Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the greatest political thinkers of all time. Born a French aristocrat, he lost nearly his entire family in the Reign of Terror, and he spent most of his adult life struggling for liberty under the unsuccessful regimes of nineteenth-century France.

At age twenty-five he travelled to America and encountered democracy for the first time. This firsthand experience contributed to his incisive writing on liberty and democracy. The ancien régime launched the scholarly study of the French Revolution, and Democracy in America remains the best book ever written by a European about the United States. This is a brilliant account of his life. (20081001)

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My Personal Review:
He seems the unlikeliest person to write an incisive study of American democracy: a rather spoiled son of a French aristocrat of the ancien regime, and one who suffered from a sense of futility in his own life. But the amazing truth is the Alexis de Tocqueville was exactly the best qualified man to do exactly that. Scholarly, intelligent, a precise writer, de Tocqueville was the one to write an immortal study of American life that would become in time a classic. Best of all, he wrote his work not in his study, but after an intense journey through America itself in the early 1830s.

Hugh Brogan's biography is an excellent study of this young author, and probably the very best modern biography. He uses de Tocquevilles' letters and other contemporary writings to illuminate the life and thought of the young aristocrat. And aristocrat he was, his father having stoutly stood by the French crown through its many vicissitudes (and nearly executed by
the Jacobins for this). Young Alexis himself clung to the aristocracy until the turbulent days of the July Monarchy, when the Bourbons were unseated by the Orleanists. After this, the young writer lost much of his loyalty to the crown.

Brogan's book is well written, and covers the political scene in France during de Tocqueville's time quite thoroughly. It is simply a book not to be missed about the world of this very talented young man, who proved to be so influential in studies about America and democracy in general.

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