

*At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on April 10, 2007, the following Minute was placed upon the records.*

## WILLIAM WHITE HOWELLS

Born: November 27, 1908

Died: December 20, 2005

William White Howells, “Bill” to his many colleagues and friends, died on December 20, 2005, three weeks after his 97th birthday. Until 1974, Bill was Professor of Anthropology and a Peabody Museum Curator. Almost until his death he was as mentally sharp and perceptive as ever, keeping up with an eclectic literature. Years after retirement, Bill noted its special pleasures in a memoir published in *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*: “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.”

After St. Paul’s School, Bill entered Harvard in 1926, completed his S.B. and then in 1934 his Ph.D. After a Research Associateship at the American Museum of Natural History, he accepted a position in 1939 at the University of Wisconsin where he stayed, except for a wartime stint in the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington, until 1954.

A brief anecdote: as a young baby, Bill’s mother took him to visit his grandfather William Dean Howells, the 19th century’s most distinguished man of letters, who at the time 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 replied, “Why *must* I?” Which evidently accounted for Mrs. Howells’ life-long distaste for Clemens. Such a reaction would have been unimaginable for her son, the kindest, gentlest, most generous, and least malicious of men.

In returning to Harvard from the University of Wisconsin in 1954, Bill followed his teacher Earnest Hooton, whom he greatly revered and respected. He served happily on the Harvard faculty until his formal retirement two decades later. Long after he retired, Bill was a regular in the Peabody Museum, and we recall with great pleasure conversations across a wide range of surprisingly disparate topics.

Bill was trained during the golden years of “four field” anthropology, and he regretted the growing gulf between biological and cultural anthropology, “a depressing fact,” as he put it. His 1934 Ph.D. dissertation on the contribution of cranial measurements to understanding the population relationships of Melanesia began a life-long commitment to an inclusive physical anthropology, the Pacific, craniometry, statistical analysis, and the evolution of the genus *Homo*. While at the University of Wisconsin, Bill published a youthfully masterful overview of human evolution, *Mankind So Far* in 1944, and four years later a book on “primitive” religions, *The Heathens*.

Bill had strong interests in an integrative human biology, and in the early 1960s he helped organize the famous Harvard Solomon Islands Project. Funded by the NIH, the project involved a strongly interdisciplinary approach to the interactions of culture, natural selection, and disease—linking such variables as habitat, nutrition, acculturation, and health. For example, the project documented the effects of an increasingly “western” diet on previously isolated populations. In 1973, Bill wrote a typically lucid

book for the general audience, *The Pacific Islanders*, a truly four-field approach to that vast region.

Bill is probably best known for his work on human cranial variation and the analytical use of multivariate statistical techniques. During his time at Wisconsin he had become an increasingly sophisticated user of these approaches to analyzing variation within and differences between samples, and by the 1960s computer-based computation had become relatively easy. With his wife Muriel by his side, Bill embarked on an ambitious study of global cranial variation, collecting around 170,000 measurements on over 2,100 individual skulls representing 28 living populations. These data are still widely and frequently used. Bill produced three Peabody Museum monographs, in 1973 (his pre-retirement year), 1989, and 1995 (when he was 86!), examining patterns of variation, inferring relationships among them and between the extant samples and various fossils, including non-moderns such as the Neandertals. Among other conclusions, Bill showed that living humans are cranially quite homogeneous, non-*sapiens* hominins are quite distinct, and (perhaps surprisingly) even relatively recent and clearly modern individuals, living little more than 10,000 years ago, fell outside a grouping of all living populations.

A brief but influential textbook published in 1973, *Evolution of the Genus Homo*, summarized superbly and even-handedly the then state of play on various aspects of human evolution, and particularly modern human origins. Bill wrote about this last issue throughout most of his career, and his pellucid syntheses were always judicious and calmly objective.

Bill was a widely acknowledged and brilliant undergraduate lecturer, a revered graduate teacher, a valued colleague, and he inherited his paternal grandfather's abilities as a writer of clear and gently witty prose. Of his popular books we would note two in particular: *Mankind in the Making*, published in 1959, because it probably influenced more embryonic paleoanthropologists half a century ago than any other book; and *Getting Here*, a brilliant synthesis, published in 1993 when Bill was 84, and updated in 1997 when Bill was 88!

One more anecdote: Bill married his sweetheart Muriel Gurdon Seabury in 1929, when he was 20 and Muriel 19. Muriel's mother had forbidden marriage before Bill had his Harvard degree; he finished in three years! Muriel died in 2002 after 73 years of marriage, four years after they had together generously endowed the Howells Directorship of Bill's beloved Peabody Museum. His daughter, Gurdon Metz; his son, William Dean Howells; four grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren survive him.

In Bill's *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* memoir he recalls one of his undergraduate and graduate teachers, Alfred Tozzer, 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." It is equally easy and pleasant for us.

Respectfully submitted,

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