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Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the greatest political thinkers of all time. Born a French aristocrat, he lost nearly his entire family in the Reign of Terror, and he spent most of his adult life struggling for liberty under the unsuccessful regimes of nineteenth-century France.

At age twenty-five he travelled to America and encountered democracy for the first time. This firsthand experience contributed to his incisive writing on liberty and democracy. The *ancien régime* launched the scholarly study of the French Revolution, and *Democracy in America* remains the best book ever written by a European about the United States. This is a brilliant account of his life.

Alexis de Tocqueville Details

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From Reader Review Alexis de Tocqueville for online ebook

Mark Mills says

Comprehensive and well written but doesn't make much of an impact. It took me into De Tocqueville's company for a great deal of time yet I don't feel really feel better informed about his ideas than I did before.

Is actually most successful as a primer on the history of France and the US in the first half of the eighteenth century than it is of its subject.

Martyn Lovell says

Alexis de Tocqueville is a 19th century French writer, intellectual, politician and statesman. He is relatively well-known, even today, because he wrote a famous, insightful book about early America from an enthusiastic European perspective. In particular, he compares and analyses the sequence of unsuccessful upheavals in France (the ongoing French Revolutions) with the fundamental strength of the American system.

The challenge for Tocqueville's biographer is to balance the narrative. Tocqueville's American visit and writings are only a medium sized part of a much larger (but less impactful) life. He wrote another influential work (revisiting his themes in the context of France). He also played a minor role in French politics and government. Focusing on what makes the subject famous would in this case make for a rather inconsistent biography. The chosen alternative, unfortunately, is a highly detailed biography with a lot of material in the second half that is not that enlightening.

This is a well-written book with a clear style, good structure, chronological organization and great analysis that connects together the themes of Tocqueville's life into a cohesive whole. While the book is dense and quite slow reading, the text is not obscure or pretentious. And even the passages on subjects of peripheral interest (to me) are satisfying and thoughtful.

Occasionally Brogan goes a bit further in judgment or commentary than I find comfortable in a Biography, but aside from length this is the only substantive flaw I can find. I suspect Brogan and I don't agree on a bunch of political philosophy, which is probably why this occasionally sticks out. But overall the book seems admirably balanced and neutral.

Reading this book definitely made me want to read the actual Tocqueville volumes, and actually to read more about the history of the French revolution, which is a lot more complex than I knew. And it's fascinating how much of this resonates with today's European situation.

If you are fascinated by American or French history, this book will repay reading.

Matt says

Maybe you've noticed, but we Americans are very insecure about our place in the world. Every election cycle we listen to people warning of our national decline. With every healthcare debate and with every World Cup exit, things seem a bit bleaker. Of course, the doomsayers have always been with us; but the lingering despair that we are no longer the greatest country on earth is relatively recent (I believe the election in which we voted ourselves #1 was held sometime in 1946).

It was the unprecedented cruelties of World War II that helped us leap to this somewhat-imaginary position atop the family of nations. While old empires crumbled and old cities collapsed, our power grew and our economy expanded. But once you get to the top, you've got to stay there. Thus, every time the Russians blasted a chimp into outer space, we felt compelled to send a man, or at the very least, a chimp dressed as a man (I can't be sure; my knowledge of the Space Race is very spotty).

By now, most other countries have agreed that we are not this planet's supreme beings. We haven't quite accepted that. So we cling to past glories. We dress in tricorne hats and knee breeches. We remind every European person we see that they should thank us for Normandy Beach. Mainly, we try to pretend that the last half century of wars in Southeast Asia, racial strife at home, growing inequality, tighter boom-bust cycles, and Mid-East occupations never occurred.

One place to turn, in order to feel a little better about things, is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. To be sure, Tocqueville was not uncritical of America, her democratic processes, or her people. (After all, he was a French aristocrat; only death could entirely keep him from sneering down his nose). However, on the whole, he was enamored of the American project. Today, if you see a Tocqueville quote (which is often), it is usually a pat on the national back, a reminder of a glorious past.

Published in two volumes, in 1835 and 1840, *Democracy in America* is regarded as classic political tract. Tocqueville was 26 years-old when he made his voyage to America; he spent less than a year on our shores, during which time his main topic of investigation was supposed to be prison reform. He left without ever having witnessed a debate or vote in the House of Representatives or Senate (which is a bit like writing a history of the New York Yankees without ever catching a game).

I guess here is as good a time as ever to mention I haven't read *Democracy in America*. I have a feeling that a lot of the people who quote Tocqueville haven't read it either. Its primary use today seems to be a collection of pull-quotes for politicians.

Now, one might wonder why I chose to read Hugh Brogan's massive biography about Alexis de Tocqueville rather than simply reading his most famous, equally massive book. Fair question. First, a part of me was genuinely excited at the prospect of Tocqueville's life. For whatever reason, I assumed he was a lecherous dilettante, and that his American adventure was a sex-and-booze filled lark. Sort of like a John Jakes novel, but with a pedigree. Second, I thought *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* would prepare me for *Democracy in America*, or at the very least, inspire me.

I was wrong on both counts.

Of course, that has nothing to do with the quality of Brogan's work. Mostly it has to do with the fact that I am an idiot. More than that, when it comes to French history in general and Tocqueville in particular, I am out of my league. There are very few topics that I hesitate to give my opinion on, and French history is one

of them (hockey is another).

The reason I was wrong is that Brogan does not give any particular weight to Tocqueville's American adventure and the book it produced. (These being the things that drew me, like a nerdy moth to the flame). To the contrary, Tocqueville's visit to America is one chapter while his formulation of *Democracy in America* takes place in another chapter. The rest of this very long, very thorough book is taken up with things that...how do I put this? Well, frankly, stuff that bored the crap out of me.

This was one of those books that became a chore to read. After a few chapters, I started avoiding it. Then I put it on my exercise bike so that I'd have to read it while I worked out. As a result, I stopped exercising and gained five pounds. All due to this biography. True story.

Again, a distinction has to be made between the objective quality of this work, and the subjective impressions it left on me (bearing in mind that my attention span has been eaten away by soda pop, candy, and television).

The objective quality cannot be ignored. Hugh Brogan is a retired professor, and there is no doubting the high standards of his scholarship. He knows his subject front to back, to the point where he can make assumptions about Tocqueville's character and psychology that feel warranted. It also helps that Brogan seems to be fluent in French, which means there's none of those pesky problems with reading translated primary sources.

Despite his academic bona fides, Brogan does not come off as a starchy professor. Rather, he writes in an accessible manner, one that is leavened with flashes of wit and occasional sly asides. We're not talking *The Far Side* or anything, but Brogan does not take himself or his biography too seriously.

Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life begins in 1773, with a long discussion on Tocqueville's family, especially his father, and ends with Tocqueville's death from tuberculosis in 1859 (spoiler alert: he dies at the end). The book is divided into two sections. The first covers Tocqueville's youth, his education, his first job, and his famous journey to America to study our penal system. This section ends with Tocqueville collecting his American notes and writing the first volume of what would become *Democracy in America*.

As I mentioned earlier, the chapter in America is a bit of a letdown. I expected an epic, wide-ranging adventure: raging storms, menacing Indians, perhaps a farmer's daughter or two. The reality is more prosaic. This is not to underestimate Tocqueville's commitment or the actual difficulty of travel in the 19th century; still, muddy roads, or bumpy roads, or dusty roads do not exactly stir the imagination.

Tocqueville saw a lot of places in a short period of time, but the overwhelming impression I got from his whirlwind tour is that his observations could not have scratched the surface of the truth. Sure, he might have been insightful, and sure, he might have been a clever writer. But that doesn't account for the fact that he spent only 9 months in-country. That's like me writing *Baguettes in France* after spending only a week eating baguettes in Paris and the Bordeaux region. (My conclusion: delicious!)

More interesting than his actual travels is Tocqueville's process of a writer. Indeed, Brogan's descriptions of Tocqueville the author (not only with *Democracy* but with *Ancien Régime* and other minor works) were among my favorite passages. Tocqueville was an endless preparer and outliner, and as he prepared and outlined, he also fretted morosely. Finally, he would write in short, frenzied bursts, with first drafts that required little change. Brogan makes an argument that Tocqueville actually deserves a place among the great French writers; however, he does little to bolster this argument other than relying on some appeals to higher

authority. I would've liked to have seen more concrete examples of this alleged greatness.

The second half of this book, which deals with Tocqueville's time as a minor politician, is where I got bogged down. The problem is twofold.

First, I don't know a great deal of French history, and Brogan doesn't have the time or inclination to fill me in. Thus, a lot of the political upheavals that Tocqueville is peripherally involved in lack context.

Figuratively speaking, post-Revolutionary France changed governments as often as a person changes their pants. Literally speaking, post-Revolutionary France changed governments as often as a Frenchman changes his pants. (Just kidding, France). You've got monarchs being replaced by republics being replaced by emperors being replaced by monarchs being replaced by a talking bird, on and on, until you just want to read something less complicated, like *Game of Thrones*. I needed a better guide through this thicket of upheaval, where it seemed that every month sponsored its own revolution.

Second, Tocqueville seemed to be relatively unimportant politician. Oh, he might have had transitory importance, to the effect that he made a few speeches that people listened to; but he made no lasting impact. That is, there wouldn't be a book about him if he hadn't written a famous book. Yet Brogan spends a huge amount of time on Tocqueville's political career without ever making the case about why I should care.

Things pick up again towards the end, during Tocqueville's long, slow decline. It's an odd thing to say, but the closer Tocqueville came to death, the more human he seemed. While Brogan makes a tremendous effort to incorporate all aspects of Tocqueville's life, he is hampered by the fact that Tocqueville's wife destroyed all their correspondence. Thus, there are gaps in our knowledge of the man. Most of the information we have concerns his political, sociological and literary thoughts. None of these things teach us as much about Tocqueville the man as would a single personal letter to his wife. As he is dying, though, we are privy to the humanity of Tocqueville in a poignant way, from his false recoveries and forlorn hopes to his final reckoning with the Catholic Church. While I struggled with the middle sections of this biography, I was riveted at the end.

Having finished this book, I don't know that I'm inclined to read *Democracy in America* or even give Tocqueville another thought. Yet both *Democracy in America* and Tocqueville will persist. The Frenchman and the Frenchman's book about America will continue to be quoted by Americans until we are finally invaded by the Quebecois to the North. And you know what? That's okay. These are rough times for Americans; these are rough times for the whole world. Unless you're part of the one percent that owns everything, in which case, it's all rainbows and gumdrops and robot butlers and time travel (I assume these are things that wealthy people indulge).

In the midst of war and recession and the NFL lockout, we should look to Tocqueville for some good cheer. To do so, I will quote from a letter Tocqueville wrote to his friend Beaumont, as he was planning *Democracy in America*:

When I got [to Paris], I threw myself upon America in a kind of frenzy... The fit persists still, although through lapse of time it may seem to be ending. I think my work will be the better for it, though not my health, which suffers from the extreme preoccupation of my mind; for I think of hardly anything else, even when handling my cock...

You're welcome, America.

José says

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Marissa Morrison says

I read three chapters of this meticulously researched and richly detailed biography before figuring out that I just didn't have enough interest in the subject to finish the book.

Pejman Yousefzadeh says

<http://www.chequer-board.net/story/20...>

Mei Lin says

Fascinating to read about de Tocqueville's life, and how his experience of the French revolution shaped his insights on the future of Democracy in America.

What emerged for me is that he almost could have written this book without ever visiting America - the ideas were already in his head. What he saw in his visit (to study prisons and learn from them) served as a catalyst to find instantiations in regular human activity, giving him deeper understanding of his insights and allowing him to describe his abstract notions in more concrete terms.
