MEMORIES
OF
WILLIAM O. AYDELOTT

William Aydelotte died on January 17, 1996. A month later, on February 17, a memorial service was held at the Old Capitol Senate Chamber. The Stradivari Quartet played selections from Schubert and Beethoven; poetry by Keats was read by Jeannette Aydelotte Burr and remarks offered by Marie Aydelotte and Stow Persons. Because the Aydelotte years continue to shape the department's traditions of collegiality and decision-making. It seemed appropriate to dedicate space in this newsletter to the Department that Bill Aydelotte built at Iowa. Here are remarks by some of the faculty who passed through the department in the years when Bill was here and by graduate students who studied with him.

Stow Persons

I first met Bill Aydelotte in the Spring of 1940, when he was teaching at Trinity College in Connecticut and I was finishing graduate work at Yale. I was a candidate for a job at Trinity and had lunch with Bill and his colleagues. I didn't get the job. Subsequently Bill told me that he had no recollection of the occasion. This was not surprising, because each of us was preoccupied with his own problems: he, with hanging on to what he had; I, with finding shelter. A few years later our paths crossed again. I was then teaching at Princeton and Bill was a Member at the Institute for Advanced Study and a part-time instructor in history at the university. We had occasional lunches together at which Bill indulged his regular practice of taking notes on what I might be saying, which was both flattering and disconcerting: was I really that smart? Or was he simply jotting down notes for his next paper?

In 1947 Bill was appointed Assistant Professor of History here at the University and immediately found himself in a very fluid and difficult situation. Shortly after he came, a group of reformers, of whom Bill was one, seized control of the department and instituted policies of self-government which have shaped its character for the following half-century. Bill was elected chairman and set about the task of building a department to conform to his exacting scholarly specifications. When I joined the department in 1950 he told me that I was the department's fourth choice for the position, naming three distinguished historians who had declined his offers. When eventually opportunities came to move elsewhere, giving me an opportunity to compare the Iowa department with others, I realized that Bill had created here a working environment so congenial, and so free of the petty distractions and squabbles that plague many institutions, that I was happy to remain.

But while building and managing a department was his principal initial concern, he became increasingly preoccupied with his own research on political behavior. As he studied the voting patterns of the British parliament of the 1840s it became apparent that the application of appropriate statistical methods to successive parliamentary divisions would permit more precise statements about parties and interests than those with which historians had previously been content—and often mistaken. In the 1950s this was all unexplored territory for a historian, and Bill assembled an interdisciplinary group of colleagues who might conceivably help him in arriving at the most useful methods. The group included Addison Hickman, economist; Manford Kuhn and David Gold, sociologists; Boyd McCandless, psychologist; and Nicholas Riasanovsky, historian. Out of the discussions of this group emerged two "Iowa Schools" which gained national and international recognition in their respective disciplines: the Iowa School of symbolic interactionism centered on the work of Manford Kuhn, and the Iowa School of historical behavioralism on the work of Bill Aydelotte. This historical school was composed of younger colleagues and graduate students who applied its methods to political and economic topics, principally in 19th century American history. Although enthusiasm for the new methods ran high, Bill did not join those of his colleagues who dismissed the traditionalists in the department as "functional illiterates." He characterized his own work as "sedate" and "circumspect," and graciously conceded that there would always be a place in historical work for story telling. The many honors which he received, including the Order of the British Empire and election to the National Academy of Sciences were sufficient indication of the originality and value of his work.

We like to say that Americans have been moving west for four hundred years in search of opportunities for self-realization. This consoling myth seems to be well exemplified in Bill's career. Here, in these corn fields, he came into his own. Finding that financial constraints prohibited the appointment of established scholars he sought out promising beginners, and by means of extensive inquiries, interviews, and meticulous evaluation of written work was able to assemble a department of outstanding younger scholars. He was always solicitous of their welfare, gave them every encouragement, and grieved when so many of them departed for what they seemed to imagine would be greener pastures.
Eugen Weber

A celebration of the Aydelotte department and of the man who built it seems very much in order. The department that Bill built was a byword in American universities of the 1950s and sixties, not exactly colonizing, but certainly irrigating them: Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Harvard, Rutgers, Columbia, Pittsburgh—and there must be more. Bill Aydelotte, the central (and dominant) figure, projected a towering and rather intimidating personality. My friends and I respected him tremendously, and of course respected his judgment the more for having been exercised in our favor; but personal relations took some time before becoming really personal. After a few months, I remember that my wife and I discovered a new man, quite different from the rather remote scholar/chairman we had first encountered: teller of stories, player of pianos, endearing, warm, and good company. Unfortunately, our stay in Iowa City lasted only 10 or 11 months (very happy months!), and the memories are bitty and superficial.

George L. Mosse

I have never known another department of history which attracted such talent and made so many correct forecasts about the future promise of the young scholars it hired, than the Iowa Department under Bill’s chairmanship. The selection process was agonizing and time consuming, we grumbled, but Bill kept us at it; and, of course, he was proved correct.

Bill himself was the first democratically-elected chairman of the department. He came into a difficult situation, but here his even temper, his refusal to be provoked, and, above all, his own passionate commitment to research (not at all typical of chairmen at that time), were instrumental in re-building the department. But his intellectual curiosity also produced what I used to call a permanent faculty seminar in history: one, dark and slept history in those days, climaxing over lunch at the “Mad Hatter” Restaurant on Washington Street. This, in turn, produced real collegiality, especially among the young colleagues. Looking back, I sometimes thought that this was because at Iowa we were all young together, but it was really Bill who created this atmosphere, even among those (like myself) who did not believe in history as a social science. I have lived through nearly a dozen chairmen in my time, but I have never again found a chairman who generated such a dynamic within a democratic and restrained leadership and singular devotion to the cause.

Donald Weinstein

I first met Bill Aydelotte in 1950 when as a new graduate student I was taken to visit him in the local sanitarium. Expecting a tubercular white-faced invalid, I found instead a ruddy, effervescent, teddy bear of a man sitting up in bed, writing away vigorously. He greeted me warmly and began talking about his work on detective stories. Neither then nor later, in his seminar (where he introduced me to the mysteries of quantification) nor as a very junior, temporary instructor, was I ever made to feel I was anything less than a friend and colleague. Bill set that tone for the entire Department and, with that enormous intellectual energy that led him to seek ideas and knowledge everywhere and from everyone, influenced the entire Iowa City university community. Of all the places I migrated to, none—not even Madison or Berkeley—was so successful as Iowa City in transcending barriers between departments, disciplines, and ranks.

Despite his friendliness, conversation with Bill could be disconcerting: we’d be talking away and suddenly his face would take on a distant expression, he’d stop talking, whip out a small piece of paper, scribble some notes and thrust it into a pocket of his suit coat, then resume the conversation. We used to speculate that they were dissertation topics. Many years after leaving Iowa I came to the University of Arizona to be Head of the Department of History—and I couldn’t have asked for a better model to follow than Bill Aydelotte at the University of Iowa.

Samuel P. Hays

My recollection of Bill and the Department was the very high degree of professionalism that both displayed. It was conveyed the very first time I visited Iowa in 1953. After the interviews with members of the Department were over we were in Bill’s office and he excused himself (at the time I thought it was to go talk to the Dean about my appointment) and before he left the room he went over to the bookshelf, picked up an armload of books, came over to me and said, “I thought you’d like to know what we’ve been doing lately.” When I went to the University of Pittsburgh in 1960 to Chair the Department I felt that I was well introduced to the ways that a History Department ought to function at a high professional level.

I found the University of Iowa quite congenial and the Department especially so. There was an atmosphere of sharing everything with the younger faculty and that stuck with me when I went to Pittsburgh, attempting to bring new and younger faculty into the full scheme of things. Bill played tennis with junior faculty, which for some reason or other became an accurate symbol of the lack of hierarchy in the Department.

Allan Megill

Although I taught in the department only five semesters before Bill retired, he had a tremendous impact on me, mainly because I was delegated to take over the departmental requirement in philosophy of history in his wake. In consequence I attended his last offering of Philosophy of History, and I got a good insight into his manner of working and thinking. I picked up the course the following year and have continued to teach some version of it since then.
Aydolotte’s two articles of 1948-49, “The England of Marx and Mill as Reflected in Fiction” and “The Detective Story as a Historical Source,” seem, in fact, to be at the root of his work both in quantification and in thinking about the implications of quantification.

I’ve recently had occasion to cite his work once again, in a piece that will be appearing in an historical encyclopedia. He had a precision of mind that is quite rare. His taste and judgment were extremely reliable. He was as far from being glib as it is possible to be. It is good that he found himself at a place where these qualities could have some effect; this does not always happen.

Alan B. Spitzer
I learned from Bill Aydelotte how a community of scholars should function, especially in locating the appointment process at the department’s ethical core. His stubborn, meticulous insistence on the highest possible standards, and that the entire department be involved in the process, which have become commonplace in many institutions, put a stamp on our department for some forty years. Colleagues who hadn’t known Bill continue to use his language: “in this department we read everything!”

Walter F. Peterson, Ph.D. 1951
I did indeed study with Professor Aydelotte as a graduate student, and he was one of the faculty on my doctoral committee. I valued the leadership he provided the department and the relationship he established with his students. Although I had not been in touch with him in recent years, nonetheless, he was to me a role model of what the professional historian in our society should be.

Harry M. Hutson, Ph.D. 1952
I was one of four graduate students who enrolled in Professor Aydelotte’s seminar on nineteenth century English history in 1949-50 and were his first Ph.D. candidates at Iowa. I remember Professor Aydelotte as patient, rigorous, and thoughtful. “He was the perfect mentor, whose careful scholarship and caring attitude towards his students served to guide me throughout my thirty-seven years of teaching. I am sure that the many Aydelotte graduate students who followed the four of us would join me in praising this brilliant, kind man who helped make Iowa’s History Department one of the best in the land.” Hutson is now retired from his position as Alumni Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

Richard G. Sherman, Ph.D. 1960
Professor Aydelotte came to the University of Iowa to replace Professor Root as chairman of the department of history, the same year that I entered the department as a graduate student. He was a wonderful person and one of my favorite professors.

R.D. (Bob) Linder, Ph.D. 1963
It may seem strange to contemplate, given my doctoral program and subsequent career, I am a veteran of two semesters of W.O. Aydelotte’s “History of European Diplomacy,” c. 1960-1961. I was actually one of the few graduate students from my era whose name Professor Aydelotte could remember. Why?—I have no idea.

Don S. Kirschner, Ph.D. 1964
Although I switched into American history after finishing my M.A. with Bill Aydelotte in 1955, I really owe my entire career to Bill, for which I was, fortunately, able to thank him some years before he died.

Bruce Curtis, Ph.D. 1964
Concerning Professor Aydelotte, I took his seminar and audited his European Intellectual History. I still delight in his story illustrating a point about subtlety: A man faced an executioner reputed to have an exceedingly sharp sword. The executioner swung. The man said, “I didn’t feel a thing!” The executioner said, “Nod, please.” Professor Aydelotte, despite his deadpan ways, could hardly contain his amusement.

Weldon Crowley, Ph.D. 1966
“I remember him well—also Kitch, for whom my wife Pat worked while we were there. I used Bill’s office to write my comprehensive exams. A distinguished son of a distinguished family.”

Don Robert Smith, Ph.D. 1978
It was my pleasure to work as a Research Assistant for Bill Aydelotte for several years in the 1970’s. I helped him develop computer methods to rank British Members of Parliament on several political dimensions based on their voting records. Professor Aydelotte’s dry sense of humor, stemming from an East Coast patrician cynicism, amused me greatly.

Bill Silag, Ph.D. 1979
In the spring of 1975, I petitioned the department to be excused from taking Professor Aydelotte’s Philosophy of History course, at that time required of all Ph.D. candidates. As a heavy-duty quantifier, I saw no reason to be distracted by Macaulay, Danto, and the other authors listed on Aydelotte’s syllabus. My petition was denied and reluctantly I enrolled in the course in the fall semester 1975. What did I know? Aydelotte’s “Philosophy of History” was by far the best course I took in my years in Iowa City, and I have been reading the philosophy of history—and philosophy—ever since. Aydelotte was a fine man and a superb teacher, and his influence on my thinking continues to this day.

Marcelline J. Hutton, Ph.D. 1986
As a graduate student, I used to think it somewhat odd that Professor Aydelotte always carried a small notebook around with him, and made notes occasionally. We used to joke about it privately. Now that I am middle aged, I understand for I too have trouble remembering things now.