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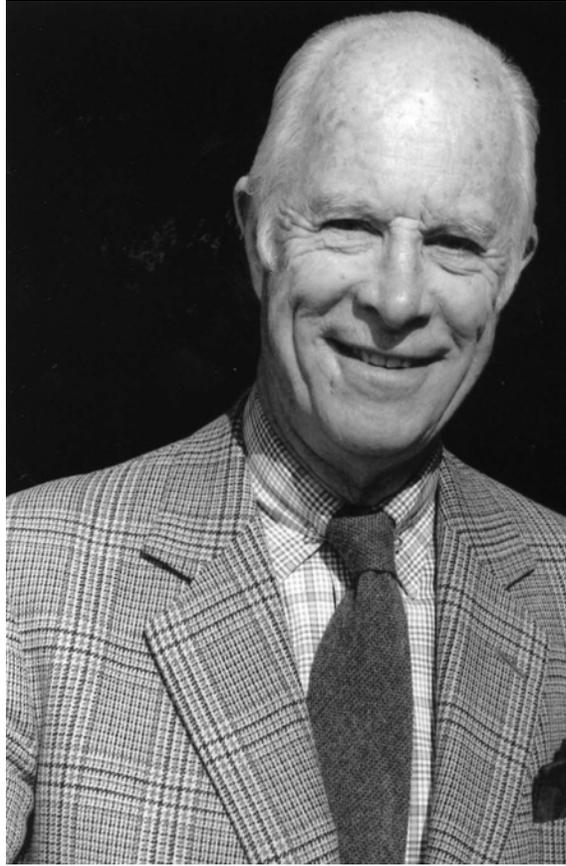
WILLIAM WHITE HOWELLS
1908-2005

A Biographical Memoir by
JONATHAN FRIEDLAENDER
WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
DAVID PILBEAM, DANIEL HRDY,
EUGENE GILES, AND ROGER GREEN

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Biographical Memoir

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W. G. Howells

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November 27, 1908–December 20, 2005

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WILLIAM WHITE HOWELLS, ONE OF the most distinguished American anthropologists of the second half of the 20th century, and perhaps the most charming and elegant, died in Kittery Point, Maine, on December 20, 2005, at age 97. He brought anthropology to a wide audience through his general books and played a major role in transforming physical anthropology into a population-based biological science. From this perspective he helped free physical anthropology from its earlier preoccupation with typological classifications of human races. His work was marked by sophistication in multivariate statistics, a great breadth of knowledge in all subfields of anthropology, and a lucid and direct literary style that engaged the reader in what appeared to be an informal conversation.

Bill (to his friends) was born November 27, 1908, in New York City. He came from a family of prominent intellectuals. His father, John Mead Howells, was a successful architect, and his paternal grandfather was William Dean Howells, the distinguished 19th-century American novelist and man of letters. A brief anecdote: As a young baby, Bill was taken by his mother to visit his grandfather, who was being visited by his close friend Samuel Clemens. On being told by Bill's mother, "You *must* see little Billy," Clemens is

said to have retorted, "Why *must* I?" This evidently was enough for Mrs. Howells; she had a distaste for Clemens forever after. In any case her son had what was once attributed to his grandfather, "the friendly eye," through which he saw life.

Bill's maternal grandfather, Horace White, was a journalist from an abolitionist background; he traveled with Lincoln during the Lincoln-Douglas debates and subsequently became an editor and co-owner first of the *Chicago Tribune* and later of the *New York Post*. Bill was very close to his aunt Amelia Elizabeth White, who after serving as a nurse in the First World War, moved in the 1920s to Santa Fe, where she became a passionate advocate for the Pueblo, promoting their public health and land rights and establishing a museum of Native American arts. She and her unique estate, El Delirio, were the center of a circle of writers, musicians, artists, and anthropologists and she became a major supporter of the School of American Research. At Bill's urging she left El Delirio and the museum (now the Indian Arts Center) to the School, rather than to him (for more on his aunt and their relationship, see Stark and Rayne, 1998).

As a boy, Bill was taken with cavemen and dinosaurs. He lived in New York and Kittery Point until going to boarding school first in Aiken, South Carolina, and then at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. From there he entered Harvard, where he planned to major in English. However, after a look at the English Department's overly long recommended summer reading list, he decided to major in anthropology on something of a last minute impulse. He subsequently became enchanted with the appeal, both intellectual and esthetic, of anthropology's great breadth; he later wrote that he regretted the growing gulf between bio-

logical and cultural anthropology in recent decades, “a depressing fact” as he put it (1992).

The Harvard Anthropology Department in the 1930s consisted of Roland B. Dixon, Alfred M. Tozzer, and Earnest A. Hooton, none of whom limited themselves to a particular subdiscipline; for example, Hooton, the physical anthropologist, taught a course in African anthropology. Howells relished his time at Harvard. In his memoir (1992) he remembered Alfred Tozzer’s personality in words that fit Bill equally well. “It is easy and pleasant to remember his face in action and the sound of his voice—the things that live on in the memory of one more generation after you die, before they are gone forever.”

Howells hurried to finish his undergraduate requirements in three years so that he could marry his sweetheart, Muriel Gurdon Seabury (her mother would not permit the marriage until he graduated). He continued on with graduate study and received his doctorate under Hooton’s direction in 1934, at age 25.

If Howells gained intellectual breadth from his teachers at Harvard, he was not too awed by them to recognize their feet of clay. Dixon’s book, *The Racial History of Man* (1923), was devastatingly critiqued by Franz Boas (the best mathematical mind in American anthropology at the time). Dixon came to refer to it as “my crime.” It was a typological reconstruction of human history, based on three simple ratios of cranial, nose, and face measurements. Hooton’s work suffered from a similar typological perspective. He tried to identify distinct elements of racial mixing within skeletal populations, diagnostic traits within series of head shapes of criminals, and reified types in body composition. Hooton was pilloried by statisticians for his poor sense of sampling and for not understanding how to construct a statistical test of an hypothesis. While Howells’s early work

in Irish and Melanesian crania followed Hooton's typological scheme, he realized early on that the variation in these cranial series was best described by a series of normal distributions. There were simply no discrete subsets or types to find. As he said in his typically self-effacing way, "I was dubious about dissecting populations in this way, having some sense of normal variation. I take no credit for this; it seemed to be a limitation that seemed to enforce itself" (1992). This sense of normal population variation came to be the core of his perspective on human biology in subsequent years.

He took up his first post (as volunteer assistant) at the American Museum of Natural History back in New York, with fellow Hooton product Harry Shapiro. As Shapiro wrote:

It became quickly evident to me that Bill had a sharp critical sense that got to the core of a particular problem. . . . In his quiet way, he could be very firm in his convictions and not easily shifted. But this determination never led to acrimony. Often, he could turn a discussion that threatened to become a bit tense into quieter channels by his delightful humor" (Shapiro, 1976).

Part of the museum's appeal for Howells was its immense collection of 12,000 crania and particularly the recently acquired Von Luschan collection from Melanesia. Howells was looking for a large cranial sample that would provide statistical reliability and at the same time represent a single locale or population. The Tolai sample from East New Britain fulfilled his requirements and became the subject of his first population study. It was also during this period that he met and collaborated with Harold Hotelling (Howells and Hotelling, 1936), a brilliant young statistician who had just returned to New York from Great Britain, where he had studied with Ronald A. Fisher. While their paper still dealt with simple ratios for sex discrimination,

Howells must have learned something of the potential power of multivariate statistics from Hotelling, who was to become particularly creative in the development of principal components analysis.

Before the Second World War, the American biological and social sciences generally and anthropology in particular were very much behind their British counterparts in quantitative methods. Between them, R. A. Fisher and Karl Pearson were revolutionizing evolutionary biology with their quantitative perspectives. In the process they developed many statistical approaches and techniques still at the heart of quantitative methodology. Pearson developed regression analysis, the correlation coefficient, and the chi square test. Fisher formulated the analysis of variance, discriminant function analysis, and the method of maximum likelihood, as well as a remarkable amount of population genetics theory.

Alone in his cohort of American anthropologists, Howells saw he had to master multivariate methods as well as proper statistical design. His keen critical sense made him realize the dead-end that American physical anthropology had reached in the 1930s. Mindless measuring had almost become an end in itself.

In 1937 Howells accepted a position as assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where (except for a period during World War II when he served in the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington) he remained until 1954. This was a period of great maturation for Howells. During the years in Madison, he spent a considerable amount of time in the Statistics Department learning multivariate statistics. He told his children that it was a very hard task, but it simply had to be done to accomplish what he envisioned. The timing was propitious: High-speed computers became readily available around 1950, making the application of multivariate statistics to large datasets feasible for

the first time. Howells first successfully applied factor analysis to body composition in a series of papers around 1950. Those results contradicted William H. Sheldon's essentialist scheme of three separate components (ectomorphy, endomorphy, and mesomorphy) and showed that the primary variant of physique was simply size, with a secondary component of fatness.

Howells did not just develop his research skills at Madison. He was always a conscientious and thoughtful participant in university affairs. He was a key participant in the development of Wisconsin's Integrated Liberal Studies program, which was a pioneering attempt to bring the interdisciplinary approach to undergraduate teaching. As chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, he was known for his civility and thoughtfulness. One archaeologist (Chester Chard), who had been hired while Howells was chair, was impressed that shortly after he was hired, the Howellses had a dinner for him and his wife, inviting their own friends outside the department, to broaden the newcomers' social circle.

It was while he was at Madison that Howells began to publish books for the general audience. He felt it was an obligation for scholars and scientists to communicate their findings to a broader public. The first of six such books, *Mankind So Far* (1944), was written at the urging of Hooton, who had been approached by a publisher to write his own book on human evolution. The publisher rejected Howells's first chapters, but after Hooton urged reconsideration, suddenly decided the chapters had been "remarkably improved" (they were unchanged). The book was published 10 years before the Piltdown hoax unraveled (while Hooton and others still championed Piltdown's importance), but after discussing it, Howells set Piltdown aside, since to him it seemed to fly in the face of so much other evidence. This was typical

of his quiet but firm belief in his own judgment. This success was followed by *The Heathens* (1948) on “primitive” religion, by *Back of History* (1954), *Mankind in the Making* (1959), *The Pacific Islanders* (1973,2), and finally *Getting Here* (1993). These books were all refreshing, slyly humorous, highly informative, and superbly informed. They contained few explicit theoretical arguments, but those that were there were memorable, such as the Candelabra, Hatrack, and Noah’s Ark schools of human evolution. The books were adopted as texts in many introductory courses across the country and internationally, and they have been more widely translated than those of any other physical anthropologist. The last of his general books (1993) appeared in an updated form when he was 89.

By 1954 he had become established as a leader in the field because of his sophisticated research findings and well-received books (three by that time). He had been elected president of the American Anthropological Association in 1951, had served as editor of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* from 1949 to 1954, and was awarded a Viking Fund Medal in 1954. When Hooton died suddenly that year, Howells was picked to succeed him as professor at Harvard and curator at the Peabody Museum.

Howells was a member of the Harvard teaching faculty until 1973 and during this period he continued to publish and gain recognition. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1967 and received a Distinguished Service Award from the American Anthropological Association in 1978. Howells was elected to nine other scientific societies in the United States, Europe, and Africa.

It was during this period that many of us came to know him as graduate students. There was no identifiable Howells school of physical anthropology. His students went into many subdisciplines (see, for example, the variety of contributors

to Giles and Friedlaender, 1976). He consciously did not steer students toward particular interests of his own but rather tried to ensure that they were broadly informed and had the proper tools to address their own research questions. Howells did, however, produce a number of students in craniometrics and in the human biology of the Pacific. He had an abiding research interest in that region: His doctoral thesis was on crania from Melanesia (1934); one of his general books was on the Pacific Islanders (1973,2); and he helped develop the Harvard Solomon Islands project (Friedlaender, 1987). Although he was always pleasant, polite, and affable, we regarded him with some awe. He was always Dr. Howells. He was fair and considerate and could gracefully tell students when they had done poorly. A typical remark accompanying a C-grade paper was, "You can do better than this—WWH." After hearing a halting oral translation of a German text for a language exam, he simply closed the book with a wan smile and told one of us (J.F.), "Why don't you just do some more practice and come back in a couple of months to give it another go?"

At Harvard, Howells was an extremely popular undergraduate lecturer. As his student Michael Crichton (1976, p. xxiii) wrote,

His style was disarming and he lectured quietly, in a relaxed, conversational manner, with occasional long pauses to look at his notes. The effect was one of complete spontaneity. . . He was a master of what Noel Coward once called "coming out of a different hole each time"—he played on the unexpected element in his lecturing. . . He kept his audience off balance, and they adored him. . . He was a gifted performer, and his imitations of primate gaits were justly famous. But those imitations, like those jokes and puns and anecdotes and newspaper stories sprinkled through his lectures, all made a certain point and were all the more appreciated.

In fact, Howells was an accomplished amateur actor and playwright. He was, with Harvard archaeologist Gor-

don Willey, among the most active members of Boston's Tavern Club, where he wrote or coauthored 21 plays and directed or performed in at least 18 others, often as the female vocal lead in musicals (this was before women were admitted). Many of these won special prizes, called Bruins.

Although he never railed against typological thinking as his colleague Ernst Mayr so famously did, Bill was clearly a committed population biologist. While Frank Livingstone (1962) made the widely quoted remark, "There are no races, there are only clines," Howells wrote, more accurately, "There are no races, there are only populations" (1995). He did not explicitly teach theory, but simply set aside arguments that were not supported by convincing data, properly analyzed. His advanced courses included excellent and easily understood sections on the proper application of multivariate statistics to anthropological data. For Howells, the correct analysis of the accumulating data on human paleontology and contemporary variation would eventually allow the proper relationships to emerge. He avoided pontificating and was adept at the deflating quip. After a colleague made a particularly pompous prediction on the direction of the field in a department faculty meeting, he replied that he sincerely regretted he lacked such an Olympian perspective. He said of another (in private), "That man wouldn't know a *Dryopithecus* tooth pattern if it bit him." Howells deflected what he viewed as improper inquiries in the same way. When a graduate student breathlessly pressed him for details on comparative primate genital sizes and shapes, Bill deadpanned, "We only study the hard parts."

Besides his expertise in osteometrics, Howells was a stalwart fieldworker as well. He and Muriel took part in the Harvard-Peabody Museum Solomon Islands project in Malaita in 1968, and he was a member of the 1972 trip to Ulawa and Ontong Java aboard the *Alpha Helix*. Bill was one of

the hardest workers on the project, often doing his painstaking cranial anthropometry long after everyone else had retired to their ration of a single bottle of warm Guinness stout. He had the ability to roll and turn over his tongue, and this gave him the opportunity to score this genetic trait on subjects during their examinations. The sight of the distinguished Harvard professor making bizarre movements with his tongue and coaxing perplexed villagers to imitate him was truly wonderful, and he reveled in the interaction. The local "big men," finely attuned to social hierarchies, would often approach Bill as the expedition's "big man," though he was not in fact the leader. When Albert Damon became incapacitated with his final illness during the 1972 trip, Bill did step in to assume command.

Yet remarkably, his most productive research period came during his long and active retirement at the Peabody Museum beginning in 1973. Bill noted its special pleasures (1992): "The discipline of teaching obliges you to try to present important matters in well-rounded, balanced fashion, even as you make your own views known. A nice ideal, but now I can lean back, read without having to revise lecture notes, and tell myself (in private) just what I think of things."

Howells realized, with characteristic clarity, that physical anthropology was in essence a descriptive endeavor and could not then be transformed into an experimental science, as some were attempting. His premier research accomplishment was to provide a comprehensive population-based description of human cranial variation. This meant an appropriate application of multivariate statistics to a large battery of measurements that he and his wife, Muriel, recorded, beginning in the late 1960s, on a well-defined and adequately sampled series of male and female crania. They initially took over 60 measurements on approximately 50

males and 50 females from 18 different skeletal populations from across the globe. The results were published in a series of Peabody Museum monographs, beginning with his authoritative *Cranial Variation in Man* (1973,1), followed by two subsequent expansions (1989, 1995) when he was 87. These data were made available online, augmented by subsequent sets that the Howellses accumulated from other skeletal series. The final total came to over 2100 skulls from 28 basic populations, and approximately 170,000 individual measurements. This dataset continues to be used as the basic global reference for craniometrics today.

Although Howells would never say it directly, since he always avoided personal attacks, this series of monographs should properly be viewed as a systematic debunking of Carleton Coon's controversial hypothesis on race that had appeared in 1962 in *The Races of Man* and in a companion volume (1965). Coon's thesis, which created a furor in anthropology at the time, was that there were five clearly identifiable geographic subspecies or races of humans: Caucasoid, Congoid, Capoid (Khoisan), Mongoloid, and Australoid. Furthermore, according to Coon, these had become mutually distinct at the level of *Homo erectus* hundreds of thousands of years ago, and all had evolved roughly in parallel, semi-independently up to the present. Coon relied heavily on the earlier work of Franz Weidenreich, but he also used a large amount of descriptive data, and both metric and nonmetric cranial observations.

Howells showed that notions of distinct races had no basis in craniometrics, contrary to the long tradition in biological anthropology before his time. His major conclusions were that modern humans are remarkably uniform as a species; that while some geographic patterning is detectable among human groups, the variation within populations substantially outweighs any among-group distinctions;

that this human uniformity appears to be very recent in origin (skulls earlier than roughly 15,000 to 20,000 years old, especially the Neanderthals, are well outside the range of modern human variation and cannot be related to it metrically); and that contrary to accounts from mitochondrial and Y-chromosomal DNA, African populations show no signs of any ancestral or distinctive status. He was skeptical of the Regional Continuity school of modern human origins and more supportive of the Replacement school, as these approaches developed in the 1980s and 1990s.

In Howells's view any distillation of a particular morphological feature as a definitive marker of population affinity, disease, or ancestry was suspect. He delighted in exhibiting to students his own shovel-shaped incisors as examples of supposedly "discrete diagnostic" traits (for North Asians and Native Americans). These and other such "discrete" traits are distributed more broadly in natural populations than is generally realized, and they are determined by poorly understood hereditary and environmental factors. He consequently distrusted Weidenreich's attempts (as well as those of his Regional Continuity followers) to trace the ancestry of particular modern human populations back to certain prehistoric fossils through a selection of such shared morphological characters. Instead he relied on size and shape relationships to establish population ties.

In his retirement he received even more honors. In addition to the Distinguished Service Award given by the American Anthropological Association in 1978, he received the Charles Darwin Lifetime Achievement Award of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists at its inception in 1992. In 1993 the William W. Howells Book Prize for general books in physical anthropology was created in

his honor by the Biological Anthropology Section of the American Anthropological Association.

Almost until the end he was as mentally sharp and perceptive as ever. Barely two years ago Dan Lieberman and one of us (D.P.) visited him in Kittery Point to show him the unpublished reconstruction of the *Sahelanthropus* cranium, and Bill's comments showed that he was even then at the top of his game; he kept up with an eclectic literature practically until his death.

For his beloved Peabody Museum he and his wife endowed the Howells Directorship in 1998. In 2002 Muriel Howells died, after 73 years of marriage. A daughter, Gurdon Metz; a son, William Dean Howells; four grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren survive him.

He was truly a man of many excellent parts, and he will be long and fondly remembered.

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