

William White Howells

American anthropology has long embodied biological, social and prehistorical components in one all-embracing discipline. Within this tradition, many intellectual leaders have emerged, each an important figure in his or her own sub-discipline. Scarcely any outstanding figures nurtured under this system have come to dominate the entire field, for in this age of specialization it is almost inconceivable that one person could become a recognized authority in all three sub-areas. Among this minuscule company is to be numbered William Howells. For he is a man who has written celebrated and evergreen texts in two sub-areas of anthropology other than his own, whilst he signalled his translation to emeritus status at Harvard by publishing three books in his own field during his retirement year!

Bill Howells was born in New York City on 27 November 1908. After receiving his secondary schooling at St Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree at Harvard College in 1930 and a Doctorate of Philosophy at Harvard University in 1934, when still 25 years of age. He completed his thesis under that remarkable maker of men, Earnest Albert Hooton.

Howells opened his career as a research associate of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. There he started a lifelong preoccupation, research on the peoples of the Pacific. In 1935, as a member of the Harvard-Irish Survey, he exhumed and studied the remains of a number of Early Christian monks.

In 1939, Howells became Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, which he served until 1954. His academic career was interrupted when he served as a lieutenant in the Office of Naval Intelligence from 1943 to 1946. After his return to Wisconsin in 1946, he became Professor of Anthropology and, concurrently, Professor of Integrated Liberal Studies from 1948. In May 1954, Hooton of Harvard died, and Dr Howells was appointed to succeed him as Professor of Anthropology, a position he filled with lustre for twenty years. He was actively associated with the Peabody Museum and held the position of Curator of Somatology.

Among his widely ranging research contributions, two principal interests may be singled out: (a) human evolution, and (b) the anthropology of the Pacific. He participated in the Harvard Solomon Islands Project from 1966 to 1972, doing field-work on these islands in 1968 and 1972. Dr Howells was the Principal Investigator of the Hutterite Colonies (1959-61). From 1965 onwards Bill Howells - always accompanied and assisted by his attractive wife Muriel - gathered large amounts of metrical data on cranial series from Europe, Australia, Africa and, especially, in and around the Pacific Ocean. His analyses of these data made valuable contributions not only to the stockpile of facts and interpretations but also to the methodology of such studies. The multi-variate analysis of those series continues adding to knowledge of the origins of the Chinese, Japanese and Polynesian peoples.

His published works of over one hundred items include no fewer than twelve books, a number of which have run to repeated printings, revisions and translated editions. The first of his famous textbooks was *Mankind So Far* (1944). It was scientifically sound, felicitously phrased, and easy to read and understand, and it set the pattern for several further books. There followed a succession of works which became household titles, *The Heathens: Primitive Man*

and his *Religions* (1948), *Back of History* (1954) and *Mankind in the Making* (1959). Some of these books were translated into French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish, Egyptian and Japanese. It is not surprising that Dr Howells was enrolled as editor of that esteemed international periodical, the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, from 1949 to 1954. The three major works he published in his retirement year were *Cranial Variation in Man*, *Evolution of the Genus Homo* and *The Pacific Islanders* (1973). In his ensuing emeritus decade he has continued to research and publish actively.

In 1951 he served as President of the American Anthropological Association, and he has held high office in a number of other scientific bodies. He has been elected a Member of the National Academy of Sciences, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an Honorary Fellow of the School of American Research and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. Among numerous honours bestowed upon Bill Howells have been the Viking Fund Medal and Award for Physical Anthropology (1954), the Distinguished Service Award of the American Anthropological Association (1978) and the Broca Prix du Centenaire of the Anthropological Society of Paris (1980). He has been made an honorary or corresponding member of learned academies and societies of Vienna, Austria, Paris, Lisbon, India and Australia.

Because of Dr Howells's own catholic interests, his students have worked in a variety of areas: but in all of them meticulous attention to the acquisition of data and to their proper analysis shines through as a mark of the master. Yet while he had many distinguished protégés, never did he neglect the undergraduates.

In the words of Michael Crichton, Howells was 'the archetypal Harvard professor. Consistent with that archetype was the fact that he apparently favoured undergraduate over graduate students.... During the years that he taught Anthropology 1a, that course was considered the best-taught and best-liked introductory course in the University.... His lectures were described in superlatives. His examinations were considered difficult but fair.... I think it is also true that Howells was popular among undergraduates because he seemed to make so few concessions to our life style. Undergraduate society perpetuates the adolescent anxiety about the right way to look and act. We were always suspicious of professors who dressed and talked as we did, who showed too much interest in football, or who gave easy examinations. There was never any question about that with Howells, who dressed and acted in his own way, and who taught courses which were demanding and difficult.' Even among the famous lecturers at Harvard, 'Howells was exceptional' (thus Michael Crichton).

This quietly spoken, witty and warm human being, who has been for more than thirty years a leading figure in the world of physical and general anthropology, is deserving of the highest laurels that the University of the Witwatersrand affords: we honour ourselves in honouring William White Howells.