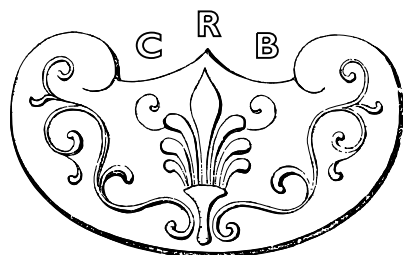




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Book Review by Michael McDonald

COMING TO AMERICA

Letters from America, by Alexis de Tocqueville, translated by Frederick Brown.
Yale University Press, 284 pages, \$20

Tocqueville's Discovery of America, by Leo Damrosch.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 277 pages, \$27

AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS LOVED TOCQUEVILLE. We recall fondly, if somewhat inaccurately, his optimistic assessment of our enterprising spirit, social mobility, and all-around “exceptionalism.” But thinking of Tocqueville as a friendly travel-writer is one thing; taking him seriously as a political thinker is something entirely different. By the 1930s, *Democracy in America* was nearly 100 years old, and whatever wisdom it might have contained for the still largely unsettled, relatively homogeneous, agrarian America of the 1830s no longer seemed relevant to the hyper-industrialized nation, which was teeming with newly arrived immigrants from all parts of the globe—and poised to assume world leadership.

But that soon changed. Yale historian George W. Pierson kicked off the revival of interest in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville with his book *Tocqueville and America*, published in 1938. Pierson assembled an extraordinary amount of material about Tocqueville's nine-month epic tour of the United States in 1831-32 to produce a monumental companion to *Democracy in America*. His skillful interweaving of letters, diaries, newspaper accounts,

and memoirs brought back the immediate drama of Tocqueville's discovery of democracy in America, and made it live again. Suddenly, Tocqueville seemed more relevant to people trying to better understand and defend democracy in the 20th century. By the year 2000, the editors of the *Journal of Democracy* went so far as to write: “One may say with little exaggeration: We are all Tocquevilleans now.”

Sustained and intelligent critical attention to Tocqueville's life and works has continued, as demonstrated by Frederick Brown's edited and translated edition of Tocqueville's *Letters from America* (with excerpts from his traveling companion Gustave de Beaumont's correspondence) and Leo Damrosch's *Tocqueville's Discovery of America*. These works, like Pierson's, retrace Tocqueville's journey through the young nation, updating it and providing a contemporary portrait of Tocqueville as a young man who open-mindedly experienced America at a time of rapid social change.

Brown, a professor emeritus at SUNY Stony Brook, shows us Tocqueville and Beaumont through the letters they sent home while traveling in America. Tocqueville and Beaumont

were quite the pair. Tocqueville had a mind suited for abstractions; Beaumont, an amateur artist, had an eye for the picturesque. Tocqueville was reserved, sometimes melancholic, and beset by doubts; Beaumont, as Brown writes, “had the bump of conviviality”; he was gregarious and was quick to issue his opinion. They went together, as a wit later said, “like the decanter of vinegar and the decanter of oil.” Their letters allow us to see how they transformed themselves into, in Tocqueville's words, “probing instruments” aiming to become “the world's most ruthless questioners” of American mores.

THEIR WRITINGS ARE A PRICELESS SOURCE of information for those interested in Tocqueville's ideas, as Tocqueville himself anticipated. He often reminded his interlocutors: “Keep this letter. I shall be glad to reread it one day.” Insights abound in Tocqueville's letters particularly, which one can enjoy for their style as well as for their substance. They have more in common with literature than with sociology. There is a classical dimension to his writing, which is full of allusions to the French *moralistes*, writers and preachers of the 17th and



18th centuries who sought to understand human character.

In *Tocqueville's Discovery of America*, Harvard Research Professor Leo Damrosch brings the journey to life, using Tocqueville's own observations alongside those of his contemporaries, such as Frances Trollope and Charles Dickens, who mocked Americans for their uncouthness. Tocqueville was more generous: "Much is flawed in the American scene," he wrote, "but as a whole it grips the imagination." Damrosch is particularly illuminating when he explains that English visitors were often offended by American colloquial speech. But Tocqueville was at least partly immune: "a principal reason for [his] apparent lack of snobbery was that his command of English, fluent enough for lively conversation, was not so perfect as to register nuances."

TOCQUEVILLE BELIEVED THAT EVERY NATION begins at what he called a *point de départ*, out of which its characteristic prejudices, passions, and habits develop. The same is true of individuals. Tocqueville's own *point de départ* was the French aristocracy. He was born in 1805 into a distinguished family descended from the military and the judicial branches of the French nobility—the *noblesse d'épée* and the *noblesse de robe*. His father, Hervé-Bonaventure, was an established member of the landed Norman gentry, and one of his ancestors had fought with William the Conqueror. His mother was Louise de Rosambo, the granddaughter of Lamoignon de Malesherbes, who as chief censor under Louis XV had authorized the publication of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*.

The Tocqueville family's first encounter with democratic revolution was not a pleasant one. Members of his mother's family, including Lamoignon de Malesherbes, were arrested on trumped-up charges of sedition against the French republic and guillotined in April 1794. But for the fall of Robespierre three months later on IX Thermidor (July 27), the same fate would likely have befallen Tocqueville's parents, who had also been jailed. Instead they walked free after ten months in a fetid prison. Their experiences of the Revolution only deepened their attachment to the *ancien régime*. They did their best to ensure that the young Alexis was raised to adhere faithfully to both the Bourbon monarchy and Roman Catholicism.

Tocqueville grew up in a household where books mattered and literature set the tone. Until the age of 15, he lived with his mother and was educated by his father's tutor, the Abbé Lesueur. Lesueur, an ecclesiastic with Jansenist leanings, was a man who belonged more to the 18th century than to the 19th. Despite the religious education that he received from the Abbé, Tocqueville's encounter with the works

of the French *philosophes* would later precipitate a crisis of faith. He would struggle throughout his life with doubt, but he never turned against religion or failed to appreciate it. Lesueur's importance to Tocqueville may be gleaned by a letter that Tocqueville wrote to his brother after learning of Lesueur's death: "Yesterday evening, I prayed to him, as I would to a saint."

Tocqueville entered law school in Paris in 1824 and became an apprentice magistrate in 1827. It was then that he met Gustave de Beaumont, who was three years older and a magistrate. They formed what would become a lifelong friendship. Tocqueville also began to study history, attending François Guizot's lectures on French civilization at the Sorbonne. He would always be deeply conscious of the fact that he was an aristocrat. In one of the letters from America he writes: "Bound to the royalists as I am by a few common principles and a thousand family ties, I find myself in a way chained to a party whose conduct often strikes me as dishonorable and almost always extravagant. I can't help taking their faults deeply to heart, even as I condemn them with all my might."

The Revolution of 1830 overthrew the Bourbon king Charles X and put the Orléanist Louis-Philippe on the throne. Tocqueville reluctantly took a loyalty oath to keep his job. This placed him in a difficult position with his pro-Bourbon family and relatives, who thought his actions treasonous. But his oath did nothing to allay the regime's mistrust of him. This suspicion was not unwarranted; in 1832 some of Tocqueville's relatives would be involved in a plot to overthrow Louis-Philippe. Beaumont fell under suspicion for similar reasons. He and Tocqueville therefore sought a pretext to leave the country for a while.

FORTUNATELY FOR THEM, A SHIFT WAS TAKING place, not only in politics but also in penal practices: torture and public executions were being replaced by efforts to rehabilitate criminals. The United States was seen as a vast social laboratory, in which prison experiments were being conducted that might profit France. Tocqueville and Beaumont were therefore able to convince their supervisors to grant them a leave of absence to travel to the United States to study American prisons.

On April 2, 1831, Tocqueville and Beaumont embarked at Le Havre with 180 fellow passengers, mostly Americans and English. During the 38-day crossing they put themselves through a heroic program of study, reading scores of books on the American legal system. They also worked on their mastery of English. This was essential, Beaumont thought, since without mastering the language, "one might as well take strolls in one's room with the windows shuttered."

As soon as they landed their observations began. In Newport they were struck by the informality of the customs office, the first indication that America was far less bureaucratic than France. They immediately noticed the mercantile culture; Newport had four or five banks. Tocqueville was taken aback at the American predilection (which, alas, seems only to have gotten worse) for eating "with both feet in the trough," confessing that he was "baffled by the sheer quantity of food that people somehow stuff down their gullets."

IN NEW YORK TOCQUEVILLE AND BEAUMONT lived in a boarding house and spent their time mingling in New York society, doing prison research, and interviewing men of consequence. They noted that Americans have "an incredible contempt for distances," owing to the efficient network of rivers and canals in that part of the country. Tocqueville further observed that there was "something feverish about the movement of industry and thought" in America, noting that Americans' desire to get rich helped account for their lack of interest in politics:

Everyone works, and the vein is still so rich that all who work it succeed rapidly in gaining the wherewithal to achieve contentment. Here the most active minds, like the most tranquil characters, have no void in their lives to fill by troubling the state. Restlessness, which harrows our European societies, seems to abet the prosperity of this one. Wealth is the common lure, and a thousand roads lead to it. Politics therefore occupies only a small corner of the canvas.

After a month and a half in New York City, Tocqueville and Beaumont took a steamboat up the Hudson River to Albany. They were guests of honor at a Fourth of July celebration: "Our festivals are more dazzling; those of the United States ring truer." They soon made their way westward to Buffalo, visited the Finger Lakes and stopped at the famous prisons at Auburn and Sing Sing, where inmates worked for 11 hours a day in silence.

They enjoyed a brief trip to Lower Canada and Quebec. The countryside reminded them of Normandy: "The French nation of Louis XIV's day survives there unspoiled in its mores and language." In Philadelphia, they attributed a dearth of imagination to the fact that "streets are distinguished from one another by number rather than name." "These people know nothing but arithmetic." From Philadelphia they traveled to Pittsburgh and then down the Ohio River to Cincinnati. Cincinnati was, as Damrosch writes, what Tocqueville had been wait-



ing for: “A city with hardly any past, in dizzying transition, inventing itself with ferocious energy.” Tocqueville himself spoke of encountering “a democracy devoid of limits and measures.” “What we encountered there,” he wrote, “is all the good and bad of American society set out in bold relief.”

They eventually reached New Orleans but didn’t spend much time in the South, which Tocqueville liked to call “le Midi.” But they did see enough to understand that slavery produced moral degradation in both master and servant. They soon traveled to the nation’s less than impressive capital of Washington and were back in New York and ready to return home. Altogether they visited 17 of the then 24 states as well as 3 regions that would later become states (Michigan, Wisconsin, and West Virginia). They met with more than 200 people from all walks of life. Tocqueville noted that the trip Americanized him: “I’m almost accustomed to this phenomenon of society growing like rank vegetation. I surprise myself speaking as Americans do and calling some establishment very old when it’s been in existence for thirty years.”

BROWN AND DAMROSCH’S WORKS PRESENT the reader with embryonic versions of many of the ideas Tocqueville would later develop in *Democracy in America*. He admired equality but also learned to fear it: “We are moving toward an unrestricted democracy,” he wrote. “I don’t say that it is a good thing... But we are being propelled in that direction by an irresistible force.”

The letters foreshadow Tocqueville’s fear of the tyranny of public opinion. After having been in America for a month, he wrote to a friend about “the broad communality of certain opinions,” for example, the American form of government is the best of all possible governments and that man is indeed perfectible through education. Did he think that the coming triumph of democracy a good thing? “The one obvious fact is that we are slogging through a period of transition. But are we moving toward freedom? Or are we marching toward despotism? God only knows.”

Throughout his travels, Tocqueville appreciated the interaction—or lack thereof—between associations, political institutions, and the state: “In this happy land, the restlessness of the human spirit does not mobilize political passions. On the contrary, everything draws it toward an activity that leaves the state alone.” Indeed, on more than one occasion, Tocqueville would record his astonishment in the face of a “society [that] walks on its own, and promises not to encounter any obstacles.” Tocqueville wrote to his father:

While among us, government meddles in everything, here there is not, or appears not to be any government at all. Alike the virtues and defects of centralization are seemingly unknown; there is no mainspring regulating the machine’s moving parts.

Tocqueville was well aware of the Enlightenment belief that religion would become anachronistic in the democratic age of reason and he observed how increasing material prosperity could weaken the religious impulse. “Faith [in the United States],” he wrote, “is obviously inert; what was once a strong impulse is growing feebler by the day.” The reason for this seemed to be because democracy tends to de-emphasize theology and dogma and to promote individual morality. “Enter any church (I refer to the Protestant kind) and you will hear sermons about morals; not one word about dogma—nothing at all likely to fluster one’s neighbor or awaken the idea of dissent.”

On the other hand, Tocqueville also observed how materialism could paradoxically coexist with extreme religious zeal. In a hospital he visited one day he discovered “a charming young woman whose head had been turned by religious ideas. This problem isn’t uncommon in the United States where religious enthusiasm runs high.” He would later theorize that religion, *pace* the Enlightenment thinkers, doesn’t simply wither away. In a complex material world people may in fact turn forcefully to religious injunctions and authority, whether by returning to the Roman Catholic Church or by embracing some brand of evangelical fundamentalism.

WHY DOES TOCQUEVILLE’S TRIP TO America exert such a powerful grip on the imagination? Damrosch suggests that although the outpouring of books on the American Revolution and the Civil War has done much good, it has also obscured “an era of immense significance in the history of our nation.” Tocqueville came to America in 1831, two years into the presidency of Andrew Jackson. This was the very moment when Americans were constructing their sense of nationhood, beginning to understand themselves as enterprising, innovative, and equality-loving.

There is another reason for Tocqueville’s enduring popularity. America was a restless society. “Hundreds of men can be found, not fifty years of age, who have settled for the fourth, fifth, or sixth time on a new spot,” he observed. The external manifestations of restlessness matched Tocqueville’s interior rest-

lessness. Tocqueville belonged to a transitional generation. He was afflicted by vague anxieties and restless desires. His inner afflictions were congruent with the historical ones characterizing the era in which he lived. That is what made him the perfect outsider and observer. “Repose was contrary to his nature,” Beaumont observed of Tocqueville, “and even when his body wasn’t moving, his intelligence was always at work.... The slightest loss of time was unpleasant to him.” He was able to overcome his privileged aristocratic birth, because his inner psychological affinity was perfectly in sync with the unrest, ceaseless agitation and ever-changing nature of American society.

A criticism of Tocqueville one occasionally encounters, even among those otherwise favorably disposed to his writing, is that he arrived in America with too many preconceptions about what he would find and, as a result, had a propensity to form quick and inaccurate judgments about the country and its inhabitants. In fact just the opposite is true: the young Tocqueville we encounter in both of these books is anything but sure of what to make of what he’s seen. “You will perhaps ask me,” he writes to his father in June 1831, “what we find most noteworthy in this land. I would need a volume to tell you everything, for we are definitely not systemizers.” Indeed, the young Tocqueville repeatedly wondered in his letters whether anything would come of his journey. Writing to his mother from Boston in September 1831, he said:

But will I ever write anything about this country? The truth of the matter is, I have absolutely no idea. Everything I see, everything I hear, everything I perceive—perceive still from afar—is a tangle in my mind and I scarcely know whether I shall ever have the time or power to sort things out. Portraying a society as vast and heterogeneous as this one would be an immense labor.

Tocqueville returned to France in March 1832 with trunks full of materials and a tangle of thoughts. Turning these impressions into a book would prove an immense task; it took him eight years to complete the work. For his labor all friends of democracy and of America should be grateful. Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, is our country’s indispensable interpreter. In that sense, yes, we are all Tocquevilleans now.

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