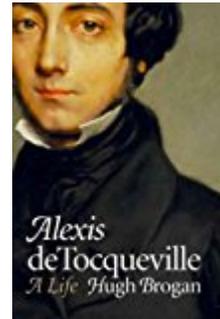


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Hugh Brogan.** *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. ix + 724 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10803-3; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-13625-8.



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This is an opus magnum not only in terms of how the book presents its central character, Alexis de Tocqueville, but also because the book was in the making over the span of an entire academic career. The author, Hugh Brogan, a retired research professor in the History Department of the University of Essex, first began to study Tocqueville in the late 1950s at Cambridge and continued during a research stay at Yale University. There were two early outcomes of his efforts. In 1966, Brogan wrote an introduction to *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, and seven years later he published a tiny biography, *Tocqueville* (1973). Brogan was said to be working on a larger Tocquevillean project, but it took a backseat partly to his other preoccupations (political historiography of the United States) and especially because of the restrictions to access the Tocqueville family archives. Brogan wrote occasional articles and book chapters about Tocqueville, coedited with Anne P. Kerr correspondence between Tocqueville and one of his close English friends Nassau Senior (*Correspondence et Conversations d'Alexis de Tocqueville et Nassau William Senior* [1991]), and fully resumed research on the present volume only in 2000.

The result is an excellent biography of Tocqueville, which has no equivalent in English. There are several introductory portraits of this French nobleman thinker and politician (e.g. Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville* [1994]);

however, these are mostly limited in scope with a strong focus on his major books, but not much about the author himself. The only comparable biography is that of André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, which is a translation from French, published twenty years ago. There are overlaps, of course, and, on several occasions, Brogan refers approvingly to Jardin's book, but his own work surpasses it in the wealth of covered material as well as the ability to use the most recent research on Tocqueville.

The volume is divided into two books of roughly the same size. There does not appear to be a clear reason for the division. The first book, "Young Tocqueville," starts well before the year of Tocqueville's birth (1805) and finishes with the publication of the second part of *Democracy in America* (1840). It, therefore, covers much more than "young" Tocqueville: growing up during the Bourbon restoration, a regime his father served ably as a prefect; law education and the years in the judicial system, where he met his close friend Gustave de Beaumont; the revolution of 1830 and the way it affected the supporters of the restoration; and Tocqueville's two campaigns for the Chamber of Deputies, the second of which was successful in 1839. The core of the first book, however, is the journey to the United States that Tocqueville undertook with Beaumont in 1831-32. The account of their travels in America and the profound influence they had on Toc-

queville is certainly among the most captivating and enjoyable passages in this book. America is at center stage also on the return from the journey as Brogan pays close attention to the writings that came out of the visit: Beaumont and Tocqueville's report on American prisons, *Système pénitentiaire* (1833) ("a remarkable book" [p. 224]); Tocqueville's first part of *Democracy in America* (1835) ("the greatest book ever written on the United States" [p. 278]); Beaumont's novel *Marie* (1835) ("full of the particulars and the living movement which Tocqueville omitted" [p. 294]); and Tocqueville's second part of *Democracy in America* (1840) ("above all a highly personal book" [p. 359]). And, just as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is as much about the United States as it is about France, Brogan's narrative wonderfully places its origins within France of the 1830s.

The next two decades are the subject of the biography's second book, "Monsieur de Tocqueville." The discussion of Tocqueville's career as a deputy shows his less appealing political attitudes, such as strong nationalism. More important, it allows Brogan to capture Tocqueville's growing preoccupation with order and support for the Orleanist regime ("He took fright in a particular way as soon as he sensed that the July Monarchy, dedicated to the protection of property, was in danger" [p. 414]). At the same time, he was able to recognize some of the problems of the regime and, with foresight, warned against the revolution. The revolution, which occurred shortly thereafter in February 1848, is the central feature of the second book. Brogan presents excellent chapters on Tocqueville and French politics in Paris as well as in his home region of the Manche during tumultuous February and June 1848. That he was enthusiastically elected into the new Constituent Assembly, where he helped to craft the republican constitution, suggests a lot about Tocqueville's independent streak but also the limits of the revolution. Tocqueville was further convinced about the necessity of restoring order, especially by countering demands of workers in Paris. He wrote to a political supporter in the Manche: "this is not about political reforms, but about property, family, civilization, in short everything that makes life worth living" (p. 462). Tocqueville only slowly assumed a more reflective and critical stance to the republic, which he supported and in which he even served briefly as minister of foreign affairs. Brogan draws masterfully on Tocqueville's recollections of 1848 captured in the *Souvenirs* ("without it Tocqueville's *oeuvre* would be infinitely less fascinating" [p. 488]). Following the *coup d'état* in 1851, Tocqueville left political life and, in search for answers, turned to

the other revolution, that of 1789. Ill health allowed him to finish only a portion of the larger project *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* ("the secret of the *Ancien Régime's* continuing vitality lies in the fascination of Tocqueville himself" [p. 565]) before his death in 1859.

Some have called this book the definitive biography, but, splendid as it is, those are, of course, overstatements. As Brogan notes in his acknowledgements at the end of the book, "definitive biography is impossible" (p. 693). It is in this context that critical remarks should be raised. There is no point in dwelling on minor mistakes, such as a rare typo or incorrect dates (p. 218-220), in a book of this size. Nevertheless, there are two problems of a technical nature and one substantive shortcoming. The book is a pleasure to read thanks to its clear style and wonderfully rich language. However, the high quality of the text brings into sharper relief what I cannot but consider two disturbing elements. The first one is the frequent use of French words and phrases in the text. To a certain degree, this is understandable (though one is tempted to ask whether the frequency would be the same had the book referred to a German- or Russian-speaking character), and, in some instances, it is even inevitable, but often it is simply annoying. Readers without the knowledge of French will also be frustrated by the inconsistency with which French expressions or entire sentences are or are not translated or explained. This is an unnecessary blemish on a book that aims at a greater than just an academic audience. The other technical problem is the occasional comparisons to the present, which are unnecessary and will be dated sooner or later. It is misleading when Brogan describes a former prison governor in the United States in the early nineteenth century as "a sadistic bully, of an American type all too familiar today from films and novels about the US Marines in the Second World War, and recent outrages in the prisons at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib" (p. 166). Similarly, nothing is gained when we are told, "Tocqueville, it might almost be said, was anticipating from afar the Common Agricultural Policy" (p. 302).

Even in a book of this breadth and scope, there will be substantive issues about which readers would like to know more. In this respect, Brogan manages to provide an extremely balanced and well-rounded picture of Tocqueville. Yet, I wish he had paid a little bit more attention to Tocqueville's property and finances. It is not that there is no information on these, but they are touched upon only in passing: in 1833, "he was still entirely dependent on his father for an income"; in 1848, his letters "are full of personal money worries"; and in 1852, Tocqueville and

his wife left Paris partly for financial reasons (pp. 240, 440, 530). Brogan, however, never explicitly connects the issue of property and sources of income to Tocqueville's turn to "the party of order," to his distrust of popular majority, or to the possibility to engage in contemplative life. The reader senses that they are somehow related, but Brogan, it seems, has adopted Tocqueville's "ostentatious disdain for material concerns" (p. 428). Greater scrutiny and examination of his material position and status would have complemented the already rich pic-

ture.

This book has received praise aplenty and deservedly so. It will be indispensable reading for all those interested in one of the most original thinkers of the modern age. The book offers much more in addition to the life of Alexis de Tocqueville. There is a depth of analysis of Tocqueville's writings, Hugh Brogan also recreates the politics and the society of Tocqueville's times in France and, thanks to Tocqueville's travels, briefly in other places. *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* is an immense achievement.

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