status. One might have wished to be kept more informed along the way of new developments in biological and geological theories in the academic community. Have we not been told that recent science does not sit comfortably with uniformitarian explanations of the universe's history? Ultimately, Numbers lets the creationists have their own say. His effort to be fair also warns us not to dismiss these protagonists as simply "anti-intellectual." Merely a difference of cosmology and epistemology distinguished them from other theorists of earth history, and within those confinements they were as "intellectual" as were their rivals. Yes, but what a difference! For when all is said and done, it remains the fact that religious faith built the creationist movement. The secularist must marvel that such an abundant literature, and such a varied and contentious institutional history as the creationists', could derive from such a source. Perhaps their curiosity will lead them to this informative and rewarding book.

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