

# A Democrat of the Head

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

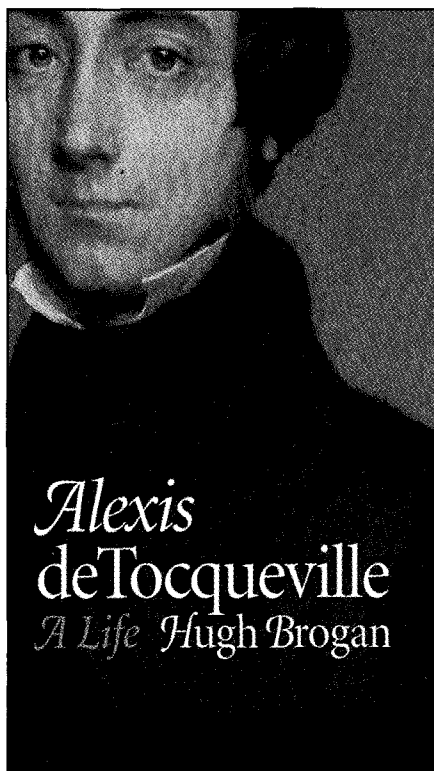
*"A perfect democracy is the most shameless thing in the world."*

—Edmund Burke

Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life  
by Hugh Brogan  
New Haven: Yale University Press;  
724 pp., \$35.00

Hugh Brogan has lived a long time—since the late 50's, when he was reading history at St. John's College, Cambridge—with the subject of this biography. Across the decades, though his affection for Alexis de Tocqueville has not lessened, his skepticism in regard to the man's social and political understanding appears to have increased. Brogan consistently deplores (over 700 pages) what he considers Tocqueville's snobbery, his expressed fears of democracy's susceptibility to tyranny by the majority, his preference for the notables over the commonality of Frenchmen in his day and for constitutional monarchy over socialism, his supposed "obsession with property"—in short, his unwillingness to go for the radical-liberal agenda whole hog, which strikes Hugh Brogan as reactionary. And yet, to my mind, it doesn't matter; Brogan's strictures may be irritating, but they cannot and do not spoil a splendid work, which amounts to a model of the biographer's art. They have at least the virtue of being honest and forthright, where another man, working indirectly by insinuation and innuendo, might have warped the whole project through fake objectivity. Brogan is free to disagree with Tocqueville and be done with it. The same goes even for Brogan's frankly expressed anti-Catholicism, as when he professes amazement that Tocqueville's "shedding of obsolete

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Melanie Anderson

mental baggage," his Faith, should have caused him not relief but deep distress. For the rest, Brogan's portrait of the great Frenchman, and of *La France* in one of the most brilliant (as he rightly says) periods of its history, cannot be bested. Moreover, Hugh Brogan writes marvelously. Tocqueville expressed the belief that a Briton surpassed a representative of any other nationality in his ability to express himself, both in thought and in writing, in his native language. As a British author himself, Hugh Brogan makes no liar of Alexis de Tocqueville.

Had Tocqueville become a social democrat, let alone a socialist, it would have been contrary entirely to his nature and to his upbringing. One might as well expect a lion to grow into a vegetarian, or a Samburu into an Englishman. As it was, Tocqueville—as Brogan concedes—departed from family tradition in his religion (he lost his Catholic faith in his youth and did not receive Communion

again until he was on his deathbed), in his marriage (marrying an English Protestant of middle-class origins), and in his politics (by refusing to hew to legitimist principles). Tocqueville was never a hidebound aristocrat, but an *aristo* he was born, and an *aristo* he remained to the end of his life, both in instinct and in preference. "When I talk to a *gentilhomme*," he once remarked,

though we have not two ideas in common, though all his opinions, wishes, and thoughts are opposed to mine, yet I feel at once that we belong to the same family, that we speak the same language, that we understand one another. I may like a *bourgeois* better, but he is a stranger.

So far from casting discredit on the man, the sentiment actually does Tocqueville credit. Had he felt otherwise, he would have been, like so many of his pro-republican contemporaries, an ideologue rather than a liberal-minded man, a savant of understanding—indeed, of prophetic genius. For Tocqueville, a republican world would be a changed but familiar world replete with familiar things, institutions, people, and relationships—not an unrecognizable and unprecedented utopia created by turning the *Ancien Régime* upside down and inside out.

Tocqueville was descended on both sides from aristocratic families. The Clérèls (later the Tocquevilles) were an old Norman family, ennobled since 1425 or even earlier, whose manor house is situated in the Contentin not many miles east of Cherbourg. Alexis's grandfather Bernard, the second comte de Tocqueville, by dint of a good marriage into the Damas family, was able to make

the house over into a chateau. Hervé, Tocqueville's father, married Louise de Rosanbo, granddaughter of Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon des Malesherbes, a scion of one of the greatest families of the *noblesse de robe* and reform-minded minister under Louis XVI who later offered his services to the monarch as the king's chief counsel during his trial at the hands of the Convention and was eventually himself executed, along with numerous members of his family. Hervé and Louise were imprisoned in Port-Libre for ten months before being released following the execution of Robespierre. Alexis's earliest memory seems to have been of an incident that occurred when he was only three years old, when the Tocquevilles and their near relations—the Rosanbos and Chateaubriands—gathered about the fire to sing a royalist song commemorating the sufferings and death of Louis XVI. According to Brogan, it was not until, as a young man, Tocqueville read Adolphe Thiers' *Histoire de la Révolution* that he began to understand the French Revolution as something more than the work of the Freemasons or the duc d'Orléans. Brogan credits a lecture series delivered by François Guizot in Paris in the months before the July Revolution with drawing Tocqueville's attention to the fact that a process of democratization had been in train for centuries, thus leading him in time to conclude that, in democracy, the inevitable future lay. Early in April the following year, he and his friend Gustave de Beaumont, whom he had met at the start of his legal apprenticeship at the parquet at Versailles, sailed from Le Havre for New York, on leave from their duties to study and produce a report on prison reform in the United States.

It is too much to say that Tocqueville arrived in America prepared, or even predisposed, to admire her democratic system of government. Brogan speculates that he was greatly encouraged in his attitudes—even in his decision to travel to the States—by his uncle, François-René de Chateaubriand, the celebrated author of *Les Natchez* and *Voyage en Amérique* as well as of the more famous *Atala*, who, in his youth, early on in the Revolution, had sailed to North America, where he was able temporarily to evade the contradiction between his liberal politics and his loyalty to the France of his ancestors. Tocqueville, who had taken the oath to support the new monarch, Louis-Philippe (thus renouncing his allegiance

to the Bourbons), may, Brogan quite plausibly suggests, have been following consciously in his relative's footsteps; indeed, he allows that "readers of the *Démocratie* today may well see in Chateaubriand's brief musings [in the *Voyage*] the germ of Tocqueville's masterpiece." However that may be, Tocqueville, by the time he and Beaumont departed New York City, had his theme:

We are travelling towards unlimited democracy. I don't say that this is a good thing. What I see in this country convinces me, on the contrary, that it won't suit France; but we are driven by an irresistible force. No effort made to stop this movement will do more than bring about brief halts.

Tocqueville was always at pains to remind that he was indeed, as the title of his book makes clear, writing a work about American democracy, not democracy as a generalized system of government and society. (Rather surprisingly, he draws few if any comparisons between democracy in America and the democratic and republican states of ancient Greece and Rome.) He was too good an historian, a sociologist, and a political scientist for that. Rather, he learned early in his stay in the United States the enormous importance of her *point de départ*, that is, her formative particularities and circumstances. The formal statement of this understanding occurs in Volume One, Part II, Chapter 9 of *Democracy in America*, entitled "The Main Causes Tending to Maintain a Democratic Republic in the United States." Tocqueville groups these causes in three categories: America's geographical isolation and the size and natural abundance of the North American continent; American laws; and American mores and habits (*mœurs*). In accounting for the success to date of democratic institutions in America, he emphasized in particular the fact of the American people's ethnic homogeneity and that of the colonists' having been the product of a high civilization, "completely civilized" upon their arrival in the New World, with "no need to learn, it being enough that they should not forget." Similarly, the principle of *point de départ* prevented Tocqueville from imagining that democracy, however modified or adapted to a particular nation, would ever spread beyond "Christendom"; for him, the genius of democracy was the product of Western institutions.

Hugh Brogan does not find fault with what he may or may not consider an expression of narrow-mindedness. However, he dissents strongly from Tocqueville's reservations (as expressed especially in Volume II of *Democracy in America*) concerning the future of democratic institutions and society in the United States—and, by extension, every nation to commit its future to the democratic dream, including France, where Tocqueville, after 1848, regarded his native country's progress away from constitutional monarchy, and later republicanism, on its approach toward democratic socialism with an increasingly jaundiced eye.

Tocqueville has much to say in *Democracy in America* about the omnipotence of the majority and, finally, the "tyranny of the majority" in the United States. Brogan charges that he slides from the first to the second, and then treats the latter as if it were an accomplished fact—which Brogan thinks absurd of him. To account for the antidemocratic element in the book, he advances an "hypothesis," explaining that its author had in mind while composing it his legitimist friends, and other readers, who would find such caveats agreeable to their prejudices. "By taking them seriously he could hope that his radical new views would be taken seriously too." But Brogan admits that, after returning from America, Tocqueville himself "relapsed into a sort of legitimism." Moreover, he all too uncritically rejects Tocqueville's less favorable descriptions of Life in These United States in the Age of Jackson. Here, by way of a single example, is Tocqueville on intellectual conformity in America:

[T]he majority has enclosed thought within a formidable fence. A writer is free inside that area, but woe to the man who goes beyond it. Not that he stands in fear of an *auto-da-fé*, but he must face all kinds of unpleasantness and everyday persecution. A career in politics is closed to him, for he has offended the only power that holds the keys. He is denied everything, including renown. Before he goes into print, he believes he has supporters; but he feels he has them no more once he stands revealed to all, for those who condemn him express their own views loudly, while those who think as he does, but without his courage, retreat in-

to silence as if ashamed of having told the truth.

Whether that is an accurate representation of the state of affairs in America in 1831, it is certainly spot-on in respect of the America of 2007; a fact to which Brogan (who has written a biography of John F. Kennedy and obviously admires America for her liberal aspect and traditions) seems oblivious. Possibly, Alexis de Tocqueville was a better prophet than he was a journalistic observer.

A dozen pages on, discussing the Introduction to the *Démocratie* of 1835, Brogan summarizes its argument and discerns its intention:

The Christian world is condemned to democracy, it is God's will; the task must be to secure its benefits rather than to succumb to its evils, and Tocqueville's book is designed to show how. While never in so many words admitting that part of the work of the French Revolution had been to create a new governing class, the notables, to which he himself belonged, he is firm in asserting that the educated classes must seize control of the democrat-

ic movement and direct it according to their superior knowledge and understanding, for otherwise the violent and ignorant lower orders will destroy society.

This is no more than to say that Tocqueville's sympathies were with the Federalists, that he viewed American democracy precisely as the Founding Fathers did, while Brogan's are with the Jacksonian Democrats, who reprobated Federalism. That is too bad for Brogan, whose subject is, in this respect as in many others, a disappointment to him. He concludes:

The Introduction, then, summarizes or implies Tocqueville's political creed as well as his historical vision, and shows clearly what he hoped to achieve by his book. He wanted to launch a new kind of liberalism and help to steer it. He was claiming a place not just among France's authors but in her governing elite. The rest of his life would be the story of how his ambition fared.

That story is, indeed, a mixed one. Elected in 1839 from Valognes (Department of the Manche) to the Chamber

of Deputies, Tocqueville sat there until 1851, while serving also as general counselor of the Manche in 1842 and the president of that department's *conseil général* from 1849 to 1851. In the Revolution of February 1848, he was elected to the Constituent Assembly and, as an advocate of universal suffrage, had a part in drafting the constitution of the Second Republic as a means of bringing the conservative countryside to bear against the Paris revolutionists. Under the Second Republic, he supported the *parti de l'Ordre* against the socialists and workers, and supported General Cavaignac's repression of the June Days revolt. He served briefly as foreign minister in Odilon Barrot's government and departed political life after Louis Napoléon's coup in 1851 as a supporter of the Bourbon Restoration. Brogan argues that Tocqueville would have had greater success as a politician had he been capable of accepting the exigencies of party politics, which he abhorred and refused to countenance. *Souvenirs*, Brogan's favorite among Tocqueville's *oeuvres*, is a notable fruit of its author's political career. For the rest, Brogan is dismayed by the political record. "There have been wickeder revolutionaries than those of 1848," said Tocqueville, "but I do not think that there have ever been any who were stupider." He would have done well to include himself in this condemnation." Brogan charges that Tocqueville expressed no sympathy for the distressed workers in 1848 and condemns his "obsession with private property."

It is perhaps unfair to point out that ever since Bismarck set out to kill socialism with kindness governments have been interfering in just the same ways that Tocqueville dreaded, and many more besides, yet civilization continues.

That, of course, is a debatable assessment, and I have little doubt as to which side of the debate the man who wrote these words (in 1841) would choose today:

I like democratic institutions with my head, but I am aristocratic by instinct, that is to say I despise and fear the mob. I passionately love liberty, legality, respect for rights, but not democracy. . . . Liberty is the first of my passions. There is the truth.

Hugh Brogan is as entitled to his politi-

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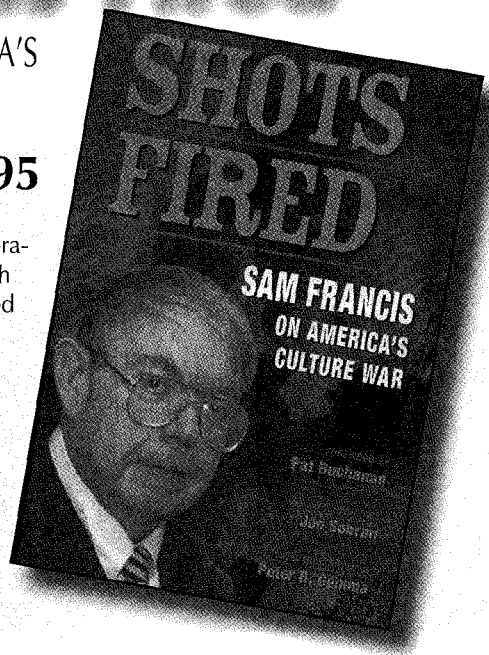
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cal opinions as Tocqueville, but it seems not to have occurred to him that a biography is no place for the biographer overtly to vent his political (or any other) disagreements with his subject, these being entirely irrelevant to the work at hand. It is almost exactly like a novelist stepping outside the narrative voice to take explicit issue with the ideas and attitudes of his protagonist. Why so good a writer as Hugh Brogan should have succumbed to the temptation to commit such an error is difficult to explain. Could he have done so from sheer frustration, the sense either that his understanding of Alexis de Tocqueville does not penetrate quite far enough, or that, at bottom, he does not wish to understand him, and with him his ideas about what is, after all, a very tender subject, no less in this day and age than in Tocqueville's?

Democracy, for Mr. Brogan, appears to be a faith; for Tocqueville, it was simply a phenomenon.


"Liberty is the first of my passions. There is the truth." Brogan protests that, by "liberty," Tocqueville meant the kind of liberty that men such as himself, a French notable, can appreciate and make use of. Yet that is the only sort of liberty worth having; in fact, it is the only kind of liber-

ty worthy of the term. Tocqueville saw, after 1848, the French republic becoming a means rather than an end, as Brogan notes, and he wanted none of it. Brogan complains that Tocqueville never overcame his prejudices as an aristocrat, a man of property, and a cradle Catholic. Every man, of course, has his prejudices, and Tocqueville's were better than those of most others, belonging as they did to a consummately civilized European. But there is more to his wariness toward democracy than prejudice, or so it seems to me.

Tocqueville, as I have noted, believed democracy to be the inevitable future for Christendom (the West), as Lincoln Stephens later thought communism was. Yet he appears also to have suspected that the future was too good to be true—in other words, that such a future would not, and could not, be a lasting one. Like Benjamin Franklin, Tocqueville beheld in America "a republic, if you can keep it," but not in America alone. With classical insight, he understood, more clearly than most observers of his time and since, democracy's self-destructive tendencies stemming from its dual nature. "On the one hand" he wrote,

democracy's project is unrealiz-

able, because it is contrary to nature. On the other, it is impossible to stop short of this democracy and go back to aristocracy. This is because democratic equality also conforms to nature. . . . To affirm and will democracy insofar as it is in conformity with nature, to limit it in so far as it is contrary to it, such is the sovereign art on which depend the prosperity and morality of democracies.

Today, Alexis de Tocqueville can be seen as the prophet of the age of democracy—and also of its successor, the post-democratic age, the signs of which are plain to see around the globe, from Asia to the Near East to Russia to Western Europe to the United States of America, Tocqueville's guarded hope for the future and, until near the end of the 20th century, a City on a Hill and a beacon (however naively perceived) for the entire world. For a time, democracy was indeed the future, but that future is now past. Tocqueville would assuredly have been disappointed, but he would scarcely have been surprised. His latest biographer, by contrast, seems blithely unaware that history has moved on into the era After Tocqueville. 

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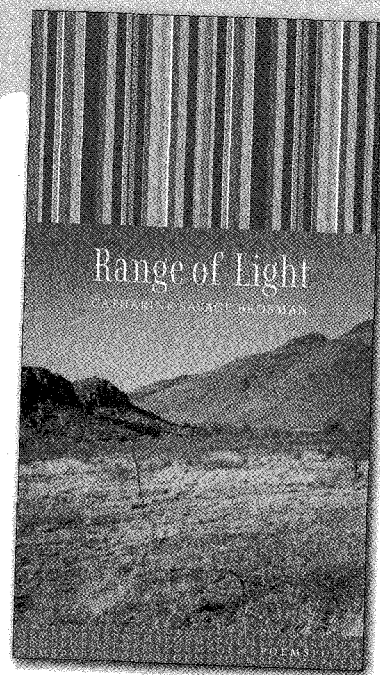
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# An Image of the East

by Daniel Larison

## Sailing From Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World

by Colin Wells

New York: Delacorte Press;  
368 pp., \$14.00

It is a cliché among Byzantinists that too few people in the world, especially in the West, know anything about Byzantium, so there is no doubt that more works of “popular synthesis” that make this Christian successor to the Roman Empire in the East accessible to a broader audience are greatly needed. Colin Wells sets out to provide one with *Sailing From Byzantium*, his overview of the rich legacy of Byzantium to the Latin West and the Islamic and Slavic worlds. Wells has studied with the great Byzantinist Speros Vryonis and has a more or less solid grasp of the sweep of Byzantine history. As a general introduction to the Byzantine inheritance that might inspire the general reader to learn more, Wells’ book is mostly acceptable, but, on a number of important topics, his explanations and descriptions are not always reliable or entirely accurate. Most importantly, on vitally significant religious questions, Wells shows that he is not interested in taking the sages of Byzantium standing in God’s holy light as the “singing-masters” of his soul. This alienation from the Byzantine religious imagination that interwove rational discourse, rhetoric, and spirituality severely undermines some of his statements about the nature of the phenomena he is describing.

Wells has divided the book into three sections, one for each neighboring “civilization” Byzantium influenced: the West, the Islamic world, and the Slavs. He does best when he discusses the intricacies of Byzantine-Latin intellectual connections in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries in the first part, as he traces the personal and scholarly links between such figures as the 14th-century anti-Hesychast Barlaam and Petrarch, or between Manuel Chrysoloras and the numerous Florentine humanists who began learning their Greek from him, or between the reformist friar Savonarola and Maxim the Greek. Those familiar with the general outlines of Renaissance Italy and Western Europe’s

debt to Byzantine exiles for reintroducing the Greek language to the West will appreciate this section, though, admittedly, it is the best-known part of the story of Byzantium’s legacy.

Wells does what he can in the section on the Islamic world, correctly noting the role of Syrian Christian scholars in introducing their Muslim rulers to Greek science and mathematics. He also tells the familiar story of the conflicts between Islam and philosophy. One such conflict occurred in the ninth century, when the Muslim rationalism of the Muta’zila briefly peaked and then suffered obliteration at the hands of the adherents of the far more widespread and common form of Islam, to which the Muta’zila had always been an elite and scholarly exception. However, Wells inaccurately equates the significantly different mysticism of the Muslim theologian Ghazali with that of the later Byzantine theologian and saint Gregory Palamas (d. 1359), quite falsely claiming that Palamas “rejected the idea that reason can say anything meaningful about God at all,” when the core of what is sometimes called Palamism is the belief that rational demonstration in theology is possible precisely because God has revealed Himself to men through His energies. In his overbearing enthusiasm for “humanists” and rationalism, Wells has managed to impute to Gregory Palamas the extreme apophatic view about God that his opponent Barlaam held (*i.e.*, that God is utterly unknowable). When Wells holds up this same Barlaam as an important “rationalist” and an early conduit of Byzantine learning to Italy, it is all the more damaging to his account of the Hesychast controversy (1338-51) discussed below. Barlaam was such a conduit, but that does not give any reason for the simplistic divisions between antirational monks and rationalist “humanists” in Byzantium that Wells makes partly on account of Barlaam’s association with the early Italian humanists.

As this example shows, Wells fumbles most often when he attempts to describe or interpret specifically religious and doctrinal matters that arose over the course of the empire’s history. Elsewhere, he repeats a standard but largely rejected canon that non-Chalcedonians (*i.e.*, monophysites) “often” welcomed the Islamic invaders in the seventh century as “liberators,” when there is no evidence of this and, in fact, important evidence to the contrary. (For example, the seventh-

century Coptic bishop and chronicler John of Nikiu denounced the Chalcedonians for bringing ruin upon the Roman empire that non-Chalcedonians regarded as theirs and viewed the coming of Islam with dismay.) In another place, Wells simply errs in his descriptions of major heresies when he says that Nestorianism emphasized the humanity, and monophysitism, the divinity, of Christ, when the crucial difference among all Christological doctrines of the period was the nature of the relationship between two complete natures. (More cringe-inducing is Wells’ off-hand comparison of Nestorianism and Arianism, when the two have essentially nothing in common and Nestorius himself was vehemently anti-Arian.) Elsewhere, he alludes to the “monochrome, iconless Constantinople” of the iconoclastic period, evidently unaware that iconoclasts were not strictly devoted to aniconism and continued to accept symbolic, animal, and vegetal art in churches. (Figural images—especially of Christ—and the veneration of such images were offensive to the iconoclasts, not church art *per se*. Unfortunately, these are common enough mistakes in such cursory explanations of Byzantine religion, but they are all the more unsatisfactory in a popular work where the intended audience can be expected to know little about the topic.)

Most vexed and troubling is his treatment of Hesychasm in the first and third parts. Built on the ancient monastic spiritual practice of constant prayer, Hesychasm is the cultivation of stillness (*hesychia*), and commonly refers to the mystical theology associated with the spiritual experience and knowledge of the Hesychasts. The word also refers to the doctrines most closely associated with St. Gregory Palamas that concern the distinction between the energies and essence of God and the emphasis on the uncreated nature of God’s light as perceived at the Transfiguration of Christ and in the experiences of the saints. Wells’ treatment of Hesychasm forms a dominant theme throughout the book and constitutes a major part of his explanation of the introduction of Byzantine “humanism” into Italy and Byzantine spirituality into the Slavic world. While Wells does recognize the significance of the phenomenon, his interpretation of Hesychasm itself will leave many Palaeologan-era scholars and Orthodox theologians baffled and frustrated. By way of emphasizing how important Hesychasm was as