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Obituary: William White Howells (1908–2005)

Henry M. McHenry[1]* and Eric Delson[2]

[1]*Department of Anthropology, University of California, Davis, CA 95616*
[2]*Department of Anthropology, Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, NY 10468 and The American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY 10024*

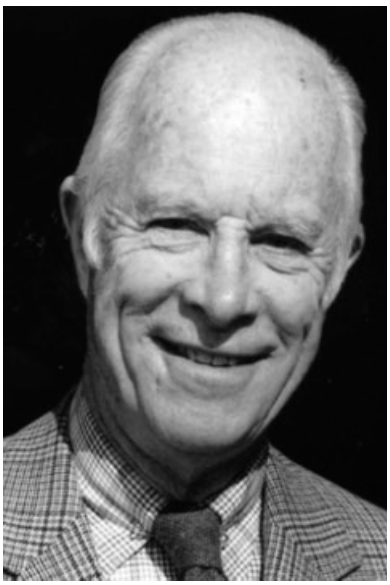
William White Howells was born in New York City in 1908, educated at Harvard University (1926–1934), served as a research associate at the American Museum of Natural History (1934–1939), joined the anthropology faculty at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1937–1954) and began his professorship at Harvard in 1954. He retired in 1974, but continued publishing papers and books well into his 90s. He had a profoundly positive influence on biological anthropology and education by his elegant writing, his superb teaching and mentorship, and his extensive service to our profession. That service includes stewardship of this journal (1949–1954).

The quality of his writing is apparent from the start and marked him as a clear thinker with a gift of making any subject delightful to read. One can see this in his very earliest publications. His 1932 contribution on the skeletal material from the Swart Ruin (New Mexico) is an unlikely place to look for literary clarity and engaging reading, but it is fun to read even through what some might consider the tediousness of osteometry (Howells, 1932). He made reports on blood-group frequencies (Howells, 1933), anthropometry (Howells, 1937), and craniometry (Howells, 1934, 1936, 1953) interesting. His first book, "Mankind So Far" (Howells, 1944) was translated into Spanish, French, and Japanese soon after its publication and sparkles with prose that may, at first reading, seem overly fanciful, but conveys with precision what is known and what is unknown:

> You may join with those who would take Java Man's leg bone away from him, or you may say it is mayhem. You may blush at the thought of *Sinanthropus* devouring his own kin, or you may blush at the thought that the culprit may have been someone very like yourself. These are relatively minor disputes and will do little to affect our understanding of the main relationships among early men. They are as nothing to the bonfire of controversy which has never died down, and onto which more paper has been thrown annually, ever since the discovery 30 years ago of *Eoanthropus dawsoni*. Such are the peculiarities of this fossil, known also as the Piltdown Man and the Sussex Woman, that 20 years of battling over the Java remains were not enough to draw the sting of what was to be said over this new unburied Caesar. It is not surprising. For what you think of Piltdown Man greatly influences your interpretation of all the fossil men taken together (Howells, 1944 p. 151).

His interest in Piltdown continued to 2005 (Harrison and Howells, 2005).

As often noted, his literary talents were part of his family heritage including his paternal grandfather, William Dean Howells, and his maternal grandfather, Horace White, who was an editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Post*. He had intended to major in English literature at Harvard, but the summer reading list discouraged that and a course from Earnst A. Hooton



seduced him to anthropology. Anthropology at Harvard in the 1920s was by his account (Howells, 1992) an inspiringly holistic study of humankind.

That holistic inspiration blossomed into some truly magnificent books. Experts quibble, but what really is the nature of *Homo sapiens*? Read *The Heathens: Primitive Man and His Religion* (Howells, 1948) where he argues in his beautiful prose the fact that the commonalities of human nature can be found by looking at belief systems "... through sympathetic eyes, from a little distance, at some different ones" (p 9). He argued, quite unfashionably for many at the time, that "... it is only three or four thousand years since the mushrooming of knowledge and commerce shoved the occident ahead of the rest of mankind. This has been the result of fortunate historical and geographic incidents" (p 8). His humanistic voice awakened the reading public through-

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*Correspondence to: Henry M. McHenry, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Davis, CA 95616.
E-mail: hmmchenry@ucdavis.edu

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out the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st. And his appreciation and understanding of *H. sapiens* as a product of history and biology expressed itself in numerous books. In *The Pacific Islanders*, published just before his retirement, he brought together the geography, human biology, language, archaeology, and ethnology of these fascinating people (Howells, 1973c). He expressed his regret that anthropology departments in the latter part of the 20th century fragmented too much into specialties, thereby losing the magic derived from studying our species from all perspectives (Howells, 1992).

He is best known from his books and book chapters on human evolution starting with *Mankind So Far* (1944), continuing with *Back of History*, (Howells, 1954), chapters in *Human Evolution* (Howells, 1959a,c,d,e) *Mankind in the Making* (Howells, 1959b; Howells, 1967), *Evolution of the Genus Homo* (Howells, 1973b), and ending with *Getting Here: The Story of Human Evolution* (Howells, 1993; Howells, 1997). They are all wonderful textbooks in their accuracy of detail and thoroughness, but they do not read like textbooks. As one of his admiring undergraduates (Michael Crichton) wrote:

> They reflected the strengths of his lecturing style—a conversational manner, a tentative attitude toward facts that might be reevaluated in the future, and a quiet, dry wit. He was the master of two dangerous and little-used devices in his writing. One was puns, which he dropped in an utter deadpan fashion. The other was aphorisms and clichés, carefully and often humorously employed to deflate any sense of academic pomposity. His writing implied that while the information was interesting and sometimes complex, there was no reason to get stuffy about it. Otherwise you ran the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water (Giles and Friedlaender, 1976: LXXIV).

There are people in their 80s living today who might remember being inspired as undergraduates reading *Mankind So Far*. They join a lineage that extends right up to the 21st century. A colleague assigned *Getting Here* as recently as 2005 as one of the texts for introductory biological anthropology.

The primary research for which Howells is best known is the quantitative assessment of human cranial variation. The application of appropriate quantitative methods interested him quite early in his career. One of his first publications was with Harold Hotelling, a statistician who studied with Ronald Fisher and who went on to develop principal components analysis (Howells and Hotelling, 1936). While at the University of Wisconsin he sought to learn multivariate statistics and particularly factor analysis which he applied to body composition with quite different results from those of William H. Shelton (Howells, 1951, 1952a). A student (George R. Holcomb) at the time remembers "... I often encountered him as he walked from Staling Hall to a classroom in another building where he became the conscientious student of factor theory" (Giles and Friedlaender, 1976 p. xviii).

His ability and enthusiasm for quantitative methods proved to be very important in freeing physical anthropology of the 1930s and 1940s of becoming stuck in typology. He revered his Harvard mentors, especially Earnst A. Hooton and Ronald B. Dixon, but he could see that their typological approach to human variability was out of synch with population biology. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he retained a strong interest in documenting and explaining the biological component of the geographical distribution of the peoples of the earth. The approach of racial typology had failed, but curiosity about how, for example, Melanesians were related to Polynesians and coastal peoples of Asia, remained strong. To investigate such questions, one needed an approach that measured variability between and within populations (Van Vark and Howells, 1984). As he so aptly said it, "There are no races, just populations."

The legacy of his most important contribution to research is his world crania study. The three monographs he wrote on this are valuable enough (Howells, 1973a, 1989, 1995), but he put the data on the internet (Howells, 1996) and it continues to be mined by numerous investigators curious to know how morphological and genetic distances among populations correspond. He was always generous with these data. When Katerina Harvati was undertaking her doctoral dissertation on Neanderthal crania, she wanted to use the same specimens that Howells had measured, but no catalog of these had ever been published. She wrote to Howells, who sent her his original notebooks so that she could locate the relevant specimens in museums around the world. It would be a wonderful addition to the online dataset to scan these notebooks and eventually transfer the information to a searchable format.

He took over 60 measurements (his wife, Muriel, recorded) on about 50 male and 50 female skulls from 28 selected populations throughout the world. His methods are exemplary from how to accurately describe shape quantitatively to how to check for measurement error, to how to control for problems in the data set, to the appropriate application of multiple discriminant analysis that takes into account the intercorrelations among the measurements and finds uncorrelated axes that reduce the data to understandable patterns. Among many things it demonstrated that the morphological variability among modern human populations was relatively minor compared to the vast difference between extinct archaic human populations such as the Neanderthals and modern people. To readers today this may seem obvious, but the idea that humankind can be meaningfully divided into a small number of distinct races whose origins go back to pre-*H. sapiens* time, is still strong in the minds of many people living today.

Although his first fieldwork was in Ireland exhuming and studying a large number of Early Christian monks, most of his geographical interests focused on the Pacific and he did do some field work in the area, particularly on the Harvard-Peabody Museum Solomon Islands Expedition which he helped establish and served as an energetic fieldworker (1968 and 1972). He and his wife of 73 years (Muriel) were great world travelers. His world crania study took them to Paris, London, Edinburgh, Copenhagen, Oslo, Leningrad, Budapest, Vienna, Geneva, Lisbon, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Adelaide, Hobart, Launceston, and Melbourne in one tour, for example.

Howells was a member of the Paleoanthropology Delegation to the People's Republic of China in May, 1975, just as the extreme isolation of the Cultural Revolution was winding down (Howells and Tsuchitani, 1977). In China, there was some consternation when those who knew Howells and Delegation leader Clark Howell only from their writings realized that they were not the same person.

His books and articles will be there in hardcopy for the generations to come. A glance at the diverse titles in *Measures of Man* (Giles and Friedlaender, 1976) reveals the remarkable catholicity of his interests. His effect on students is immeasurable. There was not an obvious "Howells-school": he wanted his students to do what

interested them and to do it well. A student has the power of inquisitiveness, openness and usually youthful vigor, but this potential can be easily distracted and wasted. An effective teacher can take a student's positive energy and launch a life full of promise. This was Howells' approach. He did not have a particular agenda for himself, or his students, but accepted whatever a student's interest was and encouraged its development. For Michael Crichton he provided just the guidance he needed to become a writer (Giles and Friedlaender, 1976). He made it possible for Philip Rightmire to go to South Africa and eventually study with John Robinson. He encouraged Gene Giles to go to New Guinea and study the Waffa speaking people, working behind the scenes to ensure he had accurate maps. His recommendation made it possible for Eric Delson to pursue graduate study in paleontology in New York. Eric recounts that he was floundering in physics when he convinced Howells to allow him to take an upper-level course in human evolution without the prerequisites. He never took another physics or calculus class, although Howells' influence led him to take matrix algebra and eventually work in 3D morphometrics. Howells invited Eric to be his research assistant the following year and allowed him to help with some aspects of the same course as well as with collection curation. When the time came for lectures on fossil primates, Howells invited him to present some of the photographs he had taken while visiting Elwyn Simons at Yale, saying "one of the tasks of Harvard professors is to try to keep up with Harvard undergraduates."

"A teacher affects eternity; one can never tell where the influence ends" Henry B. Adams tells us. The influence may be obvious in the sense that students will carry forward the banner of a particular theory or school of thought. But Howells' effect on this and future generations most likely will be more profound. His curiosity about the nature of our species and how it came to be pierced the minds of readers and students directly. His generous spirit opened opportunities for his students and they, in turn, are predisposed to the same spirit.

Howells' recognitions and honors were plentiful. He served as Associate Editor of this Journal (1947–1949) and Editor (1949–1954), a period spanning 32 issues. He won the Viking Fund Medal and Award for 1954 (Straus, 1955). He was elected President of the American Anthropological Association in 1951 (Howells, 1952b). He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences. He received the Distinguished Service Award from the American Anthropological Association in 1978 and was honored by that Association again in 1993 with the establishment of the William W. Howells Book Prize. He won the Charles Darwin Lifetime Achievement Award awarded by the American Association of Physical Anthropologists in 1992. In 1998 he and his wife endowed the Howells Directorship of the Peabody Museum.

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