



*A Fortnight  
in the  
Wilderness*



*Alexis de Tocqueville*

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## Introduction

On April 2, 1831, Alexis Charles Henri Clérel de Tocqueville, a Parisian nobleman, embarked from Le Havre, France, with his friend Gustave de Beaumont, bound for America. Officially, the two French magistrates were coming to study the country's penal system. But Tocqueville had a deeper motive. He was coming to witness democracy in America.

"In America I saw more than America," he later wrote. "I sought there an image of democracy itself, of its penchants, its character, its prejudices, its passions. . . ." He spent only nine months in America but journeyed far, meticulously recording all that he observed.

Four years later, Tocqueville published his *Democracy in America*, the first work to examine the democratic experiment in the New World. *A Fortnight in the Wilderness* came from this trip, although it was published after the author's death. Like *Democracy*, it shows Tocqueville's remarkable ability to grasp the nature of America and Americans.

Tocqueville and Beaumont arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, in early May, went immediately to New York City, and then set off on a 360-mile journey through New York State, going to Albany,

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Syracuse and Canandaigua, and then to Buffalo. But Tocqueville was intent on traveling farther into the country's interior to see "the still empty cradle of a great nation."

In 1831, Michigan was still a territory (it would not assume statehood for another six years), and the region just beyond Saginaw was considered the start of the American wilderness. On July 19, Tocqueville and Beaumont boarded a steamboat in Buffalo, bound for a French frontier town three hundred miles west called Detroit. From there they journeyed by horseback to Pontiac, then to the trading post called Saginaw, and finally, into the wilderness.

Throughout his time in America, Tocqueville kept a diary, often in the form of pocket notebooks. *A Fortnight in the Wilderness* is from this diary, a record of Tocqueville's physical and intellectual journey through frontier America. Its original title is *Quinze Jours dans le Désert*, there being no word in French for wilderness.

In vivid, graceful prose, Tocqueville recounts his experiences. He marvels both at the American Indians, two of whom serve as guides for part of the journey, and at the settlers' log houses, where china teapots sit on tables so roughly hewn, the leaves are still attached. He and Beaumont come upon a bear put into service as watchdog, suffer the ubiquitous mosquitoes, and finally reach what Tocqueville calls a forest primeval.

For the reader, *A Fortnight in the Wilderness* is a brief but memorable view of Tocqueville's genius for seeing America's institutions, its people and its future. In penetrating the American

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wilderness, Tocqueville probed deep into the psyche of a young and ambitious nation. He possessed a near-prophetic understanding of what democracy would mean to America—and just as important, what America would mean for democracy. “We were woken from our reverie by a gun-shot that suddenly echoed through the woods,” Tocqueville wrote. “It might have been the long, fearsome war cry of civilisation on the march.” Tocqueville went to the wilderness sensing that soon, it would no longer be there. And yet, how wondrous the interlude:

[A]t five o'clock in the morning we crossed the Saginaw again; our hosts said good-bye to us and gave us their last words of advice. Then, turning our horses' heads, we found ourselves alone in the forest. I must admit that it was not without apprehension that we began to penetrate its humid depths. This same forest that surrounded us then stretched behind us to the Pole and to the Pacific Ocean. Only one inhabited point separated us from the endless wilds and we were going to leave that.

July 29, 1831, marked the end of the visitors' passage through the American wilderness. It was also Alexis de Tocqueville's birthday. He was twenty-six years old.

## Afterword

After their wilderness days, Tocqueville and Beaumont continued their journey. They traveled north to Quebec, south to Louisiana and up to Washington, D.C., where they met briefly with President Andrew Jackson. (The two met a number of illustrious Americans in the course of their trip, including John Quincy Adams, the former president, and Charles Carroll, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence.) On February 20, 1832, they set sail from New York for France.

Tocqueville published the first part of *Democracy in America* in 1835 and the second part in 1840. He briefly considered *A Fortnight in the Wilderness* as an appendix. But Beaumont feared it might compete with his own novel about America that had drawn from the same experience. Out of deference to his dear friend, Tocqueville did not include it.

Tocqueville suffered from poor health much of his life. He died from tuberculosis on April 16, 1859, at the age of fifty-three. The following year, Gustave de Beaumont published a work by Alexis de Tocqueville. It was *A Fortnight in the Wilderness*.