

John Fiske Biography

John Fiske

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Biography

John Fiske (1842-1901), American philosopher and historian, was responsible for applying the Darwinian theory of evolution to philosophical and historical studies in the United States.

Born Edmund Fisk Green (he later changed his name) on March 30, 1842, in Hartford, Conn., he was from an early age extremely bookish. His investigation of current scientific theories led him to doubt the validity of orthodox Christianity. He entered Harvard in 1860 but was disappointed to find the curriculum old-fashioned; he displeased college authorities with his unorthodox religious views.

After graduation Fiske entered Harvard Law School and passed his bar exam in 1864. He soon turned from practice of law to writing to solve his financial difficulties. In 1869 he obtained a teaching position at Harvard and in 1872 became assistant librarian. At the same time he also began the career of public lecturer that he would continue until his death.

Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy (1874) revealed his basic philosophical premise: societies evolve like biological organisms, and the laws of their evolution, like the Darwinian laws of biological evolution, can be discovered. Though Fiske never succeeded in formulating any laws of history, he never doubted their existence.

At this point Fiske turned from philosophy to the study of history. In preparing a series of lectures on American history in 1879, he treated the United States as the climax of a historical evolution toward a free democratic republic. Thereafter he worked in the field of American colonial and Revolutionary history. His best-known work, *The Critical Period of American History* (1888), dealt with the period between the end of the Revolutionary War and the adoption of the Constitution. He published several books during the next decade.

By the 1890s Fiske had a considerable reputation as a lecturer, his previously unorthodox religious views having mellowed so that his middle-class public regarded him as a reconciler of science and Christianity. His scholarly reputation declined, however, as his popularity increased; professional historians noted the lack of original research in his books. While his mind was not deep, it was broad, and he had a genius for explaining other men's ideas clearly.

For the last few years of his life Fiske suffered from bad health, complicated by obesity. He died on July 4, 1901, in Gloucester, Mass.