TRAVELS WITH TOCQUEVILLE:
A FRENCH PERSPECTIVE OF 19TH-CENTURY QUEBEC

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was a French aristocrat of great distinction in literary, historical, and sociological circles, both in his own time and in our day. One reason for his renown is that his ability to write the French language is of the highest order. He is most well-known for his works *De la démocratie en Amérique* and *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. During 1831, Tocqueville traveled through Quebec with a companion, Gustave de Beaumont. His memoirs of their voyage provide a French perspective of his philosophical, political, and socio-cultural perceptions of Quebec, when it had been almost three-quarters of a century under British rule. You will find a short biography of Tocqueville, a description of his travel itinerary and activities in America, a brief history of 19th-century France and Quebec, a selection of Tocqueville's writings from his travel journal, and an intermediate/advanced lesson plan based on those writings.

BIOGRAPHY OF TOCQUEVILLE

Alexis de Tocqueville was born in Paris July 29, 1805, to a royalist aristocratic family. Typical of aristocratic families, Tocqueville's education was provided by a tutor, Abbé Lesueur. When he was 16, Tocqueville studied philosophy at the Collège Royal in Metz and then began his law studies in Paris at age 18. In 1827, Tocqueville began work at the court at Versailles as an apprentice magistrate but also continued on a path of alienation from his family because of his liberal political thinking. When Louis-Philippe came to power in 1830, Tocqueville was in jeopardy. It was at this time that he and Beaumont received permission to travel to America to study its penal system. During their trip, they also spent 10 days in Quebec.

Parts one and two of *De la démocratie en Amérique* were published in 1835 and 1840. In 1835, Tocqueville married Mary Motley, an Englishwoman of low social status with whom he had no children. He was active in politics over the next two decades and frequently encountered disapproval from the prevailing regimes. In the 1850s, Tocqueville wrote and published *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. On April 16, 1859, Tocqueville died of tuberculosis in Cannes.

(This biography is quoted and adapted from [www.gradesaver.com/author/alexis-tocqueville/]). For further information, a detailed timeline of Tocqueville's life can be found at the following Web site: [http://alexisdetocqueville.com/weblog/2010/02/01/alexis-de-tocqueville-timeline/].

TOCQUEVILLE IN AMERICA AND QUEBEC

As Tocqueville traveled westward across the southern edge of the Great Lakes, he kept a personal diary of his experiences in America which, after it had been revised, he entitled “Fifteen Days in the Desert.” Tocqueville's first commentaries regarding the Amerindians were written as he observed a large group gathered in Buffalo to receive money in payment for the lands that they had ceded to the U.S. government. He states that their race is doomed to inevitable destruction. Later, on the other hand, when Tocqueville and Beaumont arrive in Detroit, he remarks that the Amerindians are at least beginning to become “civilized” and that in order to get the truth out of them, they must be maneuvered. Afterwards, the two travelers rent horses in Buffalo and head off for the wilderness. They come across an authentic log house, guarded by two semi-savage dogs, and speak with the pioneer who lived there. Upon entering the abode, Tocqueville describes in detail the rustic living conditions that he observed. The author's commentary on the man who lived there emphasizes his individualism and solitude but also his strength and self-assured perseverance. According to Tocqueville, the pioneer was hospitable, reasonable, and adventuresome, but worried. His wife and children were weakened from the difficult life that they were living, trying to subsist from the land. When Tocqueville and Beaumont arrive at Pontiac, they meet the proprietor of a local inn who considers the two travelers to be very odd and not at all suited to the pioneer life. When they tell him that they want to buy some land, he informs them that in France labor is cheap and land is expensive, but in America just the opposite is true. Land can be purchased for next to nothing, but the price of manual labor is exorbitant. The proprietor then explains all the steps necessary for a pioneer to settle a homestead.

The next day Tocqueville and Beaumont arrive at another settlement where they meet Mr. Williams. From this man's mouth, for the first time, Tocqueville hears a positive comment about the Amerindians. Afterwards, as they travel on toward their destination of Flint River in the company of an Amerindian who was mysteriously following them, they reach the hut of another European. This man prefers Amerindian company to that of the White Man. Riding on, they arrive at the log house of another pioneer where they spend the night. Their host provides them with two Amerindians to guide them to Flint River. The guides are expert woodsmen without whom the two Frenchmen would not have survived. One of the Amerindians is a bois-brûlé, that is, the son of a Canadian and Amerindian couple, and he speaks French fluently.

Finally, they arrive in Saginaw, the farthest European outpost in the Michigan territory, which is a small community of about thirty people. Tocqueville marvels that the Europeans had completely adopted the customs, apparel, and lifestyle of the wilderness in order to survive there. In addition, he criticizes the deceitful manner in which the Europeans treat the Amerindians, scorn and cheating them during bartering. Tocqueville comments that the Eternal Being made all men everywhere the same but that men have divided themselves into different religious groups which despise each other. However, for Tocqueville, the Amerindian is more tolerant than the others, living a simple life off the land, despite the European's prejudice that he is a pagan. Tocqueville is stunned by the splendor of the raw, natural beauty of the
virgin forest, as he also would be when he saw Niagara Falls. He was quickly brought back to reality by his Amerindian guide. The Métis was mincing his steps through the fields to avoid stepping on rattlesnakes; the two Frenchmen appreciate his prudence and follow suit.

After their brief stay in Saginaw, Tocqueville and Beaumont then travel eastward through Quebec on the northern side of the Great Lakes. Tocqueville depicts Quebec as a new society in the process of formation that was composed of the ruling British, the conquered French colonists, the displaced Amerindians, and, of course, the Métis. On a steamboat that stops at Detroit, Mackinac, and travels across Lake Huron, Tocqueville begins jotting down ideas in a stream of consciousness style. Frequently, the recurring theme of the fading away of native cultures emerges. This theme reappears later in a conversation with a Canadian.

According to the Canadian, the Amerindians much prefer the French over the English. However, the native culture was disappearing. The French were trying to maintain their national identity, in spite of being forced to live under British domination.

In Montreal, Tocqueville records a conversation with a Sulpician Father and two lawyers. They paint a rosy picture of the benefits of living under English rule such as liberty of the press and freedom to practice the Catholic religion. The lawyers indicate that the clergy in Canada is not in league with the government as in France, and they often advocate on behalf of the common people who respect and love them. Tocqueville becomes aware, however, that even though the Francophone population outnumber the Anglophone population at a ratio of nine to one in Lower Canada, the latter controls the economy and the language of the country. He senses trouble brewing in the future and expresses the hope that the French Canadians would be freed from British rule someday. During another conversation, Tocqueville records his observation of evident scorn and disdain toward the French on the part of a British merchant.

While in Quebec City, Tocqueville observes that the population appears happy, strong, and healthy, and the Canadian women do not appear delicate and sickly as did those in the U.S. Furthermore, he perceives an undercurrent of French solidarity but realizes that there is no sufficient strong leadership at the moment for such a movement. Editor Claude Corbo postulates that while he was in Canada, Tocqueville and Beau-mont did not meet Louis Joseph Papineau, and probably did not know of his critical role in the political circumstances of the day (178).

Tocqueville’s conversation with John Neilson, a Scotsman who emigrated to Canada and became the editor of the Quebec Gazette, painted a vivid portrait of life in Quebec. He described the nature of the Quebec farmer as well as the workings of the seigneurial system in place at that time. Tocqueville stated that the Canadians were inferior to the Americans in matters of the head (the latter were better educated), but the Canadians were superior in matters of the heart. Nevertheless, Tocqueville’s main point was that English domination of the North American continent was a permanent feature of American demography. On the other hand, there were some Anglophones, like Neilson himself, who were linked with the Francophones in opposition to the British.

The above summary of Tocqueville’s travels through the northern U.S. and Quebec, as well as the various texts used in the lesson plan are taken from: Tocqueville, Alexis de. Regards sur le Bas-Canada: Choix de textes et présentation de Claude Corbo. Montréal: TYPO, 2003.

Following is a brief summary of the major 19th-century political events in France and in Quebec during the 19th century.

19th-CENTURY FRANCE

- National Convention (1792–1795)
- Directory (1795–1799)
- Consulate (1799–1804)–Napoleon I’s coup d’état (1799)
- First Empire (1804–1814)–Napoleon I
- Restoration (1814–1830)–Napoleon’s 100 days, Louis XVIII (1824), Charles X (1830)
- July Revolution (1830)–Les Trois Glorieuses
- July Monarchy (1830–1848)–Louis-Philippe, the citizen-king
- 1848 Revolution–Second Republic (1848–1852)
- Second Empire (1852–1870)–Louis Napoleon III
- Paris Commune (1871)
- Third Republic (1870–1940)

19th-CENTURY QUEBEC

- British conquest (1756–1760), End of the Sovereign Council
- British rule (1760–1867)
- Royal Proclamation (1763–1774)–New France becomes the Province of Quebec, established Le Test, oath of allegiance to the British monarch and Protestantism
- Quebec Act (1774)–Restored French law for civil matters, guaranteed free practice of Catholicism by eliminating allegiance to Protestantism in Le Test
- American Revolutionary War
- Constitutional Act (1791–1840)–Divided Quebec into Upper Canada and Lower Canada
- Armed Rebellion (1837–1838)
- Martial law and Special Council (1838–1840)–Durham Report of 1839
- Union Act (1841–1866)–Upper and Lower Canada are now Province of Canada
- Federal Dominion (1867–1930)–Province of Canada, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia join to form the Dominion of Canada. Canada East becomes the Province of Quebec.

LESSON PLAN

OBJECTIVES:
1. Students will recognize the passé simple. Addresses communication standard.
2. Students will become acquainted with Alexis de Tocqueville, an important historical figure, and often called the “Father of Modern Sociology.” Addresses culture standard.
3. Students will be able to explain multiple perspectives of historical French and Quebec cultures. Addresses comparisons standard.

METHOD: (Note: This lesson plan contains two Literary texts, three Interview texts, and three Observation texts. These texts appear on the AATF Web site at [www.frenchteachers.org/bulletin/activities/toqueville.htm]. You may wish to prepare vocabulary lists as aids for each text.)

1. Prepare an explanatory hand-out on how to form the passé simple. (An excellent presentation of this grammar principle can be found at [French.about.com] or any other grammar book.)
2. Activate students’ background knowledge by asking them if they know Tocqueville. Present Tocqueville biography and historical/cultural circumstances in France/Quebec in 1831.
3. Divide students into pairs. Give each student a copy of the passé simple grammar hand-out. Explain the formation of passé simple.
4. Pass out copies of both Tocqueville Literary Texts. Have students work together in partners to transform the passé simple verbs into passé composé. Ask each pair to give examples of their transformations to the class.
5. Read Literary Texts in class. Have students work in pairs to explain
what is funny or interesting about Tocqueville’s description of the 
maringouins. Have students point out the 
beauty in Tocqueville’s account of his 
canoe ride near Saginaw.

6. Next, divide students into three 
groups. Pass out Tocqueville Interview 
Texts to students—all members of a 
group receive the same Interview Text. 
Assign students to read Tocqueville 
texts in class and to answer the associ-
ated questions.

7. Have students of one group report to 
their classmates the content of their 
text.

8. Pass out the Tocqueville Observation 
Texts, matching the numbers with the groups. (For example, give 
Observation Text #1 to the students 
who received Interview Text #1, etc.). 
You may assign Observation Texts as 
homework or have students read texts 
together in class. They should be pre-
pared to tell at least three important 
observations that Tocqueville makes 
in their texts about important compo-
nents of Canadian society.

9. Ask students to explain the content of 
their text to the other groups. En-
courage discussion of broad themes 
such as relationships between French 
Canadians and English Canadians, the 
status of the economy or education, 
differences of religion, racial relations 
with the Amerindians and the Métis, 
etc. Ask students if they agree or 
disagree with Tocqueville.

10. Assign an essay in which students pick 
a character from the texts (or create 
an imaginary character) and write a 
first person narrative. Students should 
explain how their character perceives 
the state of affairs in Canada, i.e., what 
s/he likes and dislikes, and how s/he 
perceives his/her place in Canadian 
society.

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