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Brown, Robert Henry (1915?2013)

JAMES L. HAYWARD

James L. Hayward, Ph.D. (Washington State University), is a professor emeritus of biology at Andrews University where he taught for 30 years. He is widely published in literature dealing with ornithology, behavioral ecology, and paleontology, and has contributed numerous articles to Adventist publications. His book, *The Creation-Evolution Controversy: An Annotated Bibliography* (Scarecrow Press, 1998), won a *Choice* award from the American Library Association. He also edited *Creation Reconsidered* (Association of Adventist Forums, 2000).

Robert Henry Brown served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a professor of physics, college president, and

Geoscience Research Institute (GRI) director. His views on creationism, particularly those related to the age of the earth, influenced church administrators and educators, especially from the 1950s to the 1990s.

Early Life and Education

Robert Brown was born August 27, 1915 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the eldest child of Harry and Isabelle Ross Brown. His tertiary education began at Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, where he spent three years studying theology before switching to a physics major. He earned his tuition by working in a broom factory. After graduation in 1940, he married Frances Miler, a fellow college alumnus.¹ He earned a master's degree in physics from the University of Nebraska in 1942 and a Ph.D. in physics from the University of Washington in 1950.²

During World War II Brown was employed by Sylvania Electric Company where he carried out research on radar, radio communication, and proximity-fused artillery. The U.S. Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory awarded him with a Superior Accomplishment Award for his work on the development of a precursor to sonar.³

Educational Work

In 1945, Brown joined the faculty at Canadian Union College where he taught physics. In 1947 he moved to Walla Walla College (now Walla Walla University) as an instructor, and served as chair of the Department of Physics from 1952 to 1961. At Walla Walla he also served as Dean of Administration from 1959 to 1961, Vice President from 1961 to 1965, Vice President for Student Life from 1965 to 1970, and acting college president in 1968.⁴ In 1970 he became president of his undergraduate alma mater, Union College.⁵

Creationist Activities

In 1973, Brown resigned as president at Union to become director of the Geoscience Research Institute (GRI), a position he held until 1980. He viewed GRI as charged with reconciling the discoveries of science with the teachings of the Bible.⁶ Following retirement in 1980, he continued his association with GRI, and contributed articles and literature reviews for its journal *Origins* until 2005.⁷

Brown's focus on the age of the earth derived from his interest in radiometric dating and his confidence in what he considered "chronological constraints derived from a straightforward historical-grammatical exegesis of the Bible."⁸ He believed that life on earth "originated within six consecutive rotations of the planet" less than 10,000 years ago, and he dated the Genesis Flood at 5,350 years before present.⁹

Based on his confidence in the laws of physics, Brown suggested that "the rates of radioactive disintegration might logically be expected to be as constant and dependable as the basic characteristics of the physical universe, and, therefore, reliable as units of time measurement." He further suggested this interpretation was consistent with the notion that "most of the statements concerning the creation of earth which come to us from inspired sources refer only to a modification of the planet's surface and its adornment with plant and animal life."¹⁰ In other words, the material of the earth was likely as old as most scientists believe it to be—billions of years old—but that life itself is only a few thousand years old.

Some Adventists took strong exception to this view. Biologist Frank Lewis Marsh, for example, accused Brown and other Adventist physical scientists of falling "on their faces before the god of radioactive time clock dating of inorganic materials."¹¹ Marsh believed creationists would run into trouble accepting the "old earth-young life" view, for if fossils were found embedded in very old rocks, the fossils themselves would be considered as old as the rocks. Marsh opined there would need to be a "parting of the ways between belief in an inspired Bible literally read and in the accuracy of the [radiometric] timeclocks." He expressed confidence that Ellen White's numerous references to the earth as about 6,000 years old provide "accurate enough knowledge to enable us to judge deductively the reliability of the radioactive time clock datings."¹²

Brown, by contrast, believed radiometric ages assigned to the rocks "present no conflict with biblical testimony as long as the . . . radioisotope ages of material that encloses or overlies fossils are recognized as having no more relationship to fossil age than similar data for a modern cemetery, or a community buried by a landslide, have to the dates of the interments therein."¹³ This view, however, was not shared by other Adventist writers, practicing Adventist geochronologists, and creationists outside the Adventist community.¹⁴

Where Brown did see a conflict, however, was between the biblical record and dates older than a few thousand years that are assigned to fossils based on carbon-14 (C-14) radiometric dating, a problem that motivated the establishment of GRI during the late 1950s.¹⁵ He attempted to solve this problem by postulating that the atmospheric C-14 concentration before the time of the biblical Flood was much lower than it was after the Flood. Thus, fossils of organisms that lived before the time of the Flood would contain lower concentrations of C-14 in their bodies. Given that C-14 age dating is based on the concentration of C-14 in fossil material and the assumption that C-14 concentrations in the atmosphere have remained more or less constant over time, these fossils would be assigned dates older than their actual ages.¹⁶

When C-14 dating was calibrated with tree-ring dating and the ages turned out to be older than the 5,350 years Brown allowed since the time of the Flood, he postulated there must be something wrong with the tree-ring dating.

Regardless of the scientific evidence he believed that a straightforward, literal reading of the Bible “constrained” what could be derived from scientific evidence. In other words, when there was a conflict between a literal interpretation of the Bible and scientific evidence, the literal interpretation of the Bible should be favored.¹⁷

Brown made it clear that his views were based on his understanding of the Bible and not on scientific data. In 1981 he wrote:

“But at present there are no data that independently suggest inductively either a 6-day creation week or placement of such an event within the last 8000 years. In contrast with neutral scientific creationism, apologetic scientific creationism utilizes deductive logic in an effort to relate satisfactorily available scientific data to viewpoints derived from religious sources. . . . [A]pologetic scientific creationism can be defended as truly ‘scientific’ to the extent that it does not go beyond sound principles of logic, data collection, and data evaluation.”¹⁸

Although Brown was trained as a scientist, when he expressed his views on the age of the earth he did so explicitly as an apologist. For example, when he addressed the question of whether creationism should be taught in public schools, he wrote that “in a pluralistic society such as the United States only neutral scientific creationism [“operates independent of religious concepts and traditions”] is appropriate for inclusion in public school science curricula. A limited amount of apologetic scientific creationism [“begins with a religion-based theory and uses that theory as an aid in interpreting data”] would be appropriate in a public school sociology course that aims to acquaint the student with the various streams of thought in modern culture.”¹⁹

Brown wrote numerous articles for Adventist periodicals on the age of the earth and radiometric, especially carbon-14, dating. He also wrote on cosmic chronology, tree-ring dating, and paleomagnetism. He coauthored a book on creationism with Harold G. Coffin and L. James Gibson entitled *Origin by Design*.²⁰

Death and Legacy

Robert Henry Brown died on February 12, 2013 in Huntington, West Virginia, at age 97.²¹ He was a prominent Adventist administrator and advocate of young-life creationism. His young-earth views, however, were tempered with the belief that the material of Planet Earth existed for billions of years before the events depicted in Genesis 1 and 2.

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NOTES

¹ "Former Union President Robert Brown Dies," *CORD Online Feature*, January 3, 2014, accessed July 11, 2017, <https://www.ucollege.edu/news/2014/01/03/former-union-president-robert-brown-dies>

² Robert Henry Brown, "The Pressure Increments Accompanying the Production of Metastable States in Mercury Atoms (MS thesis, University of Nebraska, 1942); Robert Henry Brown, "Ion Formation and Decay in a Mercury Resonance Cell as Evidenced by Electrical Image Forces" (PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 1950).

³ "Former Union President Robert Brown Dies."

⁴ Ibid. Claudia Santellano, email message to author, April 25, 2017.

⁵ "New President Named," *The Clocktower*, April 24, 1970, 1.

⁶ "Dr. Brown Resigns; New President Sought," *The Clocktower*, April 27, 1973, 1.

⁷ "Former Union President Robert Brown Dies"; Geoscience Research Institute, *Origins – Index by Year*, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.grisda.org/origins/index.htm>.

⁸ R. H. Brown, "Compatibility of Biblical Chronology with C-14 Age," *Origins* 21, no. 2 (1994): 66–79.

⁹ Numbers, Ronald L., *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, Expanded edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 326.

¹⁰ R. H. Brown, "Radioactive Time Clocks," in Harold G. Coffin, *Creation—Accident or Design?* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1969), 273–296. Brown provided two guest chapters in Coffin's book. The quoted statement is from page 296.

¹¹ R. H. Brown, "R. H. Brown Comments on Radioactive Age Panel," *Report of the Fifth Quadennial [sic] Session of the Applied Arts and Sciences* (Lincoln, NE, August 22–28, 1956), 22–24. The quotation by Marsh is included within Brown's comments.

¹² Frank Lewis Marsh, "The Conflict between Uranium and Thorium Datings and Bible Chronology," *Report of the Fifth Quadennial [sic] Session of the Applied Arts and Sciences* (Lincoln, NE, August 22–28, 1956), 14–22.

¹³ R. H. Brown, "An Age-Old Question," *Origins* 19, no. 2 (1992): 87–90.

¹⁴ Richard J. Bottomly, "Age Dating of Rocks," in *Creation Reconsidered: Scientific, Biblical, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. James L. Hayward (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000), 71–75; Ervin Taylor, "Radiocarbon Dating: Continuing Problem for Young-Earth Creationists," in *Creation Reconsidered*, 81–102; Lynden J. Rogers, "Old Universe but Young Life?" *Christian Spirituality and Science: Issues in the Contemporary World* 10, no. 1 (no date): 6–22, accessed February 23, 2018, <https://research.avondale.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=csc>; D. Russell Humphreys, "Evidence for a Young World," *Impact*, no. 384 (June 2005): i–xiii, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.icr.org/article/evidence-for-young-world/>.

¹⁵ Richard Hammill. "Fifty Years of Creationism: The Story of an Insider." *Spectrum* 15, no. 2 (August, 1984): 32–45; Roy Benton, "Odyssey of an Adventist creationist." *Spectrum* 15, no. 2 (August, 1984): 46–53.

¹⁶ R. H. Brown, "Radiocarbon Dating," in Harold G. Coffin, *Creation—Accident or Design?* Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1969), 299–316.

¹⁷ R. H. Brown, "Can Tree Rings Be Used to Calibrate Radiocarbon Dates?" *Origins* 22, no. 1 (1999): 47–52; R. H. Brown, "Correlation of C-14 Age with the Biblical Time Scale," *Origins* 17, no. 2 (1990): 56–65. See also R. H. Brown, "Radiocarbon Dating," in Coffin, *Creation—Accident or Design?*, 299–316.

¹⁸ R. H. Brown, "Scientific Creationism?" *Origins* 8, no. 2 (1981): 57–58.

¹⁹ Ibid.; parenthetical definitions provided by Brown in the same article.

²⁰ Harold G. Coffin, Robert H. Brown, and L. James Gibson, *Origin by Design* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald

Publishing Association, 2005).

²¹ “Former Union President Robert Brown Dies.”

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