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Book Review

Teaching American History

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### **History Teacher's Review of Leo Damrosch's *Tocqueville's Discovery of America***

There were several factors that determined that this was the book for me, none of which I discovered until I left our class last meeting in July. I was about to fly to Europe for the remainder of the summer and had to choose a book to review before my flight (I had booked the trip before registering for this TAH course). Although I had some titles that had been recommended by our visiting scholars most of these would only be available online and would have to wait for another time. I had one title in mind (Sugar) that was along the same line as some the recommended titles and I had hoped would be like Mark Kurlansky's *Salt* but as I perused it's pages in Borders it didn't seem to be what I was looking for. I did find two books that might satisfy me and the assignment: Eric Jay Doolin's *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* and *Tocqueville's Discovery of America* by Leo Damrosch. Doolin's book interested me because it is compiled in that Kurlansky style of a history through a product, and I feel that the fur trade gets short shrift compared to cotton in US History.

The course and population that I teach were also crucial factors in determining which book I chose. My district has a large immigrant population and as a result we offer many sections of history for English Language Learners.

Because my students come from many different countries they have little or no background in US history and my curriculum spans from pre-Columbian America to pre-Civil War. We spend quite a bit of time on the fur trade when talking about French colonization of the Americas. Well it seems that Doolin's book would do the trick, but fate had other ideas.

In this new age of social media, I put out and all call to my history major/teacher friends to get suggestions. I had one suggestion for a fiction book based on the Tocqueville/Beaumont voyage to America () which happened to be reviewed alongside Damrosch's book in the NYT. Another friend forwarded me the aforementioned article because she knew I was on my way to France and therefore "Tocqueville is the only choice." Which of these books would be the most useful in my class? Well I was hoping that Damrosch's book would give me some examples of an outsider's view of America that my students might be able to identify with.

In a recent interview with CSPAN, Leo Damrosch describes Tocqueville's Democracy in America as 800 pages that "some of us have forgotten to finish." (Guilty.) In writing this book, Damrosch hoped to bring the Jacksonian America that Tocqueville visited to life and to bring Tocqueville himself to life so that we can see first hand how the renowned treatise about American Democracy came to be. Evident in this book is how the unique confluence of Tocqueville's perspective as a young French aristocrat at the end of aristocracy, his gregarious companion Gustave Beaumont's ability to put Americans at ease, combined with his acute listening skills and relative objectivity enabled him to synthesize his masterpiece.

Damrosch begins the book by giving a brief history of Tocqueville's life before the American trip, growing up in politically tumultuous post revolutionary France (born in 1805) as an aristocrat. He describes Tocqueville's intellectual interests, passions, religious struggles, and relationships with his good friend Gustave Beaumont with whom he will share this voyage and his future wife Mary Mottley (an English woman whom his family will never accept). Given the political instability of the time the two friends devise a plan to stay out of the fray on the government's dime so to speak (and a few of his father's). Their task wasn't to unlock the secrets of Democracy but to examine the American Penitentiary System. This was a system that involved the novel idea that prisoners could repent through isolation and work, and eventually be made productive members of society again. Most European prisons were massive holding tanks where all levels of criminals were mixed. Many of their observations are included in this book.

The majority of the book then details their tour of America with a chapter for 9 of the major cities or regions they visited. The last two chapters are devoted to the writing of *Democracy in America* and his life after writing it.

In creating his painting of Jacksonian America through Tocqueville's journey, Damrosch uses several different brushes and a multifaceted pallet. His book is populated with castaways. He is translating into English for the first time many of Tocqueville's observations about America that have been cast aside by scholars in the past as frivolous "storytelling". This is exactly the story that Damrosch wants to tell. In addition, to Tocqueville he attempts to add depth and perspective to the

painting with Beaumont's anecdotes and the observations of other contemporary European visitors such as Frances Trollope, Charles Dickens, and Harriet Martineau. Of course many of the aforementioned notes were observations by Americans about Americans. Tocqueville spoke at length to Bostonian Jared Sparks and the famous John Quincy Adams and Sam Houston. His painting is multifaceted however, with stories from not so famous or educated Americans that Tocqueville met along the way.

I believe that this book would be a great book for any college bound US History student. It could be an excellent book for summer reading or in treating the Jacksonian Era. The book is accessible, doesn't assume that the reader already knows the history, and is relatively short. As I was reading the book I was disappointed that it was going to be too short. As I finished the book I found that, yes, I wanted more but I would only get what I was looking for in other books. This book is meant to pique the reader's interest to read more. It might be to read Tocqueville's *Democracy* or to learn more about the treacherous nature of steam travel. Damrosch make it clear however that Beaumont's book (a novel dealing with slavery) is not worth reading—thanks Leo because I would have tried had you not warned me.

Given the language level of my students, I unfortunately can't use this book in either of the aforementioned ways in my classroom. I do think that small excerpts can be used to illuminate America of 1830. I was particularly intrigued by the passages about steamboat travel (pp.43-45 & 129) and various passages about

Native Americans. Damrosch lists various observations about the disappearance of Native Americans as a race in North America. He also describes Tocqueville's comparison of Native lifestyle vs. civilized and that maybe the former is to be envied but no longer has a place on this continent. Another possibility would be to map the tour of America possibly using google maps in my new state of the art classroom (if they ever get the smart board working). This mapping exercise could be combined with short excerpts where the student has to match the excerpt with the region. There are also many nice illustrations from the book that could be incorporated in this exercise.

I have attached a list of links to websites on Tocqueville's Democracy in America. Articles related to Damrosch's book, including the CSPAN interview (book is way more exciting than the interview) and the New York Time Book Review. I hope they can be of use to you in your classrooms.

## De Tocqueville Links

CSPAN revisited De Tocqueville's tour of America in the late 90's and created this website. Tons of great resources.

<http://www.tocqueville.org/>

### Review:

[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2010/05/17/100517crbo\\_books\\_wood](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2010/05/17/100517crbo_books_wood)

### Lessons:

<http://www.teachushistory.org/detocqueville-visit-united-states/lesson-plans>

<http://www.crf-usa.org/election-central/de-tocqueville-america.html>

[http://edsitement.neh.gov/monthly\\_feature.asp?id=164](http://edsitement.neh.gov/monthly_feature.asp?id=164)

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2008/election/wvote/detocqueville.html>

### Random Articles:

CSPAN Interview with the author:

<http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/294006-1&buy>

<http://harvardmagazine.com/2010/03/open-book-man-in-motion>

"Tocqueville Surfs" <http://www.city-journal.org/2009/eon0522pp.html>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cynthia-p-schneider/america-in-alexandria-de-b-638367.html>

<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/tenzer5/English>

## *Works Cited*

- Damrosch, Leo. *Tocqueville's Discovery of America*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010. Print.
- Lamb, Brian. "Q & A with Leo Damrosch." *CSPAN*. 10 Jun. 2010 Web. 12 Sep. 2010.
- Wood, James. "Tocqueville in America: The grand journey, retraced and reimagined." *The New Yorker*. 17 May 2010. Web. 12 Sept. 2010.