TRAVELS WITH TOCQUEVILLE
BEYOND AMERICA
For my dear friend Aurelian Craiutu,
Without whom this book would not have been written,
And there would have been much less fun.
Contents

1 Embarking  1

2 An American Journey  36

3 Prisons, Slavery, and a Trip to Canada  96

4 England, Ireland, and Switzerland  130

5 Algeria  169

6 Italy  213

7 Sorrento and Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire  241

8 Germany  274

9 America and England Revisited  329

  Conclusion: Cannes  383

Appendix: Reading Tocqueville  411

Notes  415

Acknowledgements  507

Index  511
TRAVELS WITH TOCQUEVILLE
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In a recent work entitled *O My America!* the British travel writer Sara Wheeler refers to Alexis de Tocqueville as the “high priest of European tourists.” For Tocqueville specialists, let alone a broader readership, this would probably not be the first description of him that comes to mind. Yet, Wheeler tells us, when she was writing her book about British women who fled to the United States in the nineteenth century, she “could scarcely get through a day without crossing paths” with the Frenchman.¹

There are many Tocquevilles available to us. The most obvious of these is the nineteenth-century liberal political theorist who has been much admired as a forerunner of later critics of modern totalitarianism.² There is, in the words of Robert Putnam, Tocqueville the “patron saint of American communitarians,” the advocate of the merits of a vibrant “civil society.”³ So, too, there is Tocqueville the sociologist and social scientist, the first analyst of democracy as a social state characterised by an equality of conditions.⁴ To this can be added Tocqueville the historian and Tocqueville the politician and statesman. Less evidently, there is Tocqueville the member of a distinguished aristocratic family (with which he was frequently in disagreement) and Tocqueville the faithful and devoted friend. It was to these friends, as well as to an astonishingly wide range of correspondents, that Tocqueville sent innumerable letters brimming with reflections about politics, philosophy, religion, contemporary affairs, and much else.

However, in line with Sara Wheeler’s remark, this book intends to take Tocqueville seriously as a traveller. It does so for a variety of reasons and with a range of different intentions. As a starting point, it is interested in

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¹ Wheeler, Sara. *O My America!*
² Putnam, Robert. *Made in America: From_scene_ to_society_*.
³ Putnam, Robert. *Made in America: From_scene_ to_society_*.
⁴ Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*.
the question of why people travel and how people travel, recognising that the latter changed very significantly over the course of Tocqueville’s lifetime. In so doing, it sets itself against the contemporary zeitgeist that mistakenly believes that simply to travel is to learn something. Rather, it assumes that, to be a voyage of discovery, travel amounts less to visiting new places than in seeing those places with new eyes. It also recognises that this is not a gift lightly given or possessed by all but that it was a gift granted to Tocqueville.

Nonetheless, this book is not intended merely to be an account of the travels of someone not known previously to have been an assiduous and tireless nineteenth-century traveller. Tocqueville himself wrote as his intended first line to his most famous text, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, that it was not to be read as a travelogue. Rather, in exploring why, where, and how Tocqueville travelled, this volume seeks to show that travel played an integral role in framing and informing his intellectual enquiries. Here, there is an element of scholarly controversy. Critics have argued that Tocqueville frequently did not see beyond what his first impressions were and that these were often based upon scant empirical evidence. All too often, it has been argued, Tocqueville learned nothing from his travels and was more interested in mixing with the social elites of the country he was visiting than in learning about it to any significant degree. More damaging still is the charge that Tocqueville’s writings, like the travel genre in general, are infused with the spirit and gaze of European colonialism. There can be no doubt that Tocqueville was not without his imperfections as a traveller, and to these arguments we will return, but here it is sufficient to assert that the places Tocqueville visited, the people he met, and the detailed observations he arrived at on his journeys were not matters of idle curiosity but the source of new perspectives and new avenues of thought that informed the conclusions he reached about the world he inhabited. Examples abound of how seriously Tocqueville took the activity of travel. Journeys were meticulously prepared and researched. Where possible, the language of the country was learned. Friends were interrogated when they returned from a foreign trip. What was seen and heard on a journey was reflected upon and distilled afterwards at length. Importantly, Tocqueville never shied away from eyewitness, first person testimony in his analysis of the countries he was writing about.
More than this, this book hopes to provide a new perspective on both the man and his work. To that extent, it does not limit itself to recounting Tocqueville's actual travels (as extensive and as varied as these were). Rather, it seeks to explore the development of Tocqueville's ideas through the prism of travel. If, for example, he did not return to America after his only trip there in the early 1830s, he continued to think about the country for the rest of his life. The subject of this book is nothing less than the journey of Tocqueville's mind.

Here we should pause to introduce the central character of our story. Alexis de Tocqueville was born on 29 April 1805 into an aristocratic family from the Cotentin Peninsula in Normandy where Alexis was subsequently to inherit his father's château, a property he was later to describe to his English friend Lord Hatherton as "a small French manor house." Tocqueville's father, Hervé de Tocqueville, had narrowly escaped being guillotined in the French Revolution of 1789. Other members of his family perished in the Jacobin-inspired Terror of 1793–1794. Like many a young man of his privileged social background, Tocqueville was educated privately by a Catholic priest, the pious and devoted Abbé Lesueur. Nonetheless, Tocqueville lost his religious faith in his youth, producing, as he was later to tell his confidante Madame de Swetchine, a "fund of melancholy and discontent" and a "universal doubt" that was never to leave him. "I was seized," he wrote, "with the blackest depression." It also seems possible that Tocqueville fathered a child by one of the maidservants at the Préfecture in Metz where his father was posted as a government official. After some hesitation Tocqueville trained for the law and in 1827 was appointed an unpaid juge-auditeur at the law courts of Versailles, just outside Paris.

The July Revolution of 1830—when, in the space of "three glorious days," the Bourbon monarch Charles X was replaced by the Orleanist Louis-Philippe as king and a new constitutional monarchy came into existence—put Tocqueville in a difficult situation. What was a man of such impeccable legitimist credentials and loyalty to the Bourbon royal family to do? How could he serve under the new regime? Tocqueville’s solution to this dilemma, as improbable as it might seem, was to study the penitentiary
system of the United States. Accordingly, Tocqueville, with his close friend Gustave de Beaumont, set out for America in May 1831, returning the following February.

It was this journey that provided the prelude to Tocqueville’s famous account of the principles and practices of American democracy, published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, the first appearing when Tocqueville was still only twenty-nine years old. To *De la démocratie en Amérique* we will return; at this point it is enough to cite the opinion of one of Tocqueville’s biographers, Hugh Brogan. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, he writes, “is the greatest book ever written on the United States.” Moreover, from the evidence Tocqueville saw before him in America, he became convinced that democracy, with its potential ills, would triumph not just in the United States but beyond. As he wrote to one of his English correspondents, Mrs. Sarah Austin, in November 1835, “I am an adherent of democracy without being blind to its defects and its dangers. . . . I am intimately convinced that nothing will prevent its ultimate triumph, and that it is only by going with the current, and trying to direct it as far as possible towards progress, that the evils may be diminished and the possible good developed.” This was a view from which Tocqueville did not waver for the remainder of his life.

With the first part of *De la démocratie en Amérique* acclaimed a triumph and membership of the illustrious Académie française a distinct possibility, Tocqueville resumed his travels—visiting England and Ireland in the summer of 1835—and soon began what turned out to be the arduous writing of the second volume. When this eventually appeared in print in 1840, by Tocqueville’s own admission it was far from enjoying the popular success of the first volume. Less directly focused on the depiction of democratic institutions in the United States, he had tried, Tocqueville told the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, “to describe the general traits of democratic societies of which no complete model yet exists,” and it was here, he conceded, that he had lost “the ordinary reader.” Posterity has confirmed this judgement.

By the time that the second volume of *De la démocratie en Amérique* appeared in 1840, Tocqueville had not only married his Protestant-born English wife Mary Mottley (much to his family’s disapproval), but he had begun a political career, serving as a parliamentary deputy in what amounted to his family constituency in Normandy. He also came to play a prominent...
role in local politics. In pursuing this course, it is hard not to see a waste of Tocqueville’s considerable talents. Throughout the 1840s he struggled, largely unsuccessfully, to define a coherent political position, rarely impressing due to his poor oratorical skills. His efforts as a journalist (in 1844 Tocqueville briefly became part owner of a newspaper named *Le commerce*) were also something of a failure. It was in these years that Tocqueville developed a strong interest in France’s attempted colonisation of Algeria, a country he visited twice in the 1840s.

The Revolution of 1848 saw Tocqueville thrust into the constitutional debates surrounding the birth of the new Second Republic. For the most part Tocqueville failed to win the argument. Furthermore, in the heated polemics of the day he showed little or no sympathy for the demands of the workers to the right to work and even less for the principles of socialism. In 1849 he served as minister of foreign affairs, during which time there was a marked deterioration of diplomatic relations with the United States. The irony was not lost on Tocqueville.

The Second Republic came to an end with the coup d’état masterminded by the future Napoleon III on 2 December 1851 and the subsequent creation of the Second Empire in the following year. Tocqueville (along with Gustave de Beaumont and many other members of the French Parliament, as well as government ministers and generals) was briefly imprisoned. Having foreseen this political outcome, and in despair at the indignity that had befallen France and its people, Tocqueville retired from political life. “I feel,” he told his brother Édouard, “like a foreigner in my own country.” Prior to this, and in his “solitude,” Tocqueville had set about the writing of a volume of memoirs, focusing upon the period that had led up to these traumatic events. The government of France, he recognised, had become little more than a joint stock company of a small bourgeois oligarchy. Never quite finished, and written not for “public viewing” but as a form of “mental relaxation,” a first (imperfect) edition of his *Souvenirs* was not published until 1893.15

Tocqueville’s second great text—*L’ancien régime et la révolution*—was published in 1856. It was an instant best seller, with separate English and American editions appearing in the year of its publication and a German edition published in 1857. Part historical scholarship and part political tract, its central thesis was that the governmental centralisation that famously
characterised French society was not a product of the French Revolution or of the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte (as had been widely believed) but of the absolutism of the French monarchy in the period prior to 1789. Slow in gestation, this argument never succeeded in convincing everyone, then as now. Nor, it has been said, was it as original as Tocqueville himself believed it to be. Nonetheless, it did provide an important explanation as to why repeated attempts to establish liberty in France had ended in bitter failure and despotism. “We have limited ourselves,” he wrote, “to placing liberty’s head on a servile body.” The planned second volume of L’ancien régime et la révolution was unfinished at the time of Tocqueville’s death.

Reflecting on the sorry outcome of his political career, Tocqueville was led to conclude that “my true value lies above all in works of the mind . . . more in my thoughts than in my deeds.” In this he was surely correct, and what today secures his reputation are his books and his ideas. Tocqueville was only one of many Frenchmen to write about America in the nineteenth century, but his is by far the best and the most read account. Tocqueville did not get everything right, and there was much that he simply turned a blind eye to; but he saw, more clearly than anyone else, that “we are travelling towards unlimited democracy” and that America offered the key to that future. And it is this that takes us to the heart of the significance of Alexis de Tocqueville as both a man and a writer. Through his many fruitless projects and arduous journeys shine the core principles that guided him during his entire life. “Liberty,” he wrote, “is the first of my passions” and so much so that he was inclined to worship it. Moreover, he told his readers, “whoever seeks for anything from freedom but itself is made for slavery.” Those who understood this knew that liberty was “a good so precious and so necessary” that nothing could console them for its loss.

Tocqueville died after a long illness, in Cannes on the French Riviera, on 16 April 1859.

Travelling and writing about travel are not unproblematic activities. Almost from the very beginning of Western civilisation, doubts about the virtues and benefits of travel have been expressed. The Stoic philosopher Seneca could not have been more forthright in its condemnation. “What
good,” he wrote, “has travel ever been able to do anyone? ... It has not
granted us the gift of judgement; it has not put an end to mistaken atti-
tudes.” Indeed, all travel had ever done, in Seneca's opinion, was “distract us
for a little while . . . like children fascinated by something they haven't
come across before.” All this hurrying from place to place, he concluded,
had certainly not made us better or saner human beings. “Take my word for
it,” Seneca wrote, “the trip doesn't exist that can set you beyond the reach of
cravings, fits of temper, or fears.”

These grave misgivings have persisted. “I have been reading books of
thrals all my life,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, “but I have never found two
that gave me the same idea of the same nation.” Those who “travel best,” he
added, “travel least,” and, in Rousseau's opinion, they travelled not by coach
but on foot. Others have agreed. Writing at the end of the eighteenth
century, Xavier de Maistre (brother to the more famous Joseph) resolved
only to journey for forty-two days around his own room, “safe from the rest-
less jealousy of men.” “We will travel slowly,” he wrote, “laughing as we go at
those travellers who have visited Rome and Paris.” Heading north, Maistre
discovered his bed. On this view, one travelled best by moving hardly at all.
In the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill displayed a similarly dismissive
attitude. “In travelling,” he wrote, “men usually see only what they already
had in their own minds.”

Yet, from the Renaissance onwards, travel became an ever more popular
activity. At the outset, it served largely utilitarian purposes. Scientists trav-
elled to collect data on fauna and flora, philosophers to observe people and
their customs. Young, usually aristocratic men (much like Tocqueville) were
sent abroad by their families or by their governments with the express pur-
pose of studying the political institutions and military capacities of their
neighbours and rivals. Only later did travel feature as an integral and indis-
pendable part of the cultural and aesthetic education of the European elite,
reaching its apogee in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the so-
called Grand Tour. Although the itinerary varied over the time, the focus
throughout remained firmly on Italy, with the intention of introducing young
men of wealth to the artistic glories of classical antiquity and the Renaissance.
Many a young traveller also took the opportunity of being abroad to indulge
in gambling, drinking, and sex of various exotic kinds. The continental wars
that followed the French Revolution and the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte effectively put an end to travel to mainland Europe (encouraging the more adventurous to visit the eastern Mediterranean) but, with the return to peace in 1815, something akin to the Grand Tour reappeared and, despite the advent of mass travel, continued to exist in a much truncated form into the twentieth century. Here travel featured as a rite of passage. Without the knowledge and connoisseurship provided by the Grand Tour, an aspiring gentleman felt a sense of cultural inferiority. The young Alexis de Tocqueville was to make this journey when he visited Italy in 1826.

Yet the Grand Tour was not without its rivals. Not everyone embraced the ideals of “noble simplicity and calm grandeur” espoused by Johann Winkelmann in his Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Art of 1755. Indeed, that same decade Edmund Burke set out the principles of an entirely different aesthetic in his Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful. This newly emerging Romantic sensibility took several forms. One was an attraction to things dark and terrifying, to the unconscious and supernatural that came to be associated with Gothic literature and art more generally. Ruins featured prominently, as did storms and tempests. Another was an interest in what became known as the pittoresque, or picturesque. This, too, took a variety of guises—in art, literature, music, architecture, gardens, and the like—but the central idea was to draw inspiration not from high art but from nature. This in turn gave rise to the phenomenon of pittoresque travel. Here, instead of heading towards Italy and the warm south, the traveller was much more likely to head north to the English Lake District or the Scottish Highlands in search of wild, natural beauty, all preferably enhanced by a reading of the medieval romances of Walter Scott and a dose of melancholia at the passing of time. One such traveller was Tocqueville’s elder brother, Édouard. Armed with the obligatory sketchbook, he set off for England, Scotland, and Ireland in 1824. A decade later, Alexis was to follow in his footsteps.

Over time, travel became not only more accessible but also less costly and less hazardous (especially with the introduction of rail travel from the 1840s onwards). The first of the famous Baedeker guides was published in 1835 (star ratings for sights and accommodation were introduced in 1846) whilst the first Murray guide, A Handbook for Travellers on the Continent, appeared in 1836.
The French equivalent, the *Guides jaunes* (later better known as the *Guides bleus*) began publication in 1841. All were essential reading for a new travelling public eager to know, as Murray put it, what “ought to be seen.”

The words *tourist* and *tourism* had entered our vocabulary by the early nineteenth century, with the novelist Stendhal publishing his two-volume *Mémoires d’un touriste* in 1838. To that extent, there is little new about today’s guidebooks, with their tips on hotels and practical hints on how to get there and what to eat, except perhaps that they are now more numerous and less well informed than Stendhal’s descriptions of the wonders of Florence and southern France. Even by this early date, there was awareness that the new tourism would destroy the beauty—and, no less importantly, the social exclusiveness—of the places and locations being visited. The German poet and literary critic Heinrich Heine was not alone in voicing the complaint that one could not visit Italy without seeing English tourists “swarming everywhere.” Tocqueville noted something similar when, writing to his close friend Francisque de Corcelle from Germany in 1854, he remarked, “Where can one not meet the English?” It goes without saying that, despite some notable exceptions, travel remained an activity largely denied to women, especially if they travelled alone.

But what is it that impels people to travel? Why, as Bruce Chatwin muses, do people wander rather than stand still? In the nineteenth century, as remains the case today, the motives were often prosaic in the extreme: the delights of a warmer climate, living cheaply, escaping disastrous marriages or sexual scandal, or simply having nothing much else better to do. Similarly, then as now, travel sometimes took the form of an attempted step back into a simpler and seemingly more authentic past, a journey infused with the sentiment of melancholic belatedness and nostalgia for what the world was once like. Wandering into the primeval forests of North America was a case in point. More seriously, travel has been and continues to be enforced as a fleeing into exile or a means of escaping persecution. In other cases, the traveller engages in the hazardous (and often fruitless) activity of self-discovery, an attempt to reveal the secrets of a soul that is often not there. In its less spiritual form, the traveller looks for something missing, for the unfamiliar, for distance and distraction from the monotonies or relentless challenges of everyday life. The poet Charles Baudelaire, following Blaise
Pascal, spoke of the restlessness associated with “the horror of home.” Tocqueville’s contemporary, the writer Gustave Flaubert, was a case in point. He left France for the Orient largely out of boredom and contempt for the grey provincial surroundings in Rouen, the place of his birth in northern France. The chaos and colour (not to mention the brothels and other erotic entertainments) of Cairo were more to his sensualist tastes. Here travel served as the pursuit of happiness and as an expression, however misguided, of freedom.

For others, travel has taken the form of political pilgrimage and an opportunity to embrace a foreign cause. Often driven by a heady mixture of self-hatred and ideological fanaticism, the spirit of radiant optimism and naive faith (not to mention personal suffering) with which these resolute voyagers make their pilgrim’s progress towards a promised land is not easily extinguished. What they see and describe is often a utopia of their own imaginings.

Such naive and dangerous idealism flourished in the nineteenth century. Socialists such as Charles Fourier and Étienne Cabet, doubting the possibility of radical reform at home, were only too eager to send their followers to the unpopulated and virgin territories of the American West in the hope of establishing model communities based on their principles. In America, Cabet wrote, “there would be the most beautiful roads, the most perfect towns and villages, the most magnificent workshops, perfection in housing, furniture, clothing, food, hygiene, and education, in a word, in everything!” The reality of disease and internal dissent—as well as the authoritarian tendencies of their leaders—ensured that hardly any of these communities lasted more than a few years. The contradiction between real life and idealism has continued to be a feature of such communities to this day, the traveller’s pursuit of brotherly and sisterly love frequently descending into violence, persecution, and schism.

Conversely, as Joseph Conrad’s famous novella Heart of Darkness recounts, travel can be a journey into such darkness, to a place of fear and profound disquiet. To quote Baudelaire again, he spoke of a “taste for the abyss.” For Conrad, writing “at the sea-reach of the Thames,” the location of this unsettling vision was a journey up the Congo River in search of Mr. Kurtz, but in the nineteenth century it was often Russia that attracted adventurers.
and outcasts, those drawn to its vast emptiness and thrilled by the idea of living on and beyond the edge of civilisation. To travel there was to move from the known world to its borders, to leave Europe behind for a vast and mysterious continent where nature and brutality held sway. The Spain of the so-called black legend attracted similar negative stereotypical descriptions. “Artists wishing to portray violent passions,” Paul Preston has written recently, “drew upon a view of Spain, its history and its people as the embodiment of fanaticism, cruelty and uncontrolled passion.” The imagined savagery of both its landscape and inhabitants proved an irresistible attraction to French and British travellers alike.44

America has for long been the subject of such dystopian forms of travel. This is how Frances Trollope described her first sighting of the United States in 1827: “I never beheld a scene so utterly desolate as [the] entrance to the Mississippi. Had Dante seen it, he might have drawn images of another Bolgia from its horrors.” For the unfortunate Mrs. Trollope things scarcely got better during the remainder of her stay.45 All too often, descriptions of America were reduced to a catalogue of bestial eating habits and boorish behaviour. Writing in the early 1840s, the English novelist Charles Dickens described the nation’s capital as “the headquarters of tobacco-tinctured saliva.” As for the “political machinery” he saw in Washington, DC, these, he assured his English readers, were “the worst tools ever wrought: despicable trickery at elections; under-handed tampering with public officers, cowardly attacks upon opponents, with scurrilous newspapers for shields, and hired pens for daggers.”46

A similarly critical appraisal of America can be found in the writings of Tocqueville’s near contemporary, Victor Jacquemont.47 Having returned to France disillusioned after his visit to America in 1826–1827, Jacquemont gave clear expression to these pessimistic sentiments. In America, he wrote, it was impossible for any political leader to rise above the level of the masses. No country was so lacking in originality and no population less colourful. Everyone came from the same mould, in much the same way as “houses are all built exactly to the same plan.” Americans, Jacquemont continued, were humourless. Relations between the sexes were characterised by “coldness” and a lack of intimacy. Parents treated their children without tenderness and manners were “stiff, flat and vulgar.” In addition, Americans had no taste for
art or poetry, and no appreciation of what was beautiful—only a sense of material pleasures and the pursuit of wealth. They might buy copies of the works of Lord Byron and Walter Scott, Jacquemont wrote, but they never read them. As for New York, from a literary and scientific point of view, it was more “wretched” than the small French provincial towns of Pointoise or Melun.

The horrors of America have been a staple of French and British literature ever since. So, if Tocqueville was one of the first to observe the tendency towards conformism in American society, it has been a commonplace to compare a superior French civilisation to the wasteland of American mass culture and consumerism. “In the United States,” Georges Duhamel was later to write, “what strikes the European traveller is the progressive approximation of human life to what we know of the way of life of insects—the same effacement of the individual, the same progressive reduction and unification of social types, the same organization of the group into special castes.”48 Disliking a place that one has had the misfortune to visit is therefore nothing new.

Moreover, travel is all too frequently not a cause of discovery and excitement, let alone of astonished arrival, but a source of suffering and tedium. We know that behind the smiling faces captured on today’s holiday photos and selfies lie cancelled flights, dodgy hotel plumbing, predatory locals, indescribable food, and diseases one previously did not know existed. Replace the reference to airports and flights with stagecoaches and paddle boats, and one has a pretty accurate picture of the hardships and inconveniences experienced by travellers during their time in America in the early years of the new republic, and indeed of travel most everywhere at the time. Of her experience aboard a steamboat, the indomitable Mrs. Trollope wrote, “I would infinitely prefer sharing the apartment of a party of well-conditioned pigs to being confined to its cabin.”49 In Tocqueville’s case, the steamboat he and Beaumont were travelling on down the Ohio River hit a reef in the middle of the night and sank.

But all travellers, be they explorers or simple visitors, face the problems of trying to understand a culture and a country that is not their own and, in whatever accounts that may follow, of representing other people.50 Some fail miserably; others succeed brilliantly. Those that succeed usually possess a generosity of spirit and a degree of empathy for what they see before them.
They see more than what is outside the window and do so through some-thing akin to a transparent lens. For such travellers, travel shows us other-ness and expands our knowledge of the variety and diversity of the world.51 By contrast, those that fail often do so because they judge a place by its dis-similarities with their own country and by its failure to meet their own stan-dards. Writing after his return from America in 1793, Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville commented that “the greater part of Frenchmen who travel and emigrate have little information and are not prepared in the art of observa-tion. Presumptuous to a fault, and admirers of their own customs and man-ners, they ridicule those of other nations.” Many nineteenth-century European visitors to America could not see beyond the dreadful food, grimy hotels, and uncouth manners. The spittoon figured prominently in their accounts.

In a similar vein, many of those who have either chosen or been paid to recount their travels have had no intention of producing anything more than a list of interesting locations to visit, no matter how little or long they stayed in a place. Some writers, out of laziness or fear, or a mixture of both, simply describe places they have never visited or cared to visit, secure in the knowl-edge that their inattentive readers will never catch them out. Here travel writing, far from being a work of nonfiction, becomes entangled with fabri-cation and invention.

This was as true in the nineteenth century as it is in our own age of the fake travel blog and the faux spontaneity of Instagram. Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley spoke rather disarmingly of her account of her visit to America as an instance of “the gossip of travel,” of appeal only to those for whom “gossip is welcome.” The American critic John Graham Brooks, writing in 1908, remarked that he could think of at least twenty books by French visitors to America from which “one could remove the various and picturesque titles, replacing them by ‘A Whole Afternoon in the United States.’” Too many of these writers, he continued, “begin to write on the steamer coming out; take their first impressions as a finality, giving them literary form so rapidly that the book is on the Boulevards soon after their return.” Both the novelist Stendhal and the jurist Édouard Laboulaye wrote with great authority and insight about America without ever going there.55
Others of a loftier disposition have turned their journeys into art. Mixing fact with fiction, literature with autobiography, such writers fashion largely imaginary journeys which, for all their factual inaccuracies, are on occasion hugely influential. One notorious case of the latter is the work of Tocqueville’s cousin, François-René de Chateaubriand. For almost a century, doubt has been cast upon the account presented by Chateaubriand in his *Voyage en Amérique*, but in his day, his largely invented descriptions of an American wilderness “as old as the world” and of the native peoples who inhabited it were largely accepted as being true. Tocqueville arrived in America with Chateaubriand’s account of America at the forefront of his mind. Nonetheless, such infelicities help us to understand why the celebrated anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss could begin his account of his time in Brazil, *Tristes tropiques*, with the memorable phrase, “I hate travelling and explorers.” The suspicion that writing about one’s travels has been the work of self-indulgent fantasists has not been easy to dispel.

Another all-too-frequent characteristic of the travel genre has been and remains reliant upon a set of concepts and categories that are taken to be self-evident and self-explanatory. Beginning in the eighteenth century, it was widely assumed that nations possessed a national genius or character. References abound to Mediterranean joyousness, Latin clarity, German spirituality, and English pragmatism. If one understood the national character, one understood the country and its people. Such forms of argument are easily found in the writings of both the Baron de Montesquieu and Rousseau, but a work such as Astolphe de Custine’s *La Russie en 1839* provided a portrayal of the gloomy and violent Russian character that was as influential and enduring among Europeans as were the stereotypical images of the amorous and morally dubious Italian. Madame de Staël did much the same with her widely read *De l’Allemagne*, first published in 1813. Not until the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 brought home the truth of German militarism could any educated French man or woman conceive of Germany and its people as anything other than a temple to literature and philosophy.

In the case of the American nation, and despite considerable ignorance of American realities, among French observers its character was quickly established and was taken to include patriotism, optimism, energy, versatility, excessive hospitality, and, of course, a love of hard work and making money. As
Achille Murat observed in his *Esquisse morale et politique des États-Unis de l’Amérique du Nord*, first published in 1832, most travellers to America returned to Europe convinced that Americans were “very polite and very adroit and that the government continues to exist because everyone, being busy with their own affairs, leaves it alone.” Tocqueville was to be one of these travellers.

In contrast to the British, who tended to see Americans as unsophisticated Englishmen living abroad, the French were always immediately struck by the stark differences between the French and American national characters. There seemed to be little in common between the sophisticated and elegant habitué of the Parisian salon and the brash self-made millionaire from Pittsburgh. French sociability and American coarseness seemed the marks of opposing civilisations. This explains why many French writers identified so readily with the culture of a leisured aristocracy then existing in the southern states. The fear of an Americanisation of French society set in early—certainly by the 1850s—but this did not stop the French, like their British counterparts, taking American money when it was offered.

All of this begged the question of which part or segment of a society provided the most authentic insight into a nation’s identity: was it the rich, the poor, the city dweller, the peasant? One recurring theme in the debate about national character was that it was often most clearly disclosed through the behaviour and place of women in society. If, as was largely agreed, the essential clue to a nation’s character lay in its moeurs, or mores, then women were deemed to be one of the principal instruments through which these were forged. How women played out their social and familial roles and how, in particular, they educated the young was a measure of how good a nation’s character was and how that nation’s future might be shaped. Again, Montesquieu and Rousseau figured prominently in these discussions—especially with regard to what they saw as the propensity of women to enjoy and value luxury—but later French visitors to America were quick to perceive the very distinctive qualities and special role of women in American society. Once more, Tocqueville (as well as his travelling companion, Beaumont) was among the many French travellers who saw that there was something very distinctive about the family structure in America and the place occupied by women within it. They also saw that relations between the sexes were of a decidedly different and less amorous nature than those they had observed at home.
In addition to references to a—often partly hidden—national character or genius, it was also believed that a country could be understood by reference to its physical shape and its climate. The title alone of the comte de Volney’s *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis*, first published in 1803, is enough to illustrate the point. As Volney explained, his “method” told him that one began with geography and climate before moving on, in order, to size and distribution of population, varieties of work and occupation, the mores “resulting from these occupations,” and finally the combination of these practices with the ideas and preconceptions derived from a society’s origins. It was in no way unusual, therefore, for Tocqueville to begin the first volume of *De la démocratie en Amérique* with a chapter looking at America’s “exterior configuration.” America’s vast continent, it was widely agreed, was an expression of its destiny.

The same applied to climate. Temperature and humidity were thought to shape character from one climate to another. Captain Marryat, in his *Diary of America*, wrote that “the excitement so general throughout the Union and forming so remarkable a feature of the American character, is occasioned much more by climate than by any other cause.” Climate explained the difference between the “hot-blooded Southerner” and the “cold-calculating Yankee,” and why the farmer from the Eastern Seaboard became “indolent, reckless and often intemperate” when he moved to the warmer temperatures of the South and West. It also explained why Americans were so prone to “the use of tobacco and of spirituous liquors.” “Their climate,” Marryat concluded, “I unhesitatingly pronounce to be bad, being injurious to them in two important points, of healthy vigour in the body, and healthy action of the mind; enervating the one and tending to demoralize the other.” Again, Tocqueville was not immune from this tendency. Having seen firsthand both the “calm, moral, pious” French of Canada and the “restless, dissolute, lax” French of Louisiana, Tocqueville informed Ernest de Chabrol that “should you encounter anyone alleging that climate has no effect on the constitution of a people, assure them they are wrong.”

But few imagined that climate was all-determining. “Many things govern men,” Montesquieu wrote in *The Spirit of the Laws*, “climate, religion, laws, the maxims of government, examples of past things, mores, and manners.” And what the dominant factor was would change over time and from place
to place. Of note here was that, from the eighteenth century onwards, French authors increasingly came to emphasise that it was political institutions that played a decisive role in shaping a people. “No people,” Rousseau wrote in his *Confessions*, “would ever be anything other than what its Government made of it.”64 If Tocqueville did not entirely agree, when he looked at America he certainly saw that the nature of the country’s political institutions played an important part in shaping the lives of its people.

Yet foreign countries and places exist as ideas and symbols. If the unfortunate Ottoman Empire figured in the European imagination for centuries as a land of despotism and misery, China could not escape its portrayal as a backward, stagnant nation. In the case of America, it came to symbolise many things and arguably has done so since the time of the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus.65 For Europeans, America has often existed as a kind of dream, as a tabula rasa, a providential promised land, a primitive and pre-lapsarian garden of Eden, where a new chapter of our history could be acted out and written.66 For many, America could not exist simply as America. It was taken as a given—and not only by Americans imbued with a spirit of manifest destiny—that the future course of American civilisation would have a bearing upon the rest of the world. America was the authentic form of modernity. That it is now argued by some that America would have been better had Columbus never set sail across the Atlantic Ocean and that what marks America as exceptional is not the nature of its democracy but the institution of slavery does not diminish what was the historic power of these ideas.

Tocqueville was only one among many who shared these preconceptions. Concluding his very first chapter of *De la démocratie en Amérique*, he wrote that America “is where civilized men had to try to build society on new foundations. Applying, for the first time, theories until then unknown or considered inapplicable, civilized men were going to present a spectacle for which past history had not prepared the world.”67 In a very real sense, America was as much invented as it was discovered.

Where does Alexis de Tocqueville fit into this picture of travel?68 Was he just another young aristocrat journeying overseas with nothing much better to do? Or was he, like many a traveller both before and since, someone who...
felt the pressing need to be elsewhere? Did he see travel to exotic locations as an opportunity for personal reinvention? Was he in search of an idealised vision of the future?

The first thing to point out is that Tocqueville spent a considerable amount of his time travelling within the borders of France. This was due largely, but not exclusively, to the fact that his family home was situated at the northern extremity of the Cotentin Peninsula in Normandy. Getting to Paris from there was no easy matter, and for the greater part of his life this was a journey undertaken largely by stagecoach, an experience that was never anything less than uncomfortable and exhausting. In July 1841 Tocqueville wrote to his father in a mood of considerable triumph to report that he had completed the journey in only twenty-four hours. All too often these journeys were dogged by logistical difficulties involving extensive delays. Another route was to travel from the nearby port of Cherbourg by ship to Le Havre and then boat down the River Seine to Paris. This might explain why one of Tocqueville’s later obsessions was his campaign to secure the completion of the Paris-to-Cherbourg railway. A journey to Marseilles—made by Tocqueville on several occasions—would commence with a carriage or diligence from Paris and conclude with a boat journey down the River Rhône by boat, all subject to possible delay due to bad weather or a flooding river. Even travelling around Tocqueville’s parliamentary constituency, usually done on horseback, was fraught with difficulties—especially in the winter, when what passed for roads were swamped by mud and rain.

Moreover, as numerous nineteenth-century testimonies recounted, for many inhabitants of Paris to travel beyond the Île-de-France often felt like visiting an unknown and unhospitable foreign country. This can be illustrated by citing the opening sentence of Eugen Weber’s classic text *Peasants into Frenchmen*. It is a quotation from Honoré de Balzac’s novel, *Les paysans*, written in 1844: “You don’t need to go to America to see savages. . . . Here are the Redskins of Fenimore Cooper.” No doubt Balzac’s tale of brutal, thieving, and vindictive peasants in Burgundy contained an element of literary exaggeration—his friend, the novelist George Sand, certainly thought so—but it captured something of the view that large sections of France’s vast rural population were relatively untouched by the values of modern civilisa-
Index

Abd El Kadar, 175, 176, 180, 190, 200
About, Edmond, *Le roi des montagnes*, 398
Académie française, 4, 20, 184, 253, 308
Achilli, Giacinto, 356
Adams, John Quincy, 80
Affair of the Spanish Marriages (1846), 355
Aix-en-Provence, 389
Alabama, 45
Albany, New York, 38, 42, 44, 77, 79, 98, 105; Ampère visits, 337
Albert, Prince Consort of England, 366, 385
Algeria, 5, 26, 27, 28, 29; comparison with India, 380; French invasion of (1830), 169–170; French military involvement in, 176; Jules Dufaure’s parliamentary report on (1846), 196–197; parliamentary reports on (1847), 204–208; Tocqueville’s first impressions of, 177–180; Tocqueville’s first writings on, 171–173; Tocqueville’s initial conclusions on, 174–175; Tocqueville’s view of French colonisation in, 185–187
Algiers, 29, 177, 178, 181, 186, 190, 197, 198, 199, 202, 205, 209, 212, 217, 219
Allegheny Mountains, 45
Alphonse, Jean-Baptiste-Simon-Arsène d’, 182
Amalfi, Italy, 227
America, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10; comparisons with Algeria, 179–180, 186, 195, 208; comparisons with England, 134, 136–138, 141, 147; comparisons with France, 329–332; comparisons with Ireland, 155, 157, 160; comparisons with Russia, 265–266; comparisons with Switzerland, 166–167; dispute over Oregon Territories, 354–355; expansion south into Mexico and Texas, 334; and French constitutional debates of 1848, 214, 238, 334, 489n20; and immigration from Germany, 304–305, 342; prisons in, 111, 113–115; threats to its future, 333–334, 339–340, 345; travel in and travelers to, 11–15, 38–39
Ancelot, Virginie, 138
Andral, Gabriel, 386, 388
Arago, Emmanuel, 279
Argyle, Duke and Duchess of, 366
Arles, France, 198
Armin, Armgard von, 295, 325
Arndt, Ernst, 289
Atanassow, Eva, 212
Athenaeum, Pall Mall, London, 25, 139, 361, 366
Auburn Penitentiary, New York, 111
Aumale, duc d’, 189–190, 231
Austin, Mrs. Sarah, 4; *Germany from 1670 to 1814, or Sketches of German Life from the Decay of the Empire to the Expulsion of the French*, 297
Austria, 34, 176, 275, 277, 279, 286, 311, 328, 353, 356, 394
Avignon, 177
Baden, Switzerland, 164
Baedeker guides, 8
Baltimore, Maryland, 45, 99, 102, 112, 122
Balzac, Honoré de, 18
Bancroft, George, 334
Barrot, Odilon, 262, 283, 308, 486n145
Barruel, Augustin, 287–288
Battle of Macta (1835), 175
Baudelaire, Charles, 9–10
Beaufossé, France, 27
Beaumont, Clémentine de, 156, 189, 190, 395–399
Beaumont, Gustave de, 4, 5, 12, 15, 20, 23, 31, 33, 37, 39, 40, 79, 89, 92, 94, 134, 204, 216, 223, 261, 283, 300–301, 338, 384; at Guizot’s lectures, 96; calls Tocqueville back to Paris from Germany, 282–283; in Canada, 106–111; in Cannes, 394–399; on the Committee for the Constitution, 238–239; contribution to the Liberty Bell, 491n54; correspondence with his family, 97, 99, 100, 101, 102–103, 104, 105, 111, 114, 247, 395–399; crossing the Atlantic, 39–40, 99–100; *De la démocratie en Amérique*, 119, 157, 159, 160, 161, 162; difference in character from Tocqueville, 97–99; disagreement with Tocqueville, 96, 191–192; edits Tocqueville’s writings, 400–403; elected to the Académie des sciences morales et politiques, 113; family background, 96; finds a house for the Tocquevilles in the Loire Valley, 260; first visit to Algeria (1841), 169, 176, 180–183; French ambassador to London, 355; friendship with Tocqueville, 96–97, 183, 191, 22; imprisoned, 118, 244–245; intellectual and political collaboration with Tocqueville, 111–112, 119–120, 126, 156–157, 183–185, 190, 214, 216, 290; journey to America, 100–106, 111, 113–116, 121–122; journey to England and Ireland (1835), 138–146, 147–153; learning German, 290; legislative elections of 1837 and 1839, 118, 126, 169; and *Le siècle*, 118, 187–189, 192; marriage, 156; meeting with Tocqueville on the Champs-Elysée, 284; in Nice, 189–190; questions about Germany, 300–301; in Scotland, 153; second visit to Algeria (1843–1844), 190–191; second visit to Ireland