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CARLETON STEVENS COON

1904—1981

A Biographical Memoir by
W. W. HOWELLS

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Biographical Memoir

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June 23, 1904—June 3, 1981

BY W. W. HOWELLS

CARL COON was born June 23, 1904, in Wakefield, Massachusetts, a typical *mélange* of Yankee stock, though the Coons were originally Cornish.

At least two of Carl's forebears were Civil War veterans. His grandfather Coon—blind by Carl's time—was a great teller of tales, all calculated to make Carl very American indeed. The old man talked not only about the war, but also about his travels in the Middle East and his readings on Africa. With his cotton broker father, the young Carl made a number of trips abroad, especially to Egypt. His mother was solicitous of his education, and the family maid (also Yankee) taught him to read before he went to school.

When he was young, Carl's only apparent awareness of ethnicity came through fracasés with Irish boys of the neighborhood. Pugnacious as well as scholarly, he managed throughout his early school years to avoid both distinction and opprobrium. But not entirely. His days at Wakefield High were numbered when, made fractious by boredom, he descended into the school's basement and swung from overhead pipes until they broke and flooded the place. As a cure he was sent to Phillips Andover Academy.

Actually, Carl Coon had strong intellectual tastes. His love of Egyptology began early, and he learned to read hiero-

glyphic writing before going to Andover. Once there, he became enamored of Greek, in which he took the prize at graduation. He learned Arabic at Harvard; but mathematics was not in him—either then or later.

At Harvard his affection for Egyptology continued, and his knowledge of hieroglyphs got him into a graduate course under G. A. Reisner. Under the great Charles Townsend Copeland, he took English composition—a subject in which he was an apt student and eventually a master. But his first exposure to E. A. Hooton caused him to veer off into anthropology.

Despite a somewhat laconic delivery, Hooton was a compelling lecturer. I myself know of at last three instances when an undergraduate, fired up by some idea in Hooton's discourse, decided to become an anthropologist then and there—Hooton the while all unwitting of the conversion going on in front of him. Coon was one of those three. Hearing about the Berbers of the Rif in North Africa with their occasional blond hair and light eyes, he determined on the spot that his first goal would be to study the lands he had long dreamed of. (Hooton himself never got nearer to Africa than the Canary Islands.)

Graduating *magna cum laude* a half year ahead of his classmates in 1925, Coon went straight into graduate school. In 1924 he had visited Morocco to sneak a look at the Riffians, who, led by Abd el-Krim, were in revolt against Spain. It was dangerous ground and therefore all the more appetizing to Carl. Reconnoitering once again in 1925, he took his plucky new bride to the just-pacified Rif to begin research for his dissertation. Hooton, keeping the Harvard community in touch with his hyperadventurous student, wrote an article for the Alumni Bulletin entitled "An Untamed Anthropologist among the Wilder Whites."

Earning his doctorate from Harvard in 1928, he stayed

on in the anthropology department as an instructor. At the sudden death of Roland B. Dixon, the great ethnographer, Carl took over all his courses on the cultures of the regions of the world. Africa he knew personally. His course on Oceania, which he did not know, was one of his most absorbing. To inform himself on the peoples of Asia and Siberia, he traveled in the USSR. He was to teach anthropology at Harvard for twenty years, with time out for service in the Army in World War II.

Anthropology in the 1920s, both physical and historical, was still a relatively young science. It was intrinsically colorful, even romantic, and not nearly so methodical and specialized as it would become. This freedom of approach suited Coon's temperament, giving his originality wide scope and allowing him to explore peoples with gusto. With his natural flair and engaging writing style, he soon became well known to the public.

That he was colorful, and that he made his material so, does not mean to say that he was unsystematic. Rather, untrammelled by a plethora of guidelines, his modes of organization set the example for others. With great mental energy and insatiable curiosity, he was a prodigious reader and notetaker. He was lefthanded, and I always saw him at meetings writing on a pad of foolscap, his left arm curled over the page. More important, he was an outstanding firsthand observer—the prime qualification for anyone in his kind of work.

It is difficult to see how he managed to file and organize the great body of information he dealt with—but, despite his flamboyant image and undoubtedly mercurial temperament, he was a careful organizer. An enormous intellectual vigor allowed him to follow up hypotheses without becoming wedded to them. Never a writer of small papers, he looked for the larger significance. It may be said that Coon's major con-

tributions to science were the fruitful formulations that followed from his assimilation and organization of massive amounts of information.

PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: RACIAL ADAPTATIONS

Carleton Coon's *The Races of Europe* (1939) began as a revision of W. Z. Ripley's 1900 work but ended as a new opus that used every scrap of published information on living populations and prehistoric human remains—and much recorded history besides. Though some of Coon's hypotheses seem dubious today, they allowed him to structure a mass of material in a way that remains impressive. This book was reprinted some years later and is still regarded as a valuable source of data.

In 1933 he published a novel, *The Riffian*, a product of his predoctoral studies in North Africa. In the late 1930s he collaborated with Harvard's E. P. Chapple on *Principles of Anthropology* (1942), an ambitious quantification of the interactions of speech and action among human individuals and groups.

Coon's desire was to use Darwinian adaptation to explain the physical characteristics of race. He defined these as the physical features that distinguish modern populations and in 1950 published, with S. M. Garn and J. B. Birdsell, *Races: A Study of the Problems of Race Formation in Man*. He was exasperated by what he called the "hide-race" attitude of people who, from social or philosophical motives, seemed to deny the existence of obvious biological differences. He became indignant at any suggestion that his interest in race derived from racist motives. Although a good many articles had been written about environmental adaptation for such traits, this book was the first to address the problem as a whole.

In 1962 he brought out his magnum opus, *The Origin of Races* (1962), based primarily on human fossil material

—a synthesis that remains unmatched today, even by Franz Weidenrich. Yet his much criticized hypothesis that five subspecies of *Homo erectus* evolved separately and in parallel into *Homo sapiens* adversely affected appreciation of the book. Coon later wrote that the stark wording of this theory had resulted from a misunderstanding with his editor, and in later editions the passage was rewritten. Yet it is the first version that is still widely quoted in discussions of hypotheses of human evolution. Coon developed objective criteria for distinguishing his two species, or grades, of *Homo*. He applied these systematically and successfully, and they have not been materially improved upon. His original interpretation incorporated the evidence of virtually all fossil material then known, which the book presents with exemplary completeness. The work remains both readable to the layman and useful to the specialist nearly thirty years later. In 1965, he published a companion and sequel to *The Origin of Races* with E. E. Hunt, Jr., *The Living Races of Man*.

Coon's last book, published posthumously in 1982, *Racial Adaptations*, was a culmination of his efforts to marshal the evidence—now including biochemical data—and to suggest explanations for physical variation in man.

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Coon learned Greek early, he profited from good teachers (including Hooton) and had a natural ear for English, which he wrote wonderfully well. His correspondence blossomed with fresh metaphors, but the hallmark of his style was its simplicity. He turned out book after book, ranging from the technical to the popular, from site reports, to texts, to travelogues, to novels. In addition to *The Riffian* (1934), he produced *Flesh of the Wild Ox*, a fictional account of his life in the Rif. *Measuring Ethiopia* is his exuberant account of his 1935

adventures gathering ethnographic data in that country one step ahead of Mussolini's troops.

More important was his 1945 *The Story of Man*, a high-level popular book on human evolution and development. His vast store of knowledge and his writing ability combined to make this book both lucid and authoritative.

Yet his knowledge was not confined to physical anthropology alone. In 1948 he became curator of ethnology at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia, a post that he held until the early 1960s. His 1948 *A Reader in General Anthropology*, an anthology of firsthand descriptions of various peoples, proved as successful as his *Story of Man*. In 1951, his *Caravan: The Story of the Middle East* introduced the layman to the peoples of Islam. He described present-day hunting and gathering societies in *The Hunting Peoples* (1971).

In the early days of television, he appeared on "What in the World," an educational program dealing with various objects in the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Froelich Rainey, the museum's director, would present objects to a panel of anthropologists who undertook to identify them without previous knowledge of their provenance. Carl was apt to recognize them on sight, but as a born showman and teacher, he held back. Instead of blurting out, "Of course, a Fiji cannibal fork!" he would take note of the wood, speak of stylistic resemblances, and talk of other clues that might give away the object's area of origin before giving the answer.

EXCAVATIONS AND FIELDWORK

The opposite of a museum-bound scientist, Carl's first love was the field. With competence in archaeology and ethnology as well as physical anthropology, he excavated (while on sabbatical leave in 1939) a cave in Tangier, where he found deposits going back to Mousterian times. Recovering part

of a maxillary bone with Neanderthal-like morphology, he returned after the war with a Harvard team led by Hugh Hencken to complete the excavation. In 1948 he began exploring caves in Afghanistan and northern Iran, working with the University of Pennsylvania Museum. This led to another book, *The Seven Caves*, in 1952. He later investigated a cave in Sierra Leone, finding Lower Paleolithic implements but no fossils. On one occasion, when being shown around excavations at Jebel Irhoud in Morocco that had produced an important premodern skull, he spotted a second skull of the same type—a find never credited to him in print by the excavation director.

Still more than studying ancient man, however, Carl loved to observe remote and seldom-visited living peoples. His predoctoral expedition among the Riffians was only the first of many. In 1929 he went to northern Albania to observe the Gheghs, undoubtedly the most isolated people in Europe, who became the subjects of *The Mountains of Giants*, in 1950. In 1959, he joined a team of physiologists travelling to Tierra del Fuego to study the few remaining Alakaluf Indians' bodily adaptation to a cold, wet environment, which they endure with very little clothing. His posthumously published, autobiographical *Adventures and Discoveries* gives firsthand accounts of these and many other expeditions.

WORLD WAR II

During World War II, Carl Coon's knowledge of remote peoples involved him in a number of adventures well-suited both to his abilities and his tastes. As he recorded in *A North Africa Story: The Anthropologist as OSS Agent* (1980), he was recruited in deepest secrecy before the 1942 Allied landing in North Africa to stimulate an uprising against Spain among the Rif tribes, if Spain should decide to join the Axis powers. A plan to send him to Albania was later scrapped when the

Allies landed in Italy and southern France. While still a civilian, Carl performed many special undercover errands, often posing in uniforms of his own devising as a British officer. He also invented an explosive designed to look like mule dung that would blow the treads off German tanks. He was later commissioned with the rank of major, and was invalided home after being hit on the head by a roof tile dislodged in a bombing attack.

TEACHER, COLLEAGUE, FRIEND

Throughout his life, Carl Coon remained a great teacher. He welcomed anthropologists of every level, from senior to the most junior, to his home in West Gloucester, Massachusetts, on the edge of the Ipswich marshes. He discussed with them whatever he was working on. He gave out his ideas on recent discoveries and publications, praising and disputing with equal warmth. He did not trouble himself with the relative significance of his own discoveries, concentrating rather on solidly demonstrating specific findings. Although pleased with his major books, he may have failed to appreciate their effect (not, however, lost on his colleagues) as models of construction and formulation. Despite the constant theme in his work of human variation as the result of adaptation to environment and his voluminous memory for information, he was ever one to complete a task and move on.

Reflective though he certainly was, Carl's temperament was not calm. His thought and speech both carried an edge of urgency. An entertaining if sometimes extravagant conversationalist, he brought to speech the same gift for phrasing that he so amply displayed in writing. Listener as well as raconteur, he was modest despite his flamboyance and totally devoid of self-importance. He was also honest and candid with his opinions whether they were popular or not. He was a constant, generous, and enormously rewarding friend,

and—remembered over fifty years—his kaleidoscopic style brings me vivid mental pictures and inward smiles.

Carleton Coon was often honored. He won the Legion of Merit in 1945 for his war service, and was made a *membre d'honneur* of the *Association de la libération française du 8 novembre, 1942*. He won the Viking Fund Medal and Award in Physical Anthropology (1952) and the Gold Medal of the Philadelphia Athenæum (1962) for *The Origin of Races*. He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1955. He was president of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists for 1962 and 1963. He was a member of Sigma Xi and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1950 at the time of his twenty-fifth class reunion, repairing a small omission indubitably caused by his eagerness twenty-five years earlier to get busy with the Riffians.

In 1926, Carl married Mary Goodale. Their children are Carleton Stevens Coon, Jr., and Charles Adams Coon. Carleton, Jr., entered the U.S. Foreign Service and, when his father died, had just been appointed ambassador to Nepal at the same time that his wife became ambassador to Bangladesh. Charles Coon is a real estate broker in Gloucester and a bridge player of international stature.

Carleton Coon, divorced, married Lisa Dougherty Geddes in 1945, the cartographer who drew the maps for many of his books. She became the companion of all his post-war work and travel. From first to last he travelled beyond the calls of his field work, to see and inform himself about areas and people. Despite deteriorating eyesight, he never stopped writing—which he called his only hobby. After holding several serious ailments at bay for some years, Carl died on June 3, 1981, at his West Gloucester home, shortly before his seventy-seventh birthday. His brilliance left a lasting mark on a generation of anthropologists.

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