



Barnum Brown: The Man Who Discovered Tyrannosaurus rex

by Lowell Dingus
and Mark A. Norell

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Whether seen in a book at home or at a museum, nearly every child recognizes the grand form of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, but few know the story of the equally legendary paleontologist Barnum Brown. Described as “one of the three Kings of Dinosauria” (Bird, 1985, p. 28), this larger-than-life figure grew to prominence as a renowned world traveler and master of Dinosauria, lovingly bestowed the title ‘Mr. Bones’ by individuals across the nation. This biography by paleontologists Lowell Dingus and Mark A. Norell eloquently conveys the life history of one of the greatest dinosaur hunters of America, thereby bridging a gap in the current literature on twentieth century dinosaur paleontology (Naish, 2012).

Born and raised on a small Kansas farm in the late nineteenth century, Brown’s insatiable interest in the natural world grew unabated as he investigated the surrounding hills. While at the University of Kansas, Brown began his lifelong career as a fossil collector, eventually joining the prestigious American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) for which he spent the rest of his career. A true world traveler, Brown prospected throughout Patagonia, Europe, India, and across the North American conti-

ment, collecting and naming numerous specimens, not least the discovery of *Tyrannosaurus rex*. An occasional author, Brown accumulated an impressive list of articles by the end of his career, especially considering his position in the AMNH (p. 71).

This glimpse into the life of Brown not only provides keen insights into early twentieth century paleontology, but also into the lives of other prominent figures, including Roy Chapman Andrews, Walter Granger and Charles H. Sternberg. Another renowned colleague of Brown was the flamboyant Henry Fairfield Osborn. As president of the AMNH, Osborn had become one of the greatest American promulgators of evolution. He was a man of plentiful contradictions—his era’s greatest spokesperson for evolution yet was distinctly non-Darwinian, and an ardent racist who denied a bestial origin of humanity. However, Osborn had an inordinate interest in human evolution stemming in part from his desire to substantiate his ideas for an Asiatic origination of earliest civilization. This interest in human evolution inevitably led to rhetorical feuds with fellow political titan, William Jennings Bryan, whom he would later oppose in the Scopes Trial. This difference of ideologies instilled in Osborn a passionate personal and professional rivalry against Bryan. This rivalry would soon commence one of the greatest

blunders in the history of paleontology as Osborn searched for the earliest vestiges of humanoid evolution.

Geologist Harold Cook addressed a letter to Osborn in 1922 containing a single Pliocene tooth Cook had discovered in Nebraska. Osborn quickly pronounced it to be an anthropoid remnant closely allied to man’s earliest ancestor. Just a month later, Osborn published a description in *Nature* dubbing the find ‘*Hesperopithecus haroldcookii*’. Nebraska Man, as this alleged anthropoid was soon called, served as a double-pronged attack on Bryan by providing supposed evidence of human evolution from Bryan’s own home state. It was not long, however, before some began to doubt the accuracy of the tooth’s classification. In 1925, Osborn sent both Brown and Albert Thomson for further investigations in Nebraska. In June of that year, Brown warned Thomson in a letter that “[i]t is quite possible that these teeth are an undescribed form of [the pig-like organism] ‘peccary’” (p. 231; brackets mine). Osborn himself began to doubt the supposed anthropoid origin of the tooth, illustrated by the lack of its mention at the Scopes Trial the following month. Five years after Osborn’s preliminary publication, the tooth’s classification as *Hesperopithecus* was publicly falsified by one of Osborn’s own lab scientists and Nebraska Man went down as a major error in paleontology (pp. 231–232).

Despite this, some continue to use Nebraska Man as evidence of human evolution contrary to the overwhelming data against an anthropoid origination (Sibley, 2008).

In contrast to his initial collection of bones at the commencement of his career, Brown turned to excavating tracks through the 1930s and 40s with the assistance of his protégé and right-hand man R. T. Bird. One particularly noteworthy trackway was discovered in the roof of the States Mine near Cedaredge, Colorado, containing positive hyporelief of tracks from an unidentified bipedal dinosaur initially measured at 5 m strides. Thrilled with the find, Brown remarked “People would never believe the stride, unless we bring back all the rock [in] between [each track]” (Bird, 1985, p. 104; brackets mine). A wise decision, for later examination demonstrated there was a track intermediate to the others, bringing the stride’s length down to 2.5 m (p. 268). This series of incidents illustrate one of the foundational principles of track collection—never trust solitary tracks, especially when they are no longer in situ!

After excavating the tracks of the “Mystery Trackmaker” in Colorado, Brown and Bird turned their attention southeast to Glen Rose, Texas, and the Paluxy River to investigate theropod tracks. These tracks became insignificant as some of the world’s first

sauropod trackways were discovered nearby. Further excavation revealed the additional trails of several sauropods possibly comprising a family group. This discovery assisted the transformation of sauropods from lacustrine to terrestrial as their preferred environment. But, as it is today, the Glen Rose tracks were not without contention. Some claimed to have found tracks of ginormous humans in the same strata that contained dinosaur tracks. Interested in these assertions, Bird (1985, p. 147) examined several solitary humanoid and theropod tracks in the nearby towns, noting that both human and dinosaurian tracks were “suspiciously too perfect” to be authentic. Bird continued: “When a beast pulls a claw out of mud, he doesn’t leave a perfect copy; the mud slurps about a bit. The fact that man appeared something better than sixty million years after the dinosaurs left stamped ‘Fraud’ on all this artists’ [sic] work” (p. 147). Indeed, quarrying tracks was a common occupation for the locals along the Paluxy River. Although Bird’s prejudice against contemporaneity of humans and dinosaurs is evident, his analysis bolsters the conclusions of other critiques (e.g. Morris, 2013; Silvestru, 2004; and references therein), necessitating caution before the Glen Rose tracks are used as evidence of coexistence between dinosaurs and humans (Walker, 2019).

This book masterfully analyses a vast repertoire of resources to bring into sharp focus the life and work of one of the greatest dinosaur hunters of his time. Furthermore, it offers an important perspective on the historical and political climate of Brown’s day, making it a prime resource for Diluvialist research. Whether for research or pleasure, this book is certain to entertain its reader.

References

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