

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 1, 2020,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Gordon Randolph  
Willey was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **GORDON RANDOLPH WILLEY**

BORN: March 7, 1913

DIED: April 28, 2002

Gordon Randolph Willey, Bowditch Professor of Central American and Mexican Archaeology and Ethnology, *Emeritus*, identified himself to friends and colleagues as a Maya archaeologist. Yet his importance transcends his remarkably distinguished career in that highly visible field. Willey also made broad and deep contributions to the archaeology of both North and South America and more broadly to method and theory in anthropological archaeology. He is recognized as the creator of the field of “settlement pattern studies,” a breakthrough he accomplished in a single season of fieldwork in the Viru Valley of Peru in 1946. In the famous monograph that ensued, he revealed how the households, shrines, forts, and public works that people left behind provided vistas onto their society. The features on the landscape revealed past people’s uses of their environment, their internal organization, and their relations with their neighbors, thus enabling archaeologists to deduce the economic, political, and social organization of prehistoric cultures. The approach was so revolutionary and productive that Gordon Willey was recruited to become the very first Bowditch Professor of Central American and Mexican Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard without yet even having set foot in that part of the world.

No one before or since has produced nearly as much published work on New World archaeology, let alone done so in North, Central, and South America. With energy, great drive, a formidable focus, and problem orientation, Willey published over a dozen exhaustive archaeological monographs; several dozen books on varied topics, including the pathbreaking *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (with Philip Phillips of the Peabody Museum); numerous edited volumes; and over 500 scholarly articles and book chapters. Willey’s utter mastery of vast amounts of information enabled him to integrate the best data available with other scholars’ ideas and his own, thereby pushing the field forward more than anyone else had up to that date. With marvelous prose, he seamlessly incorporated what most thought to be contradictory perspectives into a single coherent treatment that proponents of both sides could accept. His insights in reconstructing broad outlines of cultural history, what he called “space-time systematics,” were balanced by in-depth studies of artifacts, houses, and settlement pattern studies he conducted or directed, revealing the inner complexities and

variability of the societies being studied. Unsatisfied with materialist explanations alone, Willey also pioneered the study of the role of ideology in the evolution of complex societies and civilizations in the Americas.

Willey oversaw dozens of Ph.D. theses during his 36 years of teaching in the Department of Anthropology, mentoring two full generations of the finest archaeologists in this country. He served as the President of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) (1961) and then the Society for American Archaeology (1968). His awards included the Alfred Vincent Kidder Medal from the AAA, the Gold Medal Award for Distinguished Archaeological Achievement from the Archaeological Institute of America, the Viking Fund Medal, the Huxley Memorial Medal from Royal Anthropological Institute (U.K.), and the Order of the Quetzal from the Government of Guatemala. Honorary doctorates came from his undergraduate alma mater, the University of Arizona, as well as the University of New Mexico and the University of Cambridge, where he and his spouse, Katharine, enjoyed visiting and writing on numerous occasions. He was an esteemed member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences. He is memorialized in awards, lectures, and symposia created in his honor in the American Anthropological Association, the Society for American Archaeology, and the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. His students will forever relish the memories of their many wonderful times as Gordon and Katharine's guests at the marvelous dinner parties they held in their home at 25 Gray Gardens East in Cambridge.

Of his hundreds of scholarly contributions, Willey's own favorite was his classic article in the British journal *Antiquity*, entitled "Mesoamerican Civilization and the Idea of Transcendence." In it, he eloquently made the case that the legendary Toltec priest-ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl created a religious philosophy that was transcendent and fully on a par with the great religious traditions of the Old World. In many ways Gordon Willey was himself a transcendent figure, creating an archaeological approach that applies to and provides revelations for societies in all parts of the world. On a personal level, he transcended all of the wildly different social contexts that he experienced and relished over the course of his long, productive, and happy life, from Iowa everyman, to sunny California youth, to NCAA track star and budding archaeologist at Arizona, to archaeologist who survived the Florida swamps and Panama jungles, to dapper Harvard Professor and Tavern Club regular. With his impeccable taste—"I love suits," he would occasionally allow—his gold pocket watch, his monocle, and his jaunty walk, he was as unique and wonderful as the institution he was so proud to serve.

Gordon Willey was, for all his extraordinary accomplishments and accolades, a humble person at heart. He was a renowned raconteur who loved recalling the legion of hilarious and astounding experiences of his own eventful life and those of others. For his beloved Tavern Club, Willey served as both President and Keeper of the Rolls and wrote many award-winning plays. A great lover of limericks, he wrote many a fine one himself for his colleagues and students, who count them among their most prized possessions. Willey enjoyed his

retirement years in Cambridge, answering correspondence and visiting colleagues in the Peabody Museum, having lunch with friends at the Long Table under the clock in the Harvard Faculty Club, and writing the occasional scholarly review. He lavished most of his writing time in retirement on crafting archaeological mystery novels. Willey's skills as a writer and his human qualities shine in each of these works, the first of which (*Selena*) was published and continues to be widely read. Gordon Willey died of heart failure in his garden on April 28, 2002, and is survived by his two daughters, five grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

William White Howells †  
Richard Leventhal (University of Pennsylvania)  
Matthew Liebmann  
Evon Zartman Vogt, Jr. †  
William Fash, Chair