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WILLIAM OSGOOD AYDELOTTE  
*1910—1996*

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*A Biographical Memoir by*  
ALLAN G. BOGUE AND GILBERT WHITE

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*Biographical Memoir*

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*William O. Aydelotte*

# WILLIAM OSGOOD AYDELOTTE

*September 1, 1910—January 17, 1996*

BY ALLAN G. BOGUE AND GILBERT WHITE

AYDELOTTE WAS A leading figure in the development of social science history in the United States. Many historians consider themselves humanists or argue that theirs is a unique discipline. Others are social scientists in intellectual commitment and methods of research, and it was from this group that Aydelotte was the first to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences. Beneath the affiliative differences among historians lie disagreements as to whether history should be presented in narrative or analytical form, the degree to which historical evidence can serve as the basis for generalization and, indeed, what constitutes appropriate evidence. Aydelotte's career illuminates these issues. Publishing initially in the field of narrative diplomatic history, he emerged as the most innovative investigator of legislative behavior of his era in the history profession.

## EARLY LIFE AND TRAINING

Aydelotte described his childhood as "odd." He was born in Bloomington, Indiana, the only child of Marie Jeannette Osgood and Frank Aydelotte, a union of small town Indiana and academia on the father's side and the world of international music on that of his mother. Frank Aydelotte was a man of great intellectual and athletic ability and a

talented academic administrator, who pursued graduate work in English literature at Harvard University and studied thereafter as a Rhodes fellow at Oxford University. He taught English literature at Indiana University, moved to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1915, became president of Swarthmore College in 1921, and director of the Center for Advanced Study at Princeton University in 1939. Frank Aydelotte established a program of honors seminars and student concentrations at Swarthmore that brought the college into the first rank of American colleges. He was American secretary of the Rhodes trustees (1918-52), chairman of the education advisory board of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1925-50), and held many other advisory positions relating to education, government, and international affairs.

William Osgood remembered a household that was much open to students, to his father's colleagues, and, after the move to Swarthmore, to the varied visitors and dignitaries who move through leading college and university communities. The parents were kind and supportive and their son never lacked for the means to further his academic education. At the appropriate time in his musical training he received a Steinway grand piano. Nor did William lack family encouragement in making friends, although he found the process difficult in his younger years. Particularly after the move to Swarthmore, however, his parents' attention was often turned elsewhere. Troubled with recurrent poor health and an indifferent athlete, young Aydelotte experienced acute feelings of loneliness. Good literature was always at hand in great quantity in the Aydelotte home, however, and the boy read voraciously the works of leading nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American authors.

As a child, William impressed relatives as precocious, in part imp and in part serious beyond his years. Apprehensive of the results of placing their son in the public schools of Cambridge, the Aydelottes enrolled him in the Shady Hill School, a progressive elementary school that local faculty families had established and where leadership was provided by Agnes Hocking, an inspiring teacher of poetry and literature. When the family moved to Swarthmore, William entered public school, but the results were unsatisfactory. Various remedial arrangements failed and the Episcopal clergyman at Swarthmore successfully tutored the lad for a time. William spent his last two pre-college years in the William Penn Charter School in Germantown, Pennsylvania, a beneficial matching of talent and institution. He graduated at the end of his first year, but being only fifteen, stayed on for a "post-graduate" year and took the instruction in Greek that was normally studied during the course of three years.

Majoring in classics at Harvard University, Aydelotte graduated in 1931. In his estimation he did not have an outstanding undergraduate career, but did make Phi Beta Kappa. Although at Harvard he found the teaching of E. K. Rand and Milman Perry to be challenging, the classics program was not outstanding in his years there. In contemplating graduate work, he decided to study history and proceeded to take a Ph.D. in history at the University of Cambridge. There distinguished scholars Harold Temperley and Herbert Butterfield provided more rigorous intellectual discipline than he had hitherto experienced. But, neither his classical training nor his graduate studies in history acquainted him with systematic inquiry or scientific approaches to the acquisition of knowledge. Throughout his educational and early professional years, astigmatism prevented him from undergoing military training or service.

Although the Cambridge training and his published research in European diplomatic history gave Aydelotte academic credentials, he remained undecided as to his future course. Following completion of his doctorate in 1934 he became an assistant in the office of the chairman of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in Washington, D.C. While in Washington, he associated with a group of young economists, geographers, political scientists, and sociologists, who were enthused at the opportunity to use their analytical skills in solving the social problems confronted by the New Deal. Aydelotte always considered his experience in Washington to have been valuable, but he left the public policy arena after two years to begin his career as a college and university teacher. At that time, he also thought seriously of becoming a writer or essayist, an ambition that his father strongly opposed. After a decade of teaching, involving appointments at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., Smith College in Northampton, Mass., and Princeton University, Aydelotte accepted a position in 1947 as assistant professor of history at the State University of Iowa, Iowa City (now the University of Iowa), where he remained for the remainder of his scholarly career. He served as department chairman (1947-59 and 1965-68) and as Carver professor of history (1976-78), retiring in the latter year. Other appointments during the Iowa years included visiting professorships at Harvard University and the University of Leicester in England.

Aydelotte served on the Council of the Social Science Research Council (1964-70) and on its Committee on Historical Analysis. He was a member of the History Advisory Committee of the Mathematical Social Science Board (1968-72) during the period when that group planned an extensive program of symposia dealing with the use of math-

ematics and statistics in historical research. He edited volumes of research papers delivered at two of these conferences. He was a member of the Quantitative Data Committee of the American Historical Association (1968-72) and of the organizing committee of the Social Science History Association (1973-77), an offshoot of the Quantitative Data Committee. He held the position of chairman of the mid-western section of the Committee of Selection for Marshall Scholarships (1955-60), his service recognized by an honorary Order of the British Empire in 1961. He was a member of the Committee of Selection for Woodrow Wilson Dissertation Fellowships (1962-68) and was active in the American Association of University Professors. He was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study (1945-47) and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1976-77). The members of the National Academy of Sciences elected him to membership in 1974, and he served on the National Research Council's Panel on Privacy and Confidentiality as Factors in Survey Response. The Iowa Academy of Science named him a distinguished fellow in 1975 and he became president of the Social Science History Association in 1980. He was a member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of Modern History* and of *Social Science History*.

#### PERSONALITY

Well over 6 feet in height, blonde, blue-eyed and wearing glasses, Aydelotte appeared on first meeting to be reserved in manner or even intimidating. He was in actuality, a very kind person who was prepared to exchange views on an extremely broad range of subjects, extending from European and American authors—"Proust is best read in the original"—to music, British and American politics,

current trends in social science research, the mission of higher education, and regional or national eccentricities. Although he was essentially a serious, introspective man of quiet dignity, his conversation was lightened by a subtle but kindly wit, and often conducted with quiet animation. A tennis player and hiker, he did not discuss baseball and to him football presented an opportunity to study crowd psychology rather than backfield intricacies. A personal trade mark was the 3 x 5 note pad, which he always carried in a pocket and used whenever conversation or discussion produced a tip on research or departmental administration, or some useful fact about his other interests. He could, when on leave and focussed on his research, carry midwestern informality to the point of coming to his university study in bib overalls; he once shattered the shadowy ambiance of San Francisco's best French restaurant by requesting that an extra lamp be placed at the table so that he could more satisfactorily show his companion the latest set of tables derived from his research data.

Aydelotte was educated at two of the western world's leading institutions of higher learning. During his university training he spent parts of two pleasant summers traveling with his mother and father abroad. His family ties later gave him a unique understanding of the "world-celebrities and prima donnas" gathered at the Institute for Advanced Study. As an adult, therefore, he was superbly equal to the demands of any social occasion, intimidated by neither don nor dowager. But for many years he suffered self doubt as to whether he could be as successful as his father. Although he never severed relations with his parents, there were painful generational differences in values involving his father's attitudes toward Aydelotte, his research, and his scholarly objectives. At his memorial service, a longtime friend found one of the most striking aspects of Aydelotte's career to be

his passage from “a state of satellite dependence on his father” to one of stalwart independence in which he transformed a department of modest reputation into an exciting intellectual environment, while at the same time pioneering new modes of research and analysis in his field of history.<sup>1</sup> Aydelotte’s marriage on June 22, 1956, to Myrtle Kitchell, the wise and sensitive dean of the University of Iowa College of Nursing, contributed greatly to the happiness of his later career, as did two lively daughters, Marie and Jeannette. Aydelotte died in Iowa City, Iowa.

#### THE IOWA HISTORY DEPARTMENT

When Aydelotte (now usually known as Bill Aydelotte) arrived in Iowa City in 1947, he joined the faculty of a university whose constituency had suffered severely during the Depression of the 1930s. Financial stringency had limited university development and the situation in the history department was further complicated by the failing health of the elderly department head. After the latter’s death in 1947, younger elements in the department took control and Aydelotte became chairman. For many years he put much thought and energy into developing a department of the highest quality. In making faculty appointments, the university provost once remarked that Bill Aydelotte always wished to appoint Jesus Christ, and failing that, demanded one of the twelve disciples.

After luring to Iowa a very able intellectual historian from Princeton University, Aydelotte supervised a series of appointments that made his department widely respected. University resources were insufficient to allow the hiring of senior eminences. Iowa faculty salaries on average ranked close to the bottom in comparison with those in other “big ten” institutions, but were competitive at the junior levels. In reaction to this situation, Aydelotte tried to identify

and hire the ablest young scholars available, a strategy that was easier to implement successfully during the 1950s than at other times, because the academic job market had tightened after the colleges and universities had absorbed the postwar influx of veterans. As a result of these circumstances and his skill in search and selection, Aydelotte filled his department with scholars who were destined to have very successful careers. Few leading American advisors of graduate students failed to be subjected, at some point during Aydelotte's Iowa tenure, to intense interrogation about the abilities of one or more of their graduate students, even to the point of having their placement letters of previous years quoted to them. They who maintained that their geese were swans were given little credence once Aydelotte established the fact.

In approaching young scholars, Aydelotte emphasized the democratic nature of the department, now led by a chairman serving a three-year term, and the opportunity for instructors and assistant professors to be involved directly in departmental decision making. Aydelotte promised lighter teaching loads in the first year of teaching and early access to the pool of research assistants. Many of the appointees were later hired away by better funded institutions after they had demonstrated their abilities at Iowa. Some among Aydelotte's colleagues later filled chairs in leading history departments, accepted appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study, and became presidents of the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. Aydelotte's hiring policies and personal example made the Iowa department a place of high intellectual voltage, rigorous standards, and absolute integrity. The pioneering research of faculty and graduate students in both European and American history caused some observers to see evidence of an "Iowa school" of behav-

ioral history. Aydelotte led by example in the class room as well; his lectures on the philosophy of history and British and European intellectual history were constantly in a state of meticulous revision.

#### RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Aydelotte recalled that he found much of his training and early professional career to be unfulfilling. Periods of his pre-college schooling were frustrating and few of his instructors at Harvard excited him. He left the study of classics for history when he began doctoral work, but with that completed he entered government service for which training in neither classics nor history provided full preparation. Viewed from Washington, his future career appeared unpromising, but his experiences there pointed him back to academia with a deeper understanding of the social usefulness of research. His interests continued to shift during his first decade of teaching as he turned from diplomatic history and the study of imperialism to English social, political, and intellectual history. He planned research projects on the role of the churches in the industrial revolution and Charles Dickens, but he did not carry either through to completion.

At the University of Iowa, Aydelotte's research interests came into focus. In his early years there he was a member of an informal seminar of social scientists, who were, he wrote, "interested in problems of social psychology and in the new methods and concepts it suggest[ed]" for their work.<sup>2</sup> With these men he discussed major publications in social science, including the writings of Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Max Weber, Robert Michels, Maurice Duverger, Hannah Arendt, and David Riesman. He now understood that his primary interest lay in explaining human motivation within its historical contexts and that elements in the behavioral

analysis of the time promised to be rewarding in his research. In 1948 he published an article that explored the social attitudes reflected in the work of the leading English novelists of the 1840s. He followed this during the next year with a study of the detective story in which he argued that “a careful study of literature of this kind [might] reveal popular attitudes which shed a flood of light on the motivation behind political, social, and economic history.”<sup>3</sup>

Although these papers attracted favorable attention, Aydelotte realized that conclusions derived from the content analysis of literary sources were too conjectural to be completely satisfying. But the division lists of the British Parliament of the 1840s provided a body of data revealing political opinion that was much more amenable to rigorous analysis. This source was all the more intriguing because, in repealing the Corn Laws, the parliament of 1841-47 effected one of the fundamental policy reversals in modern British history. Other researchers had maintained that modern political attitudes had their source in the 1840s and believed that agrarian interests were yielding governmental power to industrial elements at that time. The Corn Laws Parliament provided Aydelotte with the data for a research project that he began during the late 1940s and continued during the remainder of his career. In retrospect he explained that his research focus from the early 1950s forward lay “in general problems about legislative behavior; defining the nature of this behavior, using for this purpose the rich information in the division lists; and examining the relation of behavior to other variables that may be hypothesized to have affected it, such as party, personal background, and constituency.”<sup>4</sup> This commitment allowed him to produce significant theoretical and substantive findings in the fields of legislative behavior and

theory, as well as to revise scholarly understanding of British history during the 1840s.

Some members of earlier generations of professional academic historians had tried to use quantitative evidence analytically, but that practice had declined by the 1940s. There was need, therefore, to explain the relevance of quantification to historians on the one hand and the usefulness of the historical dimension in research to social scientists on the other. These challenges defined a second major area of writing for Aydelotte during his Iowa years.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Aydelotte assembled personal and political biographical data bearing upon the 815 members who sat in the British House of Commons between the British general elections of 1841 and 1847 and undertook the task of relating them to their behavior in parliament. Locating the information, transcribing, and classifying it involved an intimidating amount of labor and thought, given the primitive state of data processing at the time and the complex relations between British politics, economy, and class structure. Aydelotte's experience provides a case history of the development of research technology in social and political research during the years from 1945 to 1980. First, he used an electric calculator in analyzing his various categories of data and their interrelationships, but then transferred his materials to punched cards and used IBM machines for counting and sorting. As the computer revolution took hold, he employed the university computer.

Reaction to descriptions of Aydelotte's technological adventures ranged from awe to scorn. A critical English scholar accused him of using a machine for thinking—"Shame!" On these matters, Aydelotte never succumbed to zealotry, always noting that the evidence bearing on some important areas of behavior would always be lacking; that some

evidence resisted classification and quantification; that statistics could be a dangerous form of weapon; that statistical tables created a false sense of completeness and security and might also be subject to different interpretations. In themselves, he cautioned, quantitative data did not create hypotheses, serving primarily as evidence to be used in testing them. Despite the skepticism, Aydelotte soon found a sympathetic audience both in the United States and in England, where historians at Oxford University were particularly supportive.

Between 1954 and 1977 Aydelotte published a series of papers dealing with the political behavior of the members of the Corn Laws Parliament. In them he described his data and methods and established, as no British historian had thus far done so completely, the exact proportions of the various economic and social groups represented in parliament. But the complexity of the data base was bewildering. Previous researchers had advanced a number of major hypotheses about the relations between class and economic groupings and political behavior. Aydelotte's statistical tests initially showed that the connections were weak or did not hold. Negative findings demonstrated progress of a sort but left the roots of behavior still mysterious. In the mid-1950s Aydelotte learned of Guttman scaling from colleagues in the social sciences at the University of Iowa. He realized that this powerful technique allowed him to order his data so as to allow reconsideration of questions about which investigators had long argued. Employing Guttman scales as his basic statistical tools, Aydelotte used the votes of the members of the House of Commons to construct the ideological dimensions of behavior in the Corn Laws Parliament and to analyze the relation of party affiliation, economic and social position, and constituency to the voting patterns.

A paper dealing with the influence of constituencies on parliamentary behavior, appearing in 1977, was Aydelotte's last published work in the field of British political behavior. He continued his investigations and hoped to produce a series of volumes that would combine much unpublished analysis with the work that was already in print. Deteriorating health prevented him from doing so. Some scholars publish too much of their research, and others, unfortunately, publish much too little. Aydelotte is numbered among the latter.

#### OTHER PUBLICATIONS

During the 1950s Aydelotte was a leader among the historians who envisioned the adoption of analytical approaches in history involving greater application of social theory, systematic analysis, and quantitative evidence. By the early 1960s these trends had created a backlash within the history profession. A president of the American Historical Association denounced "worship at the shrine of that bitch-goddess, QUANTIFICATION."<sup>5</sup> Several of the discipline's brightest younger stars pronounced quantitative analysis to be sterile or destructive. These calls for purification of the discipline were also indirect attacks on the social sciences, the presumed source of infection. In a number of notable statements, Aydelotte explained and justified the use in history of quantitative data and methods more commonly used by political scientists and sociologists. Preparing these papers also helped him to clarify his thinking on the nature of the research process and its component elements of data collection, hypothesis, verification, and generalization.

Aydelotte published the first of these publications as "Notes on the Problem of Historical Generalization," a chapter in *Generalization in the Writing of History* (1963) prepared by

the Committee on Historical Analysis of the Social Science Research Council. Here he dealt with the problems of nomenclature, proof, theory, and procedure, including an extended argument on behalf of the use of statistical procedures in the last section. In a second major essay, "Quantification in History" (1966), he considered the quantification issue in greater detail, refuting critics and explaining the benefits of adding statistical methods to the historian's arsenal. This was published in the *American Historical Review*, the journal in which the sponsoring organization's president had inveighed so trenchantly against quantification three years earlier.

Subsequently, Aydelotte included these essays in a collection, *Quantification in History* (1971), along with an introductory statement of argument, a discussion of the feasibility of establishing a machine-readable archive of British political data, and an earlier published discussion of the problems of using quantitative analysis in the study of the Corn Laws Parliament. An appendix to this volume contained an exchange of correspondence with Jack Hexter, a specialist in English history, which began when the latter asked Aydelotte to comment on the text of his article "The Rhetoric of History." Later Hexter reacted adversely to the attitude of historians presenting papers illustrating the use of statistical methods of analysis in history at a symposium organized by the History Advisory Committee of the Mathematical Social Science Board of which Aydelotte was a member. In the letters of Hexter and Aydelotte, the pungency of the debates of those years is clearly revealed. Hexter complained that historians who used statistics had "lost mastery of their native tongue," and evinced no concern that other historians could no longer understand them, while Aydelotte deplored scholars who "simply gas about

the subject in an inconclusive fashion, toss in a few cheesy epigrams and a little vivid writing, and let it go at that.”<sup>6</sup>

In presenting his presidential address, “The Search for Ideas in Historical Investigation,” to the Social Science History Association in 1978, Aydelotte returned to a long-time interest, discussing theories about the generation of ideas and the circumstances that were conducive to the process. Although directed to historians, this paper, as with his other papers on method and theory, could be read profitably by workers in any field of the social sciences.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF AYDELOTTE'S RESEARCH

Aydelotte was keenly aware of the difficulty of developing useful generalizations in history about social processes that could be considered valid in all times and places (that is, laws of behavior or historical development). He preferred rather to work at “middle range,” endeavoring, in his own words, to “produce for a single period some reliable findings relating to . . . great issues, and to make a contribution also to a better understanding of British politics in the mid-nineteenth century.”<sup>7</sup> His research allowed him to argue convincingly that ideological dimensions underlay behavior in one of the most important parliaments in British history and to demonstrate that voting behavior there was systematic and could be ordered into a major left-right dimension. He showed as well that voting was multidimensional, the dimensions according, however, with the divisions between the major parties. Although party defections sometimes influenced the outcome of voting in the parliament of the 1840s, independent members did not form a swing group whose influence prevented party leadership from adopting too radical a stance, as some scholars had suggested. Aydelotte also corrected prevailing interpretations to the effect that nineteenth century par-

ties were primarily instrumental in focus and that multidimensionalism in legislative behavior was a twentieth-century phenomenon only. He showed as well that parliamentary leaders during the mid-nineteenth century did not accept the rationale for a parsimonious majority advanced by modern game theorists.

Aydelotte's research constituted the most careful analysis of the social composition of the British parliament to that point in time. He qualified the importance of the Reform Act of 1832 and industrialization in changing the social character of the parliament and demonstrated that it was extremely difficult to show strong relationships between social and economic backgrounds and legislative behavior. Although the characteristics of constituencies were strongly related to behavior, deviations from constituency position by members, once elected, did not appear to have produced measurable constituency reaction.

Aydelotte's investigations also provided a very important illustration of the data, methodological problems, and rewards involved in systematic quantitative research when very little of that kind of analysis was being attempted in history. His theoretical papers dealing with the broader issues involved in historical research and the place of quantitative analysis within that setting were even more widely distributed due to reprintings and translations into foreign languages and did much to create a climate of opinion in which his kind of research was accorded general acceptance, if not universal approval. According to one observer, he also demonstrated that "it could be written with a measure of grace, that jargon could be avoided, and that pretension and arrogance are never warranted."<sup>8</sup>

Due to Aydelotte's activity in the programs of the Social Science Research Council, the Mathematical Social Sciences Board, the Inter-University Consortium for Political and

Social Research, and the Social Science History Association, he became acquainted with numerous social scientists. Sometimes as well, Aydelotte joined members of the Iowa political science department in teaching an interdepartmental graduate seminar in legislative behavior. He found these contacts with social scientists to be stimulating, but they also encouraged investigators working in the related disciplines to incorporate historical elements in their research designs, a direction that growing numbers in political science and sociology were to take.

During the years of Aydelotte's greatest professional activity, researchers were demonstrating the research value of the manuscript United States census data, assembled in the decennial enumerations of the years 1790 to 1880. They looked forward to using equivalent information from later censuses, due to be opened for research generally at the end of seventy years from the date of enumeration. Fearing that concern about public use of these data would affect the rate of response in future censuses, employees of the Bureau of the Census became reluctant to allow the data of 1900 and subsequent enumerations to be released, even suggesting that the census data of 1980 should remain closed indefinitely. In the face of widespread concern within the research community, the National Research Council established the multidisciplinary Panel on Privacy and Confidentiality as Factors in Survey Response to report on the issues involved. Aydelotte was a member of this panel and, when the final draft of its report was unclear in stating the implications of the findings, he appended a statement noting that their upshot, "suggests that concern over the issue of confidentiality may have been exaggerated, and they tell against the claim that a promise of perpetual confidentiality or of long delayed access to identifiable data is essential to obtaining information."<sup>9</sup> His point of view prevailed. The

practice of releasing federal census data to the research community at large after a period of seventy years was retained.

In a broad sense, Aydelotte's election to the Academy was a recognition of the validity of adopting quantitative social science methods in historical research and of the relevance of that research to other scientific analyses.

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We drew upon obituaries prepared by Jeffrey Cox, Stow Persons, and William C. Lubenow in *SSHA News: The Newsletter of the Social Science History Association* (vol. 12, summer 1996). Information about Aydelotte's early life is found in Frances Blanshard's *Frank Aydelotte of Swarthmore* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1970).

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