

# Obituary

GORDON RANDOLPH WILLEY  
1913–2002

GORDON RANDOLPH WILLEY, Bowditch Professor of Mexican and Central American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, and the leading American archaeologist for almost half a century, died aged 89 on 28 April 2002. He was born in Chariton, Iowa on 7 March 1913.

Gordon Randolph Willey was recognised by his colleagues as the epitome of American archaeology: his excavation experience in the United States and in Central and South America was of unrivalled breadth, his knowledge of the continent's prehistory encyclopaedic, and his published output formidable. His influence on academic appointments and in professional organisations was as wide and long-lasting as his contribution to the understanding of the Pre-Columbian world.

Willey was educated at the University of Arizona, where (as he admitted in his *Portraits in American Archaeology*) he paid more attention to athletics than to academic work. Only his first taste of excavation at the end of his degree course finally aroused a serious interest in American archaeology, and he then moved to Columbia University in New York for his doctoral research, taking his Ph.D. in 1942. He spent the period 1936–39 working as a Federal Relief Archaeologist in Georgia (where he met and married Katharine Whaley of Macon, by whom he had two daughters; she died in 2001) and Louisiana, and in 1940 had begun a new and important project in Florida when he was diverted into South American archaeology by his advisor at Columbia, Duncan Strong.

His surveys in the Chancay and Virú Valleys of north coastal Peru in 1941–42 and 1946 established settlement pattern studies as a new aspect of American prehistory, and after seven years (1943–50) at the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology in Washington, D.C., Willey was invited to become Bowditch Professor of Mexican and Central American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. He held the Chair until 1983 and then, Harvard having failed to appoint a successor, was asked to continue as Senior Professor until his retirement in 1987. He continued to teach, however, in the new Department of Archaeology established by Boston University across the river from Harvard.

During his third of a century as Bowditch Professor, Willey shifted his fieldwork first to Panama and then, in accordance with the wishes of the Chair's founder, Charles P. Bowditch, into the Maya Area of southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Not being a specialist in either Maya hieroglyphic writing or iconography, the two aspects of the civilisation that had preoccupied scholars for a century, Willey sought to establish the nature of the economic and social infrastructure on which those more visible achievements stood. Where previous research had concentrated on the temple-filled 'ceremonial centres' of the Maya, Willey deliberately moved into as rural an area as possible and started to excavate a small riverside settlement at Barton Ramie in central Belize (then British Honduras). The excavations, from 1953–1956, and the resulting monograph on *Prehistoric Maya Settlements in the Belize Valley* (1965) set a

fashion for studying the Maya in a regional context which was taken up by many of his pupils, and which also underlay his two major projects of the 1960s, at the large sites of Altar de Sacrificios and Seibal in the Pasión Valley of Guatemala, and his last important fieldwork at Copan in Honduras (1973–1977).

Willey was never a narrow-minded Mayanist, or only an economic archaeologist, however: although he always eschewed epigraphy, his holistic approach to Maya studies included the rule of iconography and the impact of political events on the archaeological record. He was a prime mover in the development of Pre-Columbian studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., which became the principal centre for research in PreHispanic art history. He was attracted to the grand themes of the past rather than the minutiae of the stratigraphic record, although his detailed studies of the artefacts from Barton Ramie, Altar de Sacrificios, and Seibal showed that he was more than capable of dealing with them.

This breadth of view led him, with Philip Phillips, to write *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (1958), the first explicit consideration of the intellectual framework within which New World prehistorians worked, and then to synthesise a colossal amount of published and *samizdat* material into his two-volume *Introduction to American Archaeology* (1966, 1971). Much of the final work on these was done as a visiting fellow at Cambridge, at Peterhouse in 1962–63 and Churchill College in 1968–69, and his contribution to archaeology was recognised by the University with an honorary Litt.D. in 1977.

Willey's omnivorous interest extended into the history of American archaeology as well, and with his former pupil Jeremy Sabloff he wrote the standard book on the topic (1974), following this with several other essays and in 1989 with *Portraits in American Archaeology*, a

set of short biographical assessments of twentieth-century scholars which acted also as a hidden autobiography.

Gordon Willey was widely honoured in the United States, receiving the Gold Medal of the Archaeological Institute of America among many similar awards, honorary doctorates from the Universities of Arizona and New Mexico, and the presidency of both the American Anthropological Association (1961) and the Society for American Archaeology (1968). He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and in Britain a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, a Fellow (and in 1996 the first ever Honorary Vice-President) of the Society of Antiquaries, which also gave him its Gold Medal in May 2000. He was awarded the Huxley Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1979, and Guatemala awarded him the Order of the Quetzal in 1968, at the conclusion of the Pasión Valley research.

Some of Willey's colleagues felt that he should have taken a firm stance on such issues as the looting of sites and the traffic in antiquities, both in the Maya Area and in Peru and the United States, using the prestige of his own reputation and the Bowditch Chair to advance causes that the majority of his profession believed in. For over fifty years he declined to take sides.

Gordon Willey was by inclination and perhaps conviction a synthesiser rather than a disputant: he tried to see all points of view, in both the politics of the past and in its substantive reconstruction, and to bring forth a measured summary of the good ideas in whatever debate he was participating. His broad tolerance piqued many for a short time, a few for longer, but none would deny the substance of his achievement.

When he reached the age of 80, he determined to publish no more in the archaeological field (although in fact he wrote occasional articles and reviews until 2001, some of them still in press), but to devote himself to writing fiction. His first novel, *Selena*, was a competent whodunit set in Florida, and with a background in the region's archaeology; in spite of good reviews and reasonable sales, he was unable to place three subsequent manuscripts, set respectively in Peru, Panama, and Belize and reflecting his experiences in those countries nearly half a century before.

NORMAN HAMMOND  
(by courtesy of *The Times*)

Martin Carver writes: For those of us who have never worked in south America, 'Willey in the Virú' nevertheless marks a major moment in the development of project design and archaeological survey. Disarmingly frank, one of the finest things about his *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns in the Virú Valley* is the lengthy self-critique it contains – which itemises the errors, approximations and misjudgements which we all make but often forget to mention. Willey's admissions ('actually, a number of factors tended to skew our sample') provided

a strong platform on which the future of survey could be built. Ahead of his time Willey also realised that the Incas of the Virú Valley had insights into agriculture which perhaps might benefit modern society. On completion of his study he took some of the maps round to the Ministry of Fomento and tried to convince them that archaeology could show how to increase productivity. However the Ministry was not disposed to grow maize and beans but preferred cash crops such as sugar cane and cotton, and did not want to increase the population. 'So ended my attempt to demonstrate the practical uses of our profession to what is known as 'the real world' he wrote in 1999. Far from ending, however, the attempt inspired a later generation elsewhere in Peru to re-install Inca irrigation and appreciate the utility of the past – just one part of the enduring legacy of a great archaeologist.

Willey, G.R. (ed) 1953 *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns in the Virú Valley, Peru* (Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 155; Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute)

Willey, G.R. 1999 'The Virú Valley Project and Settlement Archaeology' in Billman Brian R. and Gary M. Feinman (eds) 1999 *Settlement Pattern Studies in the Americas. Fifty Years since Virú* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution): 9–11