A Cousin Worthy of Visiting

Joseph A. Amato


Having written on Tocqueville, modern France, and the history of the United States for almost three decades, Hugh Brogan comes well prepared to write this truly substantive biography. The bibliography and index alone to this 724-page tome attest to his careful attention the eighteen volumes of Tocqueville’s *Oeuvres*, especially the last three volumes, which include his exceptionally important correspondence. In addition, Brogan has also made use of a vast number of secondary articles and books, along with André Jardin’s substantive *Tocqueville: A Biography* (1984, Eng. trans., 1988).

Brogan’s work proves him a master at evoking the social circumstances, personal relations, and inner life of his subject. He depicts Tocqueville as a son of a sickly mother and a wise, prudent, and caring father, and as a student who found both love and learning under the tutelage of the family priest. Brogan introduces us to a shy but amorous young man, whose soul emotionally belongs to the Romantic era. He took his youthful friendships to heart and transformed them into life-long loyalties and allegiances. Attributing a doubting spirit to the young Tocqueville, Brogan describes a single and irrevocable night during which sixteen-year-old Tocqueville suffered what can only be considered a reverse religious conversion. In a matter of a few horrible hours, his turbulent and doubting mind took away his Catholic faith that had so ordered his meaning, defined his family’s identity, and so profoundly consoled his sickly mother. Tocqueville awoke from that awful night a skeptic, thereafter never to believe in the truth of religion, which he, nevertheless, paradoxically judged in his writings to be so important to order, tradition, and a required providential view of history.

Brogan suggests the young scholar read with passion such French writers as Racine, Pascal, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. Along the way, he also assimilated a fair share of Greek and Roman classics in philosophy, politics, and history. Brogan acquaints us with an indisputably brilliant young man whose passion, one so common to the Enlightenment and Romantic eras, was for public fame and responsibility. Tocqueville sought glory first as a young judge, then as a keen observer and interpreter of democratic society’s development. Finally, thanks to the long-term influence of modern scholar-historian-politicians Adolphe Thiers and François Guizot, Tocqueville, conceding that he was unable to change France, elected to define it as a master historian.

Tocqueville began his career as a promising novice *juge auditeur* at Versailles during the reign of Charles X. His career and aspirations were truncated by the Revolution of 1830, during which he remained loyal to Charles X until the latter fled for England, taking the monarchy itself with him. His aristocratic distaste for the bourgeois revolution did not prevent Tocqueville, who by long family inheritance was a noble of both sword and robe, from swearing allegiance to the middle class king, Louis Philippe.

Both Tocqueville and his aristocratic supervisor and friend, Gustave de Beaumont,
decided that an absence from France would provide temporary protection and keep open the possibility of future public service. In 1831 they traveled, at their own expense, to America to assess whether the young republic’s penitentiary system could serve as a model for the reform of punishment in France. Though constantly sick, Tocqueville persisted with his work. Information gathered on the nearly yearlong American journey formed the core of his commentary on American democracy. This project fit his ambitions, which in large measure were those of an age when literate Europeans looked to Russia and America for prognostications of their own futures. With the first volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville established his intellectual importance not just in France, but also in the United States, England, and elsewhere in Europe.

Simultaneous with its 1835 publication, the celebrated author affirmed his full adult independence. Having opposed his parents in religion and politics, he then went on to defy them by marrying a middle-class English Protestant. At the same time, believing himself deserving of authority, Tocqueville worked in the government of Louis Philippe. In the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848 he served for two years as minister of foreign affairs under Louis Napoleon, until the latter, intent on governing France alone, ran and was elected by a democratic plebiscite. The reign of Napoleon III, which marked France’s failure as a republic, realized Tocqueville’s worst fear of the convergence of democracy and tyranny, and once and for all ended his political career.

Brogan argues, at points aggressively, that Tocqueville never intellectually escaped the social cocoon into which he was born. Membership in a prominent aristocratic family with roots in Normandy equipped the young Tocqueville with an abiding presumption that he should judge and rule France. This prejudice was reinforced by the fact that at no time in his life did Tocqueville lack financial means to pursue a public career, to own and rent several residences, to employ servants, to seek out the best medical care, and to pursue his research and travel plans.

Nevertheless, Brogan also observes that the armor of birth and privilege did not eliminate Tocqueville’s sense of historical vulnerability. His father and other family members were detained in prison, while his mother’s eminent aristocratic maternal grandfather, Lamoignon de Malesherbes, and other members of his family were guillotined during the French Revolution for their loyal service to the monarchy.

Brogan suggests that Tocqueville’s sense of vulnerability was rooted in his mother’s sickness and compounded by his marriage to his beloved Marie, who was actually the volatile and sickly Mary Mottley, daughter of the bursar of the British seaman’s hospital at Gosport. Though she remained his lifelong love and companion, her weak constitution became apparent during her sickness on their extended honeymoon. Her frequent maladies interfered with travel and, especially in their later years, darkened their childless marriage.

Brogan argues that Tocqueville is a prophet neither of his own times nor of ours. He denies the “prescience” that Russell Kirk assigned to Tocqueville, contending that he stereotyped women by assigning them fixed domestic roles and by ignoring the contentions of their contemporary advocates; that he underestimated the importance of slavery in forming American society; and that finally he showed neither an empirical nor empathetic understanding of the working class. Tocqueville, Brogan contends, wore the blinkers of his class in his discussions of equality, liberty, and democracy and his underlying appreciation of English political traditions.
Tocqueville, according to Brogan, corrupted his major works by his class interest. A staunch and constant defender of inherited rights and freedom, with the support of Montesquieu and other classic writers, Tocqueville favored parliaments, the division of power, and the autonomy of social constituencies. His preference for legal and differentiated social orders accounts for his criticisms, so popular among conservatives of the post-World War II era, of leveling egalitarianism, disaggregating individualism, and the centralizing state.

Brogan is especially critical of Tocqueville’s second volume of *Democracy in America*. Underlining the empirical weakness of Tocqueville’s methodology, Brogan contends that simply on the basis of an interview or two, Tocqueville deduces ideas about an entire subject and then proposes logics that govern the course of social and political development. Not without parallel to Hegel and other contemporaries who joined philosophy and history to over-reaching theories, Tocqueville, as Brogan judges him, was a brilliant intuitive observer, who, in his study, working on phrase after phrase and draft upon draft, crafted what in truth was a philosophical commentary rather than an empirical study.

Brogan, however, does not extend this indictment to Tocqueville’s *Recollections*, which he admits is based on lived experience and participation in the events of the years from 1848 to 1850. Of all his works, Brogan judges the *Recollections* to be the one that he “could least spare for oblivion,” saying, “The wit, the eloquence, the deep feeling, the predominant pessimism, and the occasional sparks of hope: the characteristics that are to be found in his letters and the records of his conversation are here deployed by the artist.” In the very course of his hurried writing, “Tocqueville,” earning Brogan’s full praise, “turns into a historian before our eyes,” as he grasps the plurality of causes that move human affairs in such passages as this:

The more I study society in former times, and the more I learn in detail how society operates now, and when I consider the prodigious diversity that once comes across, not only of laws, but of principles of laws, and the different forms they have assumed and which the property assumes, whatever men say, here on Earth, I am tempted to believe that what we call necessary institutions are often only those to which we are accustomed, and that where the organization of society is concerned, the field of possibility is much vaster than the men who live in particular societies ever imagine. (500)

For Brogan, Tocqueville’s last book, *L’Ancien Régime*, which occupied his twilight years, proved him a true historian. It is a fruit of his innovating regional archival research. It offers a singularly novel argument that state centralization, which until then had been assumed to be the consequence of the Revolution and Napoleon, had a long development under the monarchy and had been intensified in the course of the eighteenth century. Though not in the end bestowing the prophet’s mantle so vigorously denied at the outset, Brogan concludes with earnest acclamation: Tocqueville was a true and great historian of France.

This last work was “the creation of a master historian.” “Extensive, powerful, and convincing,” it showed the “inexorability of the Revolution’s coming” and penetrated the plight of French peasants, while searching for the movement of social and institutional history, not on the surface of events but in *la France profonde*. Not absent flaws and shortcomings, *L’Ancien Régime* was the culmination of Tocqueville’s passionate preoccupation with the fate of France. Paying homage to his own craft, Brogan argues that *L’Ancien Régime*, not *Democracy in America* as Kirk would have it, redeemed Tocqueville’s life insofar as a great book can.
Brogan’s narrative, which moves between the primacy of Tocqueville’s life over his thought and his ultimate achievement as a historian, might have found mediating ground by assuming that Tocqueville was one of the true master thinkers of the great kaleidoscopic period from 1776 to 1848 that juxtaposed the Enlightenment and Romanticism and took form between the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Along with the era’s greatest minds, he wrestled with the meaning of what were truly unprecedented events. The world had become a stage for the enactment of a new order.

Tocqueville, I would have it, singularly sought to ponder what democracy was and what it boded for America and Europe. He was a man who puzzled deeply over the events of his times and the very making of modern America, France, and Europe. On this count, Tocqueville remains, though many times removed, a cousin worthy of visiting.

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**The Start of Something Big**

Bruce P. Frohnen


“Discovery” has been a term and a process more subject to revision than most in recent decades. It was not Christopher Columbus who discovered the New World, we have been told; it was Leif Erikson—or more properly the descendants of the American Indians. This is in an important sense true. Moreover, pointing out this truth is in important ways salutary because it diverts our attention from the subjective act of discovery (discovery for whom?) to the more important process of settlement. Settlement itself is a contested term, of course. Does it mean the spread of a particular culture to new, unsettled parts of the world? Domination of one people by another? Or the beginning of something truly new—of a pioneering offshoot of one culture that reacts to and even brings into itself elements of indigenous ways of life, surrounding geographical elements, and the lessons of pioneering itself?

This last vision pervades Karen Ordahl Kupperman’s illuminating volume, *The Jamestown Project*. As Kupperman points out, Jamestown, Virginia, founded in 1607, was far from the beginning of colonization of the New World. Indeed, the relatively backward English were latecomers to the colonization game, lagging far behind the Spanish and Portuguese, in particular. And most observers, this reviewer included, prefer to emphasize the influence of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and other Puritan colonies rather than Jamestown on the development of American institutions and character. Where Jamestown evokes visions of violence, greed, squalor, martial law, and the institutionalization of slavery, Plymouth brings to mind the importance of religious faith, sacrifice, and the striving after virtue in local democratic communities. But history seldom rewards virtue in and of itself, instead smiling on those whose practical mindset spawns an experimental pragmatism and commitment to success before ideals. And it was commitment to success by whatever means necessary that made Jamestown the crucible in which was forged the successful pattern of settlement.