

wisdom as an Athenian; he ended it as a member of the "city in speech," the pattern or paradigm of which he perceived to be "laid up in the heavens." Where is Havard's paradigm? Would he feel obliged to die for it if necessary? For all the very great strength of this volume, its author left this reviewer wondering whether he has fully addressed this eminently Socratic question. But I should not complain: on the desert the traveler welcomes any oasis when he sees one.

—Reviewed by Dante Germino

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## *Aristocrat of the People*

**Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society**, edited by Roger Boesche; translated by James Toupin and Roger Boesche, *Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. xiv + 417 pp. \$24.95.*

IN 1831 a young French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville journeyed to the United States on the pretext of studying the American penal system.<sup>1</sup> Yet the result of his travels was *Democracy in America*, an extended meditation on American political institutions and mores.

Like many classics, *Democracy in America* has the reputation of being a book that everyone quotes but hardly anyone actually reads. Happily the latter charge is not entirely accurate. This profound and often prophetic work has become required reading for all serious students of the American regime in particular and of free government in general. Nevertheless, it is lamentable that Tocqueville is not more widely known outside academic circles.

As for the former charge, it is quite true that Tocqueville is quoted everywhere and by partisans of every viewpoint across the political spectrum. The first reason for

this is simply that Tocqueville is eminently quotable. His penetrating insight and mastery of epigrammatic prose are captivating, even in translation.

The second reason is that Tocqueville's thought defies simple categorization. He was in many ways a man of contradiction. He was an aristocrat who admired the nobility of democratic ideals. He was a Roman Catholic who praised the salutary effect of religion in a largely Protestant United States. Finally, throughout his life he combined the exuberance of political passion typical of a young man with gravity, discernment, and prudence about political affairs that is rare even among men of advanced years and vast experience.

Nor does he fit neatly into any of the standard political compartments so familiar since the Enlightenment. He is neither of the Left nor of the Right; neither a reactionary nor a revolutionary; neither a liberal nor a conservative. He is rather an acute political thinker and adept statesman who is well-tutored in a political tradition that antedates these superficial dichotomies by two thousand years. Tocqueville insists upon restoring the harmony between individual liberty and the common good that characterized classical political thought, rather than—like so many of his contemporaries—emphasizing one to the detriment of the other.

It is hardly surprising that apologists of one extreme or the other have found passages in Tocqueville's works that, quoted out of context, seem to corroborate their views. In fact, in a letter written only a month after *Democracy in America* was published, we find Tocqueville complaining that most of his readers had missed the point: "I please many people of conflicting opinions, not because they understand me, but because they find in my work, by considering it only from a certain side, arguments favorable to their passion of the moment."

Part of Tocqueville's intellectual temperament is due to his lifelong attachment to what are often referred to today as "the great books"—works by authors both ancient and modern who concentrate on the

perennial questions rather than on the controversial issues of the day. He did not regard these books as tortures to be inflicted on schoolboys, but as friends and companions in the life of the mind:

"I have admitted nothing into this library but what is excellent," he wrote to his cousin in later years. "It is enough to tell you that it is not very voluminous, and above all that the nineteenth century does not occupy a very great place. We take down to read sometimes one book, sometimes another. It is as though we were forcing the man of intellect who has written it to come converse with us."

In another letter, this one to his lifelong companion and friend, Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville reflects upon reading Plutarch for the first time: "I at first read one of his lives rather inattentively, then another less nonchalantly; now I find a singular charm in this reading. . . . [Plutarch] makes people move who had always seemed to me more or less contrived; he makes men of them, only a little higher than nature, and reduced to men, they strike you much more than when you only saw in them immobile colossi and imaginary giants."

To a certain extent, reading the collection of Tocqueville's correspondence under review may have the same effect on his contemporary admirers that reading Plutarch's *Lives* had for him. His letters reveal not the dry, bookish, and coldly analytical scholar one might expect, but a genial and passionate man of affairs immersed in the grand movements and petty details of nineteenth-century French politics. Even the reverential awe, which his intellectual and literary genius can easily induce, is somewhat mitigated by the following description of his early efforts at scholarship:

You would laugh with all of your might [he wrote to Beaumont] if you saw the way I direct my intellectual efforts each morning. I get up and at once sink into the immense easy chair my father was imprudent enough to give me. On one side, I place a chair and on the chair a writing stand. On my knees, I have a notebook, a thick notebook with

paper, and very near a pile of old books. Thus prepared, I lean back into my easy chair and, my eyes half closed, I wait for the spirit of the penitentiary system to appear to me.

As noted above, Tocqueville lamented that his intentions in writing *Democracy in America* were misunderstood. Fortunately, two of the letters in this collection shed considerable light on precisely this point: one to Louis de Kergorlay and another to Eugène Stoffels. In the latter, he explains that his "rigorously exact picture" of American democracy was "intended to produce a double effect on the minds of the men of my time."

He addresses the overzealous and utopian advocates of democratic government who imagine that such a regime can and should be imposed immediately on every nation of the globe, regardless of the customs, mores, or history of its people. At the same time, he addresses those who regard every democratic sentiment as anarchical and destructive of order, property, religion, and civilization. "I wanted to diminish the ardor of the former and . . . to diminish the terrors of the latter . . . so that . . . society could advance more peacefully toward the necessary fulfillment of its destiny."

Over a third of the letters included in this collection are addressed to Beaumont. Another third are divided among two intimate friends, Kergorlay and Stoffels, and three close associates, Paul Clamorgan, Arthur de Gobineau, and Henry Reeve. The remainder, with the exception of one letter to John Stuart Mill and one to the *London Times*, were written to various relatives and acquaintances whose names would be familiar only to scholars of the period.

The most noteworthy exchange of letters appears to have been between Tocqueville and Gobineau. Although a more complete collection of their correspondence was published over twenty-five years ago,<sup>2</sup> the editor provides a representative sampling as well as one letter not included in the earlier volume. Gobineau is

best known for his *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, which generated a school of racialist thought in Germany that culminated a century later in Hitler's theory of Aryan supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, to a certain extent, Tocqueville's amicable and gentlemanly debate with Gobineau foreshadowed the awesome conflict between the Third Reich and the Western democracies in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

"Christianity," wrote Tocqueville in one exchange, "tended to make all men brothers and equals. Your doctrine makes all of them cousins at most, the common father of whom is only in heaven; here below men are only conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves by right of birth. . . . No, I will not believe that this human species, which is at the head of visible creation, should become the debased flock that you tell us it is and that there is nothing more to do than to deliver it without future and without recourse to a small number of shepherds who, after all, are not better animals than we are, and often worse."

It is clear from this letter as well as several others that while Tocqueville may have been distrustful of the political designs of the Catholic clergy,<sup>5</sup> he remained convinced of the fundamental truths of his faith.<sup>6</sup> In a letter to Kergorlay, he reveals his contempt for the "uncertainties of Protestantism" and describes Protestant ministers as "businessmen of religion." Elsewhere he criticizes "the clergy of our time" for promoting private morality at the expense of the public virtues of the citizen. While his criticism is ostensibly non-denominational, it is clearly directed more at *reformed* religion than at the religion which animated the medieval political order. "It was not like this under the Old Regime."

This collection of letters is arranged chronologically and is divided into seven sections, each covering a period of Tocqueville's career. The editor has provided an adequate, even if uninspired, introduction to the correspondence as a whole and prefaces each section with a survey of historical events. There is also an index, as well as two very useful appen-

dices. The first contains a brief biography of each correspondent; the second is a chronology of Tocqueville's life. This volume is certainly a welcome addition to the literature on Tocqueville available in English.

—Reviewed by Kevin G. Long

<sup>1</sup>"The penitentiary system was a pretext. I took it as a passport that would let me enter thoroughly into the United States" (p. 95). <sup>2</sup>*Tocqueville: The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, ed. John Lukacs (Garden City, N. Y., 1959). <sup>3</sup>Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York, 1980), pp. 288-91. "Yet," warns Lukacs, "it is a mistake to regard Gobineau [as simply] a precursor of Hitlerism" (p. 189; see also pp. 14-25; 179-87). <sup>4</sup>"I honor the priest in church, but I will always put him outside of government" (p. 132). <sup>5</sup>See Antoine Redier, *Comme disait M. de Tocqueville* (Paris, 1925). Boesche appears to exaggerate Tocqueville's "hostility to organized religion" (p. 16) and thus dismisses Redier as "tedious and tainted by an urge to claim Tocqueville for the Catholic Church" (p. 3, 2); cf. Lukacs, pp. 25-8, especially: "The world is indebted to . . . M. Antoine Redier for a truly painstaking description of Tocqueville's Catholic Christian death" (p. 28).

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## *Antinomianism and Honor*

**Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners**,  
by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Baton Rouge*:  
*Louisiana State University Press, 1985.*  
xi + 227 pp. \$20.00.

MILLENNIALIST VAGARIES POCK the whole landscape of American history. Not surprisingly in a culture so laden with the Puritan legacy, a form in which these have often found expression has been antinomianism, the exaltation of the private moral vision over custom, tradition, and law. Antinomianism was already a problem in colonial New England, Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson being the seventeenth century's most famous examples. It was not the only kind of American thought and certainly was not a characteristic of the thought of the men