

Letters From An American Farmer

by J. Hector
St. John De Crevecoeur

1782

“What then is the American, this new man?...He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He has become an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of man, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims.” (from "Letter III," 1782)



Written from the point of view of an ordinary man, Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* is the first text to ask and answer the question "What is an American?" Although Crèvecoeur was describing life in the British colonies in America, he used his character, James, to portray the new consciousness of emerging American society.

Born in Normandy, he went to England, and then left England to begin a new life in French-held Canada in 1755. He worked as a surveyor and cartographer during the French and Indian War. In 1759, Crèvecoeur disembarked in New York harbor from a British vessel carrying the defeated French troops back to France and began afresh in the British colonies, where he worked as a surveyor and trader and traveled extensively.

In 1765, he became a naturalized citizen of New York. Four years later, he married and began to farm. The outbreak of the American Revolution and the desire to see his children's inheritance secured were the likely reasons that Crèvecoeur decided, in 1778, to return to France. The long and dangerous trip was complicated by the war. After being imprisoned as a spy by the British, he was allowed to leave the colonies in 1780. He sold the manuscript of *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1781 to a London publisher and proceeded to France. Crèvecoeur returned to America in 1783 as French consul to New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. He found his wife dead, his farm burned, and his children resettled in Boston. In America, Crèvecoeur continued his scientific studies and worked closely with Thomas Jefferson to unite French and American interests. In 1790, Crèvecoeur left America for the last time.

The twelve letters of *Letters from an American Farmer* are held together by the movement of the fictional narrator of the text, James, the American farmer, from happiness to despair as he records his life as a farmer and his travels to Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and Charlestown. **In the opening letters, James celebrates America as a place where the oppressed masses of Europe are able to pursue their own self-interest as independent landowners. In the later letters, he deals with problems already causing divisions within the new society—slavery, and the Revolution.** *Letters* is a form of epistolary, philosophical travel narrative that integrates important Enlightenment ideas into descriptions of ordinary American life.

Democracy in America

by Alexis
De Tocqueville

1835



“I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or hope from its progress.”

In 1831 an ambitious and unusually perceptive twenty-five-year-old French aristocrat visited the United States. Alexis de Tocqueville’s official purpose was to study the American penal system, but his real interest was America herself. He spent nine months criss-crossing the young country, traveling mostly by steamboat, but also sometimes on horseback and by foot. He visited the bustling Eastern cities, explored the wilderness on the northwestern frontier, and had several adventures on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. He even stayed in a log cabin. Throughout, he spoke to Americans of every rank and profession, including two presidents and Charles Carroll, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. Tocqueville’s sojourn in America did lead to the writing of a book on the American penal system, but its much more important result was the reflection on equality and freedom known as *Democracy in America*. This great book remains arguably one of the two most important books on America political life, the *Federalist Papers* being the other one.

“AMONG the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence that this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society; it gives a peculiar direction to public opinion and a peculiar tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities and peculiar habits to the governed.”

“I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less effect on civil society than on the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.”

“The electors see their representative not only as a legislator for the state but also as the natural protector of local interests in the legislature; indeed, they almost seem to think that he has a power of attorney to represent each constituent, and they trust him to be as eager in their private interests as in those of the country.”

“In towns it is impossible to prevent men from assembling, getting excited together and forming sudden passionate resolves. Towns are like great meeting houses with all the inhabitants as members. In them the people wield immense influence over their magistrates and often carry their desires into execution without intermediaries.”

"If there ever are great revolutions there, they will be caused by the presence of the blacks upon American soil. That is to say, it will not be the equality of social conditions but rather their inequality which may give rise thereto."