

## John B. Watson

I noticed it as I passed Greenville, a small sign “Furman University next exit”. I was driving south on I-85 on my way to Clemson to see a dear friend and give a talk. I remembered from when I taught History of Psychology; Furman is where John B Watson did his undergraduate work. The talk I was to deliver “Behaviorism and the Autism Epidemic” had an elaborate Power Point slide on Watson.

I had prepared to say that the “root” of Skinner’s “radical behaviorism” was the writings of Watson. It was Watson who said: Psychology must be the study of behavior; behavior can be accounted for without recourse to private events; the task of Psychology is the prediction and control of behavior; consciousness is a non useful inference. To get back to these roots—which traditional Psychology had long abandoned—Skinner named the philosophy that informed his work, *radical behaviorism*. Skinner had no interest in the Psychology of his day. But in the embedded epistemology of Watson’s writings, Skinner, the writer, found what he had been looking for and set off to study it.

I had the feeling that somehow I had passed hallowed ground and with my Arkansas cultural heritage emerging, I vowed to return and stand there.

I did so two days later. My friend had classes to teach and I had a free day, so I set off for Furman. Greenville is a rather large town for the area and I followed the signs to Furman until they ceased. It was a hostess in an IHOP that wrote out for me the last four turns. In the soft hills a bit beyond the town lies a beautifully manicured campus of modest and barely modern buildings that is Furman.

The students had not returned from Spring break and the only life I saw was at the Admissions building. As I entered a woman behind the counter smiled a greeting that led me to believe that she would be helpful. I had not rehearsed exactly what to say so I stammered out something about me being a professor, John B. Watson, and talking to someone in the Psychology department. She averred that she did not know Professor Watson having been there only a couple of years herself, but that professor Brewer, who had been there “forever” could possibly help me. She immediately called Dr. Charles Brewer who seemingly picked up on the first ring. “He would be happy to see me” she said and began to give me directions to his office. In mid direction she stopped and began to walk me to his office some 150 yards away.

As we emerged from the elevator on the second floor there was a display of Watson and several of his documents. She took me down the hall and knocked on Dr. Brewer's office door. He came to the door and instead of inviting me in, guided me to an empty conference room across the hall where we sat down. To the question "what would you like to know", I had no specific answer so we began to talk. He told me that when he first came to Furman in 1967 there was nothing on Watson. The Baptist trustees and "the little old ladies in tennis shoes" at the historical society deemed that the "scandal" (more on this later), precluded Furman from showing any interest in the history of John B. Watson. "I told them that was almost 50 years ago and this man and his history at Furman was important. So I began to do something about it."

First, there was the display in the hall I had seen. Then an historical sign down the road a couple of miles, that proclaimed this to be the birthplace of Dr. Watson. But, most importantly, Charles began the systematic accumulation of knowledge about Watson.

"I probably know more about John Broadus Watson than anyone in the world" he said as a matter of fact and not at all immodestly. He told me his office is full of materials, manuscripts, and films that he intended to leave to the University of Chicago (rather than Furman).

(Charles Brewer is quite an accomplished scholar:  
<http://www.furman.edu/depts/psychology/brewer/index.htm> )

Most of our conversation consisted of discussing special events in Watson's life such as the "scandal". I never understood why Johns Hopkins University fired the most prominent psychologist of his day based solely on an affair with a graduate student. While improper, surely it was not that uncommon. Well, it is a bit more complicated. The student, Rosalie Rayner came from a prominent Baltimore family. Watson was married to Mary Ickes whose brother Harold was to become a cabinet officer under Roosevelt. Watson himself was prominent in the higher circles of Baltimore.

According to Charles, they were all at a dinner one night at the Rayner house. Mary Ickes feigned a migraine headache and asked to lie down. She went to Rosalie's room and instead of lying down began to rummage through it looking for some incriminating material. She found a packet of very explicit love letters from Watson to Rosalie.

A divorce ensued and Harold Ickes gave the letters to every newspaper that would take them. "The letters were plastered on the front page of every newspaper in the country" according to Charles. Add to this the fact that Rosalie refused to go to Europe "until this thing blew over", and

Watson's refusal to end the relationship, left little alternative for the Trustees at Hopkins.

Rosalie and John married. Charles Brewer in his many talks on Watson had occasion to meet and speak with Mary Cover Jones one of the pioneers in behaviorism. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Cover\\_Jones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Cover_Jones). Rosalie and Mary were roommates at Vassar. Once they attended a lecture by Dr. Watson and Rosalie was smitten according to Mary and announced she intended "to marry Dr. Watson". Both went on to do graduate work at Hopkins with Watson.

Charles suggested that Watson was not above an apocryphal story. For example, in a well known account, Watson insists that he flunked a course at Furman because he handed in a term paper "backwards". Yet in examining Watson's actual transcripts, Charles found no F's.

In 1979 to celebrate the Watson Centennial, Charles invited Keller and Skinner, both of whom were recorded and the tapes sit in Charles' office. Skinner told him that choosing "radical" to describe his behaviorism was a mistake because of the political connotation. Charles and I then both laughed over the term "negative reinforcement".

Watson's granddaughter (with Mary Ickes) the actress Mariette Hartley <http://www.mariettehartley.com/> was also invited. She declined, not being a fan of Watson. She sent an autographed picture instead.

The last anecdote I remember had to do with the filming of the famous work with "little Albert", now memorialized on You Tube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aG6A66iV5tk>, (Charles came to know who little Albert was but then lost contact) There was some question if the people in the film were really Watson and Raynor. So Charles brought in their son who identified them as his parents. For some fun parody of the Little Albert work see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJthPwb4yMQ&feature=related>

At one point Charles asked if I wanted to see Watson's house. I heartedly agreed thinking I would be given an address. Instead, he said "well let's get in the car and go see it". We drove out a few miles to a well kept and occupied, rather large wood framed house. I took pictures and we went on to Watson's grandfather's house.

I'll end the story here. There are probably a few more things I could remember but these are the highlights.

I counted it a good day.