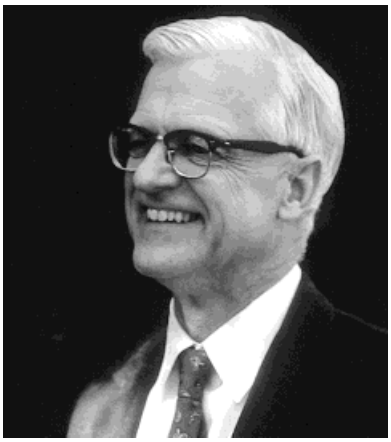
Sherwood Washburn, 1911–2000



Sherwood Washburn

Sherry Washburn died on Sunday, April 16, 2000, in Berkeley, California, at the age of 88, having outlived the field of biological anthropology in his own department.

Washburn grew up to privilege in New England, attending Harvard in the 1930s.[1] Participating in the famous Asiatic Primate Expedition to Thailand led by Harold Coolidge, C. R. Carpenter, and Adolph Schultz, Washburn came to recognize the importance of nonhuman primate biology to a comprehensive understanding of human behavior in an evolutionary framework. In 1940 he completed his Ph.D. on langur and macaque skeletal material under Earnest Hooton, with whom he maintained a respectful, if sometimes strained, relationship. He would, for example, recall Hooton's publicly dressing him down for failing to mention Piltdown Man in one of his early publications in human evolution, but nevertheless continuing to write glowing letters on his behalf.

Washburn's first academic job was at Columbia University Medical School, where he fell in with the geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky. But his work on the growth of the skull in rats was sufficiently un-anthropological to alienate him thoroughly from the American Museum's anthropology curator, Harry Shapiro.

What Washburn was trying to do was to introduce laboratory experimental methodology into physical anthropology, an idea that was sufficiently radical at the time that he had trouble publishing in the American Journal of Physical Anthropology. Later, he recalled the great anatomist Franz Weidenreich asking him directly, "But what have rats to do with anthropology?"[2]

The relevance of the rats did impress someone else, namely Paul Fejos, to whom Washburn had been introduced by Ralph Linton. Fejos happened to be in the position of developing a legitimate philanthropic outlet for the fortune of a Nazi vacuum-cleaner mogul named Axel Wenner-Gren. With the aid of this new so-called "Viking Fund," Washburn was able to generate support for summer seminars in physical anthropology, as well as to keep himself abreast of developments in general anthropology at Viking Fund dinners hosted by Fejos.

In 1947 he moved to the University of Chicago, replacing Wilton Krogman, with the promise of a joint appointment in anthropology and anatomy. At the last moment the anatomy department reneged on their offer, and it was through the intervention of Robert Redfield that the anthropology department was able to pick up his full appointment. But Washburn no longer would have the medical facilities to do experimental work on skulls, and so his primary research interests began to shift to primate behavior and its role in illuminating aspects of human evolution.

In 1948 Washburn visited Africa for the first time, and made the acquaintance of Raymond Dart and Robert Broom. It was at about that time that Washburn crystallized a plan for the reformation of physical anthropology. He and Dobzhansky organized a Cold Spring Harbor symposium in 1950, attempting to refocus the field around real populations instead of Platonic racial types. The following year he published his most famous and influential paper, "The New Physical Anthropology," in which he argued for the replacement of the static typological approach to human variation by a dynamic, evolutionary, adaptive approach.[3] In so doing, he lived out every graduate student's fantasy, effectively driving a stake through his thesis advisor's heart. Washburn recalled Hooton saying to him at the conference, "Sherry, I hope I never hear the word 'population' again!"

Washburn's visit to southern Africa in 1955 afforded him the first opportunity to study baboon behavior. He developed an approach to primate behavior that was, for all intents and purposes, a structural-functionalist "Chicago school" model of baboon society.

His first-generation students at Chicago included Irven DeVore, Phyllis Dolhinow, and Clark Howell. In 1957, while he was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Washburn was invited to lunch by Ted McCown, who broached the subject of adding a second physical anthropologist to the Berkeley faculty. When McCown asked Sherry for a recommendation, Sherry recommended himself. Shortly thereafter he headed west, passing, on the way, so-

Jonathan Marks is in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He is the author of *Human Biodiversity: Genes, Race, and History* (Aldine de Gruyter, 1995) and *What It Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee* (University of California Press, forthcoming).

cial anthropologist David Schneider, who was heading to Chicago from Berkeley. To Schneider, what Washburn was doing wasn't anthropology.[4]

In the early 1960s, Washburn was in the right place at the right time. Sputnik stimulated the federal government to fund American science, Louis Leakey was making human evolution a glamour field, and Sherry Washburn was a man with a vision. He organized two major international conferences, *The Social Life of Early Man,* the proceedings of which were published in 1961, and *Classification and Human Evolution,* in 1963.

To Washburn, biological anthropology was a kind of anthropology, a kind of anthropology informed by biology. He was also a great innovator in what we can now see as evolutionary epistemology. He saw Misia Landau's work on narrative as highly resonant with his own, although her degree was done at Yale.[2,3]

It is important here to digress and observe that Washburn's vision of physical anthropology would carry the seeds of its own destruction. Committed to the proposition that physical anthropologists needed to learn more modern evolutionary biology, Washburn forged a discipline in which, unconsciously, one could easily to lose sight of the anthropology ostensibly giving it form. He began to realize this with the publication of *Sociobiology* in 1975, where suddenly a human-evolutionary discourse involved way too much biology and not nearly enough anthropology. Washburn wrote and taught eloquently against sociobiology, but by that time he was swimming against a biologistic tide he himself had paradoxically helped to create.

As president of the American Anthropological Association, Washburn, in 1962, condemned the racism of a book called *The Origin of Races,* by Carleton Coon, for whom he had once been a teaching assistant at Harvard. The book was being invoked by segregationist activists; it was alternately vilified and praised by different segments of the scientific and anthropological communities. Washburn's address, published as "The Study of Race,"[7] was a work he was proud of, and with good reason. In the face of controversy, Sherry rose up and spoke out courageously and tried to do the right thing—an act sufficiently rare in academics to be worthy of note. There can be little doubt that Coon and other reactionary senior colleagues perceived him as a traitor to his race and class.

At Berkeley he was keen to nurture the use of genetic technologies within anthropology. His students there included Vince Sarich, along with students of primate anatomy and behavior such as Russell Tuttle, Ralph Holloway, Adrienne Zihlman, Ted Grand, Shirley Strum, and Jane Lancaster. Ironically, Washburn would criticize his advisor Hooton for "not wanting students, but disciples," yet would himself recruit several of his former students as colleagues, engendering inevitable conflicts as they subsequently attempted to assert their intellectual independence. It was with and through his students, however, that Washburn's most profound impact would be exerted on biological anthropology. With Dolhinow, for example, he edited the highly influential *Perspectives on Human Evolution.*[5]

Donna Haraway's[9] analysis of physical anthropology in the 1960s makes Sherry Washburn the pivotal actor in an attempt to reinvent a unified human condition in the wake of the divisive Nazi anthropological ideologies of World War II. Washburn, under the philosophical guidance of UNESCO, helped establish Man the Hunter as a guiding paradigm, replacing the Übermensch with an Ürmensch. Ultimately, he saw the paradigm supplanted, or rather augmented, by a feminist revision spearheaded by his own students, thinking his way. Had his old professors had the opportunity to witness Sherry's role as godfather to feminist biological anthropology, they would doubtless have seen him as a traitor to his race, class, and sex.

Washburn was not a public intellectual, and was largely unknown beyond the ivory tower. He wrote neither popular articles (Scientific American was as popular as he got) nor full-length books. In 1960, before the controversy, Carleton Coon was asked about Sherry by a prospective book publisher. Coon responded: "Sherry Washburn is working on baboon behavior, and doing very well with it, but he has never written anything more than 6 pages long and probably never will" (Coon to Harold Strauss, 27 January 1960, Carleton S. Coon Papers, National Anthropological Archives). Instead, Washburn exerted his influence through scientific journals and societies and through his students, a true academic insider.

His honors and awards were legion. The Viking Fund Medal was presented to him in 1960, the Huxley Medal in 1967, and the Distinguished Service Award of the American Anthropological Association in 1983. When the American Association of Physical Anthropologists instituted their Charles Darwin Lifetime Achievement Award in the mid-1980s, they presented it first to Sherry Washburn. The statuette was displayed prominently in his living room.

His last two public lectures were both lectures about his life and work, given in the fall of 1997 and 1998, in my class at Berkeley on the history of anthropology. A perfectionist to the end, Washburn chided himself after his final lecture for briefly losing his train of thought, a sin he considered unpardonable even though he was in failing health at the age of 87 years.

REFERENCES

1 DeVore I. 1992. An interview with Sherwood Washburn. Curr Anthropol 33:411–423.

2 Washburn SL. 1983. Evolution of a teacher. Ann Rev Anthropol 12:1–24.

3 Washburn SL. 1951. The new physical anthropology. Trans NY Acad Sci, Series II 13:298–304.

4 Handler R. 1995. Schneider on Schneider. Durham: Duke University Press.

5 Landau M. 1991. Narratives of human evolution. New Haven: Yale University Press.

6 Washburn SL. 1982. Fifty years of studies on human evolution. Bull Atomic Sci 38:37–43.

7 Washburn SL. 1963. The study of race. Am Anthropol 65:521–531.

8 Washburn SL, Jay PC, editors. 1968. Perspectives on human evolution. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

9 Haraway D. 1988. Remodelling the human way of life: Sherwood Washburn and the new physical anthropology, 1950–1980. In: Bones, bodies, behavior: essays on biological anthropology: history of anthropology, vol 5. G. Stocking. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. p 206–259.

Jonathan Marks
Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Charlotte, NC 28223-0001