

H-France Review Vol. 10 (January 2010), No. 16

Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, eds. *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 560 pp. \$32.99 (US). ISBN 978-0521676830.

Review by Jennifer Pitts, University of Chicago.

This compilation of Tocqueville's correspondence and other writings on America offers a fascinating perspective on both the thinker and the turbulent republic, across the two decades leading up to his death in 1859 and the union's own near-annihilation soon after. The editors' fine translations will make Tocqueville's extensive letters to Americans far more widely known to an American audience that has always repaid Tocqueville's interest in their country with an avid taste for his writings, as long as they are in English.

The book's *raison d'être* is compelling. Although Tocqueville stopped publishing about the United States after the second volume of his critical and public triumph *Democracy in America* appeared in 1840, when he was just thirty five, he continued to follow American affairs closely throughout his life, so that his American correspondence and scattered other treatments might be said to gesture at, in the editors' (forgivably exaggerated) phrase, a "third *Democracy*." His particular interests in that "great republic" varied as circumstances changed. During France's Second Republic, his concern lay primarily in the peculiar institutional features of American democracy, especially bicameralism, judicial review, and indirect election of the president. From France's February revolution in 1848 through his brief arrest after the coup of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte in December 1851, Tocqueville, as an eminent legislator, a member of the constitutional committee, and, for five months, foreign minister, relied on the U.S. example in debates over France's institutional structure and democratic future, and he doggedly called for close alliance with America against British maritime dominance. In the late 1850s, as violence erupted in the territory of Kansas over slavery and Americans spoke pointedly of civil war, Tocqueville's preoccupation with slavery and its degrading moral effects on North and South alike came to the center.

Given that Tocqueville's own letters and other writings are already available in French in the magisterial *Oeuvres Complètes* published by Gallimard since 1951 and now spanning over twenty volumes, this book's greatest contribution to scholarship may be its publication of the dozens of letters written to Tocqueville by his many American friends, most of which have never appeared in print before and are scattered in various archives, some only as early-twentieth-century transcriptions by the Norman schoolteacher Bonnel who copied so much of the Tocqueville archives for Yale's Beinecke Library. These letters provide valuable insight into Tocqueville's knowledge of America and the social and political views of his circle there. The editors' endnotes are informative and reliable, as are appendices giving a chronology and particularly helpful brief biographies of the American correspondents. The volume is an impressive editorial feat that displays both the editors' acute judgment about what to include and their diligence in pursuing the relevant materials and supporting information. The thoughtful introductory essay canvasses the French literature on America before Tocqueville's famous intervention (drawing on an important, untranslated 1962 study by René Rémond), and evaluates Tocqueville's shifting thoughts on America. The editors argue convincingly

that Tocqueville did not reconsider the judgments of *Democracy* and that the subtle shifts in his views about America resulted from new developments in the country's rapidly evolving society and economy.

Tocqueville's grace in the various genres on display in this volume will be a welcome feature for readers who know him primarily through *Democracy in America*. His letters have a fineness of touch and tone that clearly moved his American friends and that continue to make for wonderfully compelling reading (and that come through nicely in this translation). One of his most faithful correspondents, the lawyer and legal theorist Theodore Sedgwick, confessed that although he was a fiercely private man, the kindness of Tocqueville's letters led him to want to discuss his devastation after his wife's death. The letters provide intimations of aspects of Tocqueville's life that are hardly touched on in the standard biographies. Especially striking is Tocqueville's attachment to the Childe family, evident in his correspondence with Edward Vernon Childe and his intelligent and somewhat wayward son Edward Lee, whom Tocqueville urgently counseled to settle into a profession that might occupy and develop his abilities. The letters suggest, as biographies have not, Tocqueville's particular devotion to Edward Vernon's wife Mildred Childe (the younger sister of Robert E. Lee), whose salon in Paris he attended before her quite sudden death in 1856 and with whom his correspondence has been lost or, as it seems, destroyed. The volume offers a rewarding glimpse into a world of transatlantic correspondence, through which friendships were carried on over decades and across generations, and mutual favors delicately requested, amid recurrent frustrations over crossed or lost letters and irritation at censorship by the Second Empire. Tocqueville had invested heavily in a series of railway bonds, and he often and anxiously sought better information from his well-placed friends than was available through the unreliable American newspapers that seemed always to be predicting imminent financial catastrophe. Tocqueville expressed nothing but contempt for French newspapers, though his engrossing correspondence with the political scientist Francis Lieber demonstrates his efforts on behalf of the paper *Le Commerce*, of which he was briefly a sponsor, to engage a sharp-eyed commentator on American affairs.

Tocqueville's American friends were nearly all northern intellectuals, lawyers, diplomats, and public figures. In the 1850s, as America's controversy over the spread of slavery in the Western territories threatened to erupt into civil war, and as riots flared in American cities, Tocqueville and his friends debated the gravity, and the likely causes, of the degradation of America's political life and Americans' increasing propensity for public violence. While Tocqueville worried about the possible ill effects of universal suffrage and mass immigration, some of his American friends insisted instead, and arguably in the spirit of *Democracy in America* itself, that the gravest threats to democracy came from the powerful — Wall Street speculators and above all the Southern plantocracy, whose culture of violence and love of overweening power increasingly infected national public life. Tocqueville, thanks to his keen sense of rivalry with Britain, was often less skeptical about American expansion than his American friends were. They tended to see the depredations of slavery as nefariously bound up with imperial expansion — as in President Buchanan's plottings to seize Cuba — in ways that Tocqueville did not. They could also be far more critical than Tocqueville was of European imperialism. Their sense that habits of domination over both subordinated groups within the polity and colonized peoples were irreconcilable with democratic society posed a challenge to the imperial temptation that Tocqueville felt, ambivalently, throughout his life.

As the editors note, some of the most compelling letters come from a Mr. Beckwith, who came to know the Tocquevilles well during the winter of 1852-53 when he and his family were in Paris, and who wrote long, lively, informed, and sharply critical letters to Tocqueville in 1857-58 on slavery and on European and American commercial and imperial expansion in Asia. Tocqueville, who praised Beckwith's "penetrating and original mind" (p. 294), was keen to hear his observations about China when he and his family traveled there in 1857. Following a paleographical or editing error by the Beinecke Library, one similarly repeated by the French editors of Tocqueville's foreign correspondence (volume VII of the Gallimard *Oeuvres complètes*), the editors of the current volume identify him as N.W.

Beckwith, noting that despite the interest of his letters “surprisingly little” is known about him (p. 461).<sup>[1]</sup> They add that it is not clear whether he had any relationship with Nelson M. Beckwith.<sup>[2]</sup>

But Tocqueville’s correspondent is indeed undoubtedly Nelson Marvin Beckwith (1807-1889), a wealthy New York businessman who lived in France and Germany in the early 1850s, went to Hong Kong in 1857 as a managing partner of Russell and Co., the most important American trading house in China in this period, and, not surprisingly for such a well-connected and articulate man, left a considerable paper trail.<sup>[3]</sup> Beckwith obtained control of Chinese inland waters for American steamers, and when he returned to Paris in 1861, he was apparently instrumental in preventing some Confederate ships from leaving French ports.<sup>[4]</sup> These details enable us to better situate this most engaging and worldly of Tocqueville’s American correspondents, one unusual in being neither an author nor an academic. Tocqueville’s friends included two presidents of Harvard, and a recurrent theme in this correspondence is the desire of his American friends to have their writings presented to the French Academy, to which Tocqueville was elected in 1841.

Apart from the abolitionist Senator Sumner, Tocqueville’s correspondents, though staunch critics of slavery, tended to be Free-Soilers, committed to preventing slavery’s spread to the west, rather than seeking its abolition where it existed. Tocqueville himself held that position, although for prudential rather than constitutional reasons. As he wrote to Sedgwick in 1857, “I am unwilling to admit that any contract whatsoever could include among its terms the annihilation of the right and the duty that the present generation has to prevent the most horrible of all social evils from spreading over millions and millions of people belonging to future generations” (p. 226). Beckwith, a passionate critic of slavery, could, unlike Tocqueville, “never could see any danger in immediate emancipation,” though he favored an apprenticeship period for freed slaves (pp. 270-71). But as a Free-Soiler, he also held that abolition was a “breach of faith” and an inappropriate intervention into the affairs of “*sovereign* states.” He so fervently opposed the extension of slavery because he saw in it the total subversion of democracy in America. The slave owners’ true aim in the struggles over the western territories was not to expand slavery as a social or economic system, he argued, but to entrench their own wildly disproportionate political power. He called the Constitution’s 3/5 provision “the most fatal mistake and the most vicious bargain in the whole American system,” but added, “the bargain was made and we don’t ask to break it; we intend to keep the agreement and beat them besides.” A fervent democrat with the kind of faith in the basic integrity and good sense of popular judgment that Tocqueville sometimes yearned for, and occasionally indulged in, Beckwith wrote of the “voice of the people” that “we never go so right as when that *vulgar* voice is listened to” (p. 202).

The volume’s second half includes Tocqueville’s comparisons between Swiss and American democracy, his valuable if ultimately futile parliamentary interventions championing bicameralism and (the only major piece here that had been previously published in an English translation) his important 1848 speech against the right to work, in which he denounced socialism’s “immoderate appeal to the material passions” and distinguished democratic from socialist egalitarianism. It also includes previously unpublished documents relating to the “Poussin affair,” a diplomatic kerfuffle that took place when Tocqueville was foreign minister and that, he felt, damaged his reputation. While they provide an interesting glimpse into nineteenth-century diplomacy, the Poussin documents do not reveal a great deal about Tocqueville except perhaps his thin skin; this reader would have welcomed, as a window onto the views about Tocqueville of a broader public, the inclusion of a few of the criticisms of him in the American press that appear to have bothered him greatly.

This well conceived and excellently executed edition and translation should prove invaluable, especially for readers accustomed to thinking that the 1840 *Democracy in America* marked the end of Tocqueville’s preoccupation with American democracy: its unique trajectory, its lessons for Europe, its complicity with and vulnerability to the dominations in its midst.

## NOTES

[1] Beckwith's signature is plausibly an M or W in the originals; Bonnel transcribed it as both M and W in various copies. I am grateful to the librarians at Beinecke, who very kindly assisted my research into this question; the Beinecke catalog entry has now been corrected.

[2] About the latter they mention only that he had an "interesting correspondence with John Bigelow" and was described by the New York Public library as an American living in Paris with an interest in railroad reform

[3] Beckwith was a friend and client of Theodore Sedgwick, who introduced him to Tocqueville. During his sojourn in France, Beckwith engineered contact with Louis Napoleon for the 1854 New York Crystal Palace exhibition, of which Sedgwick was president; he later served as Commissioner-General of the American Commission to the Paris Universal Exposition in 1867. See Richard O. Cummings, "The Growth of Technical Coöperation with Governments Abroad, 1849-1853," *The Pacific Historical Review*, 18.2 (1949), 199-212 and John Bigelow, *Retrospections of an Active Life* (New York, 1909), II, 476. Some of Tocqueville's railway shares were in the Michigan Central Railroad, directed by John Murray Forbes, Beckwith's friend and relation by marriage.

[4] *America's Successful Men of Affairs: an Encyclopedia of Contemporaneous Biography*, ed. Henry Hall ([New York]: New York Tribune, 1895-96), reproduced in the American Biographical archive, at <http://db.saur.de/WBIS/basicSearch.jsf> ). Also see James Parton, Bayard Taylor, Amos Kendall [et al.], *Sketches of men of progress* (Cincinnati: Greer, 1870-1871). Also see Robert B. Forbes, *Personal Reminiscences* (Boston, 1882) and *Letters and Recollections of John Murray Forbes* (Boston, 1899).

Jennifer Pitts  
University of Chicago  
jpitts@uchicago.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172