

**The Creationists:
The Evolution of Scientific Creationism**

Ronald L. Numbers

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A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1998 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Much has been written for and against creationism, but its *history* is poorly documented — and poorly understood by both critics and proponents. In *The Creationists* Numbers offers us an intellectual and institutional history of creationism, or more accurately of "creationism" as it is now understood. As he writes:

During the early decades of the twentieth century, few creationists, even among hard-shell fundamentalists, insisted on a young earth or a fossil-producing flood. Some naive readers of the Bible no doubt assumed that the date 4004 B.C. found in the margins of the first chapter referred to the original creation of the earth, but except for the Adventist disciples of Ellen G. White they almost never committed such beliefs to writing. By applying the unquestionably orthodox day-age and gap theories to Genesis 1, even the staunchest defenders of biblical inerrancy could accommodate the claims of historical geology. But by the end of the century ... the very word *creationism* had come to signify the recent appearance of life on earth and a geologically significant deluge.

It is this story — of an intellectual revolution in creationism — that Numbers tells, but he spends little time on "big picture" generalisations (the quote above is from a brief conclusion). He concentrates instead on the key individuals, on their backgrounds, their relationships with one another (informal and organisational), the challenges they faced, and the development of their beliefs.

This is not obviously exciting material: the people involved are often obscure, and offer little drama — no great tragedies and not much in the way of comedy, either. Numbers also refuses to be lured by high profile, public events such as the encounters with scientists and anti-creationists in legal conflicts and public debates. There is no blow-by-blow description of the Scopes Trial, for example; it is the light that trial sheds on creationists such as Bryan and Price and on their views of one another that

interests Numbers.

Despite this he has produced a dramatic and readable volume, almost novelistic in its feel. (It is also a solidly scholarly work, but the ninety pages of detailed references are left to the endnotes.) It achieves objectivity and even-handedness not with an artificial detachment but with a powerful, all-embracing empathy. Numbers' contagiously sympathetic understanding succeeds in making the ideas, concerns, and lives of his subjects matter to the reader, despite the large and changing "cast".

In the years immediately following publication of *The Origin of Species*, evolution rapidly swept America. Many had qualms about an animal lineage for man, but there was hardly "a scientist or cleric who rejected the antiquity of the earth, denied the progressive nature of the fossil record, or attached geological significance to the Noachian flood". One notable early exception was the pastor George Frederick Wright. Outside scholarly circles, anti-evolutionism was more widespread, however; it was connected with the fundamentalist movement right from the beginning. This popular support for creationism was illustrated by William Jennings Bryan's anti-evolution crusade in the 20s.

Scientific credentials were far and few between amongst creationists, and those they had were flaunted. But it was the self-taught Harry Rimmer who reached the widest audience during the second quarter of the century. The Seventh Day Adventist George McReady Price was the leading proponent of flood geology during the first half of the century. His message fell largely on barren ground, however, and the association of flood geology with Adventism was to complicate creationist attempts at organisation.

The Religion and Science Association (RSA), set up in 1935, aimed to be an elite group of trained scientists. Irreconcilable differences, doctrinal and exegetical, between the organisation's officers led to its self-destruction within a few years. The founders of the Deluge Geology Society tried to avoid the fate of the RSA by restricting membership to believers in "six literal days" and "the Deluge as the cause of the major geological changes since creation". Despite this, the society was soon riven by disagreements (and personal animosities) and lasted less than a decade. The key point of

conflict was again the age of the Earth, with Molleurus Couperus leading advocates for "pre-Genesis time" and an old Earth.

The oldest anti-evolution organisation in Great Britain was the Victoria Institute, founded in 1865. Over time most of its members had moved towards theistic evolution, leading anti-evolutionists such as Douglas Dewar and Lewis Merson Davies to set up the harder-line Evolution Protest Movement in the early 30s. This never gained much credibility amongst evangelicals, however. In the United States the American Scientific Affiliation, founded in 1941, was turned against flood geology by the criticisms of J. Laurence Kulp, and towards progressive creation or theistic evolution by Russell L. Mixter and J. Frank Cassel. This contributed to the broader fundamentalist-evangelical split.

After decades in the wilderness, a turning point for flood geology and young-earth creationism came with the publication in 1961 of John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris' *The Genesis Flood*. Another key event was the setting up by Walter E. Lammerts and others of a Creation Research Advisory Committee, which was to evolve into the Creation Research Society (CRS). The CRS didn't require the acceptance of flood geology or a young earth by members, but was eventually, after some conflicts, dominated by those holding such beliefs.

One consequence of the struggle to get creationism into schools was a shift towards a "scientific creationism" in which religion was downplayed. Some of the pitfalls facing creationist attempts to do science research can be seen in the career of Clifford L. Burdick, who was considered a bit of a loose cannon even by his fellow creationists. (His career was also notable for claims of discrimination and censorship by the scientific establishment.) The CRS looked long and hard for "Ph.D.'s in geology who take Genesis 6-9 seriously", with several apparently promising candidates defecting. Two creationist research institutes were set up, the Institute for Creation Research and the less well known Adventist Geoscience Research Institute; both faced similar problems to earlier creationist organisations.

There may be relatively few creationist scientists, but creationism can draw on a broad base of support amongst the wider community. Numbers

compares its influence and standing amongst Lutherans, Pentecostals, Mormons, and other denominations and religions. He concludes with a brief account of the spread of creationism outside the United States.

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