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One of the most popular of Charles Darwin's books is his "Manakin's Voyage Round the World," in which he tells of his experiences and discoveries while he travelled as official surgeon with the warship Beagle. He thoroughly studied the geology of South America and found many fossils. Here we see him discovering a fossil mastodon that was exposed on a cliff near Bahia V. It was in too crumbling a state to be removed.

The Butler Act, outlawing the teaching in Tennessee's public schools of "any theory that denies the divine creation of man and teaches instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals," became law on March 21, 1925. But it really wasn't a matter of national interest until May 1925, when, in short order, John Thomas Scopes agreed to become the defendant in a case testing the law's constitutionality,

William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow agreed to join the legal teams representing the prosecution and the defense (respectively), and Scopes was duly indicted. That was enough to kindle interest in the issue of teaching evolution around the country. And my choice of the particular verb “kindle” is deliberate.

Yes, I’m going to discuss a real—rather than a fictional (see [“Darwin in The Dante Club”](#) [6])—evolutionary bookburning, noted by various sources, including Oscar Riddle’s *The Unleashing of Evolutionary Thought* (1954) and L. Sprague de Camp’s *The Great Monkey Trial* (1968). A local school board in Jewell County, a rural county in north central Kansas, “voted 14 to 5 to order a set of ‘The Book of Knowledge’ burned,” apparently because “the books contain quite a thorough discussion of the theory of evolution,” according to a story in the *Southeast Missourian* for May 28, 1925. *The Book of Knowledge* was the United States edition, published by Grolier, of *The Children’s Encyclopedia*, published in Britain by the Educational Book Company.

By the way, de Camp adds the odd detail that the vote was due to “members of a Fundamentalist sect of Quakers” who packed the meeting. Although he didn’t provide the source, he was probably relying on Maynard Shipley’s *The War on Modern Science* (1927), which quotes a 1925 story in the *New York World* describing the antievolution faction as members of “an old-time sect of Friends, with tenets more rigid and beliefs more ‘fundamental’ than the modern Quakers”; the sect included about half of the taxpayers in the district. I expect that in the United States as in Britain (see Geoffrey Cantor’s *Quakers, Jews, and Science* [2005]), the Quaker reaction to evolution was muted, with a split among those reacting on generational and theological lines.

Since the *Southeast Missourian*’s story says that the books were purchased “about two years ago,” it was probably the 1922 edition. The treatment of evolution would not have been as current, though, since the contents were originally published in fortnightly parts from 1908 to 1910. Michael Tracy, the author of a study of the book, *The World of the Edwardian Child: As Seen in Arthur Mee’s ‘Children’s Encyclopaedia’ 1908-1910* (2009: Arthur Mee [1875-1943] was listed as the editor-in-chief or co-editor-in-chief, depending on the exact edition), [summarizes](#) [7]: “The readers were left in no doubt about evolution. Man was presented as the highest form of life, though the *Encyclopædia* avoided asserting too clearly that he descended from the apes: Darwin’s work was still controversial.”

But you know me: I wanted to look for myself. It wasn’t easy to assess Tracy’s evaluation, I have to confess. This was in part because there are only scattered volumes of various editions of the encyclopedia available on-line, and in part because of the unsystematic arrangement of the books, presumably owing to the piecemeal production. A typical volume contains short essays arranged under various headings—“The Book of the Earth” contains “Mountains and Glaciers,” “Forests, Woods[,] and Deserts,” and “The Rivers and the Seas,” and is followed by “The Book of Plant Life,” and, at a remove, “The Book of Poetry,” containing several dozen short poems, for example—rather than alphabetically. So it is hard to look for a specific topic.

Yet I managed eventually to find, under the heading “The Child’s Book of Men & Women,” the essay “Famous Men of Science,” in which biologists, and indeed evolutionists, loom large: the dozen scientists discussed are Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Tyndall, Owen, Lyell, Cuvier, Liebig (the chemist), Buckland, Humboldt, Linnaeus, and Leibniz (spelled Leibnitz). “Darwin,” the essay announces, “is dead and gone, but his work will live for ever.” Although “Darwin’s views eventually won the day,” the essay claims that “amazed and grieved at the bitterness which he had raised, he sadly expressed the wish that he had never written the book”—perhaps a reference to Lady Hope’s spurious claim of his recantation.

Interestingly, natural selection is not so much as mentioned in the discussion of Darwin. His “teaching” (or his “strange doctrine” or his “wonderful theory”—elegant variation was the order of the day, apparently) is identified as common descent, with examples given from the jungle fowl, the rock pigeon, and the wild chrysanthemum: “man himself [is] among the number to undergo the wonderful process of evolution” (though it is not specified from what, as Tracy observed). Given that natural selection both is a little harder to explain than common descent and was at the time of writing (later described by Julian Huxley as the eclipse of Darwinism) regarded by the scientific community as controversial, though, the neglect is not so surprising.

Taking the discussion of Darwin as representative, then, it’s not likely that *The Book of Knowledge’s* treatment of evolution was either extensive or offensive. And I think that it’s unlikely that the school board in Jewell County pored over the text before taking the vote to burn it: rather, they probably wanted to signal their rejection of evolution, now that the topic was in the headlines, and hang the expense, the waste, and the consequences for the teachers. According to the *Southeast Missourian’s* story, “Arlo Howell, 33, is the teacher. [Only one?] He is a supporter of the evolution theory.” Well, good for Howell: I hope that he was able to continue to foster a knowledge of evolution among his students even without the aid of *The Book of Knowledge*.

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