Who Was Madame Marie de Tocqueville?
By Sheila Le Sueur

Even in the 21st century it is not uncommon for the spouse of a famous person to be ignored by biographers and academicians unless that person is pedigreed by birth or has chalked up their own accolades. In the 19th century before women’s suffrage and the women’s liberation movement, such dismissiveness, especially of females, was the norm.

Mary Mottley, the wife of famous French writer and social commentator, Alexis de Tocqueville¹ was no exception. Not only was Mme. de Tocqueville a member of the bourgeoisie and thus ostracized by her husband’s aristocratic family and peers, but also she was perceived by Tocqueville’s [male] biographers as a rather ordinary and not particularly accomplished individual.

For both of these reasons, Mme. de Tocqueville seems to have vanished from the copious biographical annals depicting Tocqueville’s professional and personal life. One finds only a few backhand remarks as if only to acknowledge the fact that the great man had a wife.

George Wilson Pierson² describes Mary Mottley as an English woman of no fortune who was older than her husband, taller than him and—heaven forbid—a Protestant!³ In his essay, Come Disait Monsieur de Tocqueville, Antoine Redier⁴ mentioned only that Mme.

¹ Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville (29 July 1805, Paris – 16 April 1859, Cannes) was a French political thinker and historian best known for his Democracy in America (appearing in two volumes: 1835 and 1840) and The Old Regime and the Revolution (1856). In both of these works, he explored the effects of the rising equality of social conditions on the individual and the state in western societies. Democracy in America (1835), his major work, published after his travels in the United States, is today considered an early work of sociology and political science.

² George Wilson Pierson (22 October 1904 -12 October 1993) was the first official historian of Yale University. He is the author of Tocqueville and Beaumont in America (1938) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Wilson_Pierson.

³ Mary Mottley did convert to Catholicism before her marriage to de Tocqueville.

⁴ In 1925 a Frenchman, Antoine Redier, wrote a biographical study of Tocqueville entitled Comme Disait M. de Tocqueville. [Paris: Perrin, 1925].
de Tocqueville had large yellow teeth. French biographer, André Jardin\(^5\) cited her as a woman without a fortune and one with whom Tocqueville had been having an affair for several years. Good writers learn how to craft their innuendos. In that sentence Jardin made his elitist point that that a “commoner” even if married to an aristocrat could never be considered more than that sire's prostitute or mistress.

Prodigious research proves however, that Mary Mottley was a woman of exceptional intelligence, wisdom and wit. Apparently she was also a woman who was able to skillfully transcend the petty nuances of both 19\(^{th}\) French high society to serve for twenty-four years as the perfect helpmate for her brilliant husband until his death in 1859.

**Mary Mottley’s Family [1737-1924]**

The Mottleys and their spouses were born and raised in the Portsmouth area of the English county of Hampshire, where the family is still remembered and respected. According to Portsmouth archives, they appear to have been a close-knit, hard-working civic-minded clan. Several of the sons rose in the ranks of the Royal Navy where Portsmouth had a base, and they also contributed to the burgeoning of this bustling port city. By virtue of its location and growth, Portsmouth benefitted from the Industrial Revolution and it also had access to the bounty from captured vessels during the Napoleonic wars.

Mary Mottley’s grandfather, James C. Mottley, Sr. (1737-1805), was a bookseller and printer whose wholly owned home and business were located in the High street in Portsmouth. He and his wife, the former Hannah Earle, were parents of eight children: Hannah, Mary, James, Samuel, George, Sophia, Elizabeth, and Thomas. James, Sr.’s company published pamphlets and sermons, which at that time was apparently a prosperous

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\(^5\) André Jardin (1912 – 1996) was a French biographer and historian, best known for his studies of Alexis de Tocqueville and 19th century French history. His 1984 biography of Tocqueville, *Alexis de Tocqueville: 1805-1859*—translated into English as *Tocqueville: A Biography in 1988*, by Lydia Davis and Robert Hemenway—was acclaimed as the definitive account of the life and career of the author of *Democracy in America*.  

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business. Since there was never a shortage of reading material for the Mottleys, one imagines a well educated family living in a comfortable home well stocked with books.

Evidence of James, Sr.’s community interests can be found in the *History of Portsmouth*[^6^], a book printed by his firm that contained information about the city’s origin, progressive improvements and the current state of its public buildings. Mention of Mottley activities also appeared the *Portsmouth Telegraph* in 1802, a daily paper founded in 1799[^7^] by James Motley, Jr., the eldest Mottley son. Like many Mottley accomplishments, the paper was the first of its kind.

James Mottley, Sr. died in 1805 at age 68. His obituary, recorded in the *Portsmouth Telegraph*, stated:

> This evening at six o’clock, died, after an illness of two months, which he bore with the most Christian fortitude, Mr. Mottley, sen. In the 68th of his age. he will be long lamented by his afflicted family.

James, Jr. took over his father’s business, running both the newspaper as well as the publishing and printing business. A highly successful entrepreneur as well as a community activist, James was involved in real estate and other business dealings with his brother-in-law, Thomas Belam. It is said that he brought culture to the middle class in Portsmouth. In 1800 he published “A General Treatise on Music,” based on Mr. M.P. King’s work. Soon James, Jr. was also selling sheet music of Massinghi and Reeve, *The Comic Opera Of Ramaah Droog* in piano score, “songs sold singly,” and sonatas for pianoforte, violin, flute and violin cello.


[^7^]: A one-page newspaper, the *Portsmouth Telegraph* cost seven shillings per issue. It represented a new and progressive voice, signaling the increasing power of the middle class. The Portsmouth library contains a copy of the first edition. In later years the newspaper’s name was changed to the *Hampshire Telegraph* and after a run of 177 years, it was discontinued in 1976.
Apparently James, Jr. was a colorful character who managed to conduct two lives. After paying him a visit, English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge described him as a prominent resident and bookseller. Yet in spite of having a lovely wife and six or seven children, Coleridge confided to his friend William Wordsworth, how appalled he was by Mr. Mottley’s personal habits—his smoking, drinking and ability to swear like a sailor—and what he described as his addiction to sleeping with women of all classes.

Mme. de Tocqueville’s father was George Mottley, the third son of James, Sr. and Hannah Mottley. In 1795 George started working at the Royal Haslar hospital caring for sick and wounded soldiers. It was also in 1795 on April 9 that he married Mary Martin from Hambledon, a historic town located ten miles north of Portsmouth. George was nineteen and Mary Martin was twenty-one. Eventually they became the parents of thirteen children, of which Mme. de Tocqueville [Mary Mottley], born on August 20, 1799, was the eldest daughter.

During the first part of their marriage, George and Mary Martin Mottley resided in the officer’s quarters of Haslar hospital. George was an intelligent, educated man and apparently an excellent bookkeeper. Soon he became an assistant to agent John Newsham in proving patients’ wills. Eventually he assumed Newsham’s position and launched his own distinguished career at Haslar.

A hospital agent had a number of important responsibilities that included management of finances, supplies, hospital staff, and safety of patients’ belongings. Evidence from original archived records bearing George’s flamboyant, beautifully scripted signature indicates that he conducted these administrative duties expertly. If handwriting tells us anything about a person, he was a man well worth knowing.

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8 Convincing a probate court that a document is truly the deceased person’s will. Usually this is a simple formality that the executor or administrator easily satisfies by showing that the will was signed and dated by the deceased person in front of two witnesses. When the will is holographic—that is, completely handwritten by the deceased and not witnessed, it is still valid in many states if the executor can produce relatives and friends to testify that the handwriting is that of the deceased. - http://www.nolo.com/dictionary/proving-a-will-term.html
In 1833, after serving as agent at Haslar for 38 years, George was transferred to the Royal Naval Hospital in Stonehouse, located in the county of Devon near the port of Plymouth. It is unclear whether this relocation was by his request or whether it was part of the hospital system’s routine procedure. Apparently this is where the family was living in 1835, because it is known that during that year Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to Devon to meet the Mottley family and ask for Mary’s hand in marriage.

George Mottley’s wife, Mary Martin, was from the historic Saxon town of Hambledon where the family had lived for several generations. Hambeldon was known for its vineyards and was also referred to as the “cradle of cricket,” or the place where the game of cricket was first introduced. Around 1740 the Hambledon Cricket Club was founded.

Coincidentally, both Mary Martin’s husband and father were butchers by trade. Mary Childe [Mary Mottley’s grandmother], who was from Alverstoke in Hampshire County, married Thomas Martin when still a minor, with written permission from her father, Richard Childe. The affidavit stated that Mary was fully consenting to the marriage.

The Mottley family history records the ceremony as having been performed at St. Thomas church in Portsmouth, but the Martin family records it as having taken place in Hambledon. Of the Martins’ four children, their son Thomas, also became a butcher, and their daughter Mary, became the wife of George Mottley. Mary Martin Mottley apparently was proud of the Martin family legacy, since four of their children were given the name “Martin” as their middle or second name.

George Mottley, Mme. de Tocqueville’s father, died on April 10, 1840 at the age of 64 and probate was granted to his eldest living son, Thomas Martin Mottley, who was a captain in the army. Mary Martin Mottley survived her husband by several more years, dying at age 89 in the home which her son Thomas had purchased for her at Number 2 Grove Road in Cams. Living with her at the time of her death were three of her daughters: Louisa Eleanor, by then a widow; and two spinsters, Elizabeth Martin Mottley and Margaret Claributt Mottley. The latter women were in their forties and since they were considered to
be a social notch above working class women, as spinsters they were condemned to a life of good works and embroidery, reminiscent of a Jane Austin novel.

The Mottley lineage ended in 1947, when another Mary Mottley, widow of Arthur Mottley, the son of Rear Admiral Joseph Mottley [Mme. de Tocqueville’s nephew] passed away, leaving no heirs.

**Mary Mottley’s Earlier Years**

On March 2, 1801, Reverand John Hall baptized Mary and her older brother Thomas, at St. Mary’s Church in Alverstoke in Hampshire County, where the hospital was located.

In addition to her Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Thomas Belam, two other uncles, her father’s brothers, James and Samuel, also played a prominent role in Mary’s upbringing.

Although she was the eldest girl born to George and Mary Martin Mottley, Mary had two older brothers, Roger and Thomas. Roger died in April, 1802 at age six. Other Mottley siblings were: George, Jr., born in 1801; Joseph, born in 1802; Louisa Eleanor, born in 1803; Elizabeth, born in 1804; Catherine Ann, born in 1805; James Charles, born in 1810; Margaret Claributt, born in 1811; Anna, born in 1813; and Henry Bayless, born in 1842.

It is believed that Mary began to live with her Aunt Elizabeth Mottley and Uncle Thomas Belam in Peterfield, Hampshire, around 1804, when she was approximately four years old. Thomas Belam was a prosperous merchant who owned several enterprises. The Belams had no children of their own and although they raised Mary as their child, they did not formally adopt her; the practice of formal adoption was non-existent at that time.

One can surmise that Mary was a bright child and possibly the Mottleys saw a larger future for their eldest daughter by giving her the opportunity to be raised by the Belams. From that time forth, Elizabeth, a favorite sister and aunt, became Mary’s mother. The only mention of Mary’s real parents was upon the occasion of her wedding when both attended the ceremony. According to custom, her father gave her away.
In his book, *Tocqueville in America*, George Wilson Pierson describes Elizabeth Belam as “being an undistinguished woman who was said to be the widow of a Portsmouth pharmacist.” Wilson is correct in stating that by profession, Thomas Belam was a druggist and chemist who owned an apothecary. At that time, apothecaries were well respected for their contributions to health care, so it can be assumed that Thomas had a thriving business. He was also an assistant surgeon, serving as an instructor for other surgeons.\(^9\)

Thomas worked closely with his brother in-law, James C. Mottley, Jr. He advertised his products in the *Portsmouth Telegraph* and also sold a large number of elixirs in James’s printing shop. Both of these men possessed great ingenuity and were high achievers. By popular demand, James and Thomas sold a book—two volumes for the price of one—*A Guide To Old Age, Or: Cure For The Indiscretions Of Youth*, by Dr. Brodum. Dr. Brodum was a scoundrel and was later arrested.

Thomas Belam owned residences in the High street of Portsmouth at White Hart Row and a cottage with a beautiful garden in Chalton, in addition to his primary residence in Petersfield. He also owned or was part owner of several breweries in the Petersfield area.

The Belams offered Mary love, security and financial opportunities that may not have been available to her had she remained in Devon with her family. Mary was probably educated at home and was well read in German and Italian in addition to English. She was also free to express her own political views, and even though such occasions would have been rare for a woman at that time, one could surmise that Mary didn’t hesitate to speak up whenever possible.

After Thomas Belam died at a young age, his widow Elizabeth moved to Paris where living may have been less expensive than in England. Apparently Mary accompanied her


\(^{10}\) Medical schools did not exist at that time, so physicians were not entitled to be addressed as “Doctor.” In fact, even in the 21\(^{st}\) century, surgeons in the U.K., although university educated, are referred to as “Mr.”
and although from time to time they returned to England to visit their family, for the most part they remained in France. Throughout her life, Mary was attentive to her aunt’s needs; they enjoyed a warm mother-daughter relationship.

**Mary Mottley and Alexis de Tocqueville**

Alexis and Mary met in the late 1820s when Mary was either visiting or living with her Aunt Elizabeth Belam in Versailles. At the time Alexis was a young jurist sharing a house nearby with two friends and fellow jurors, Gustave de Beaumont and Ernest de Chabrol.

Alexis was the youngest of three sons born to the Tocquevilles, an aristocratic family from Normandy. The French aristocracy had the benefit of a leisurely lifestyle, since they derived their income from taxes collected from the peasants who worked the land of their vast estates.

To protect this feudal master-slave system, the aristocracy also supported the belief that they were “special” and thus deserved to be set apart from the lower classes. Since the French aristocracy also subscribed to the belief of Divine Right of their ruler, they were closely linked to the power and hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, which in turn depended on the Throne for its financial sustenance. The closed circle of power was complete as long as the bourgeoisie and peasants remained ignorant.

However, as the bourgeoisie class grew wealthier and more educated, they started to question church authority. They also resented the aristocracy and considered them arrogant self-serving parasites. Ultimately the bourgeoisie came to realize that as long as the common person believed they had no free will and therefore could never escape from the class into which they had been born, the aristocracy would continue to thrive. Ignorance is bliss. Rumblings of revolution were beginning to be heard throughout the land as the bourgeoisie continued to threaten the status quo.

The Tocquevilles were well respected by their tenants and servants whom they treated with kindness and consideration. If ever there were a family Mary might have
chosen to join, it would have been the Tocquevilles. But this was the 19th Century when class, titles, religion and lands separated the nobles from all but themselves. Marriages were arranged purely on a business basis for financial and land acquisition with or without the consent of the nuptial couple. It was impossible—out of the question—that Mary, a commoner, would be accepted into French society.

Unlike his brothers and other members of his family, Alexis realized at an early age that he would never take the beliefs of anyone at face value without questioning them. Moreover, he had no intention of allowing his life to be molded by others.

Alexis soon became a frequent visitor at the Belam home and over long fireside chats, the relationship with Mary deepened. He found in her a woman of many interests, one of which was politics, and he began to share with her his belief that democracy would inevitably find its way into the life and government of France. Alexis knew that when this happened it would cause a painful family rift. As aristocratic landowners his parents were devoted to the monarchy and the Bourbon regime.

Unquestionably, this was a romantic union; otherwise, the two would not have put each other through the pain and suffering caused by a socially mismatched marriage. Alexis de Tocqueville ignored the gossip and did as he pleased. He felt he had found his intellectual match in Mary and he also felt she would provide stability for his high-strung impetuous nature. He was devoted to her.

Historians had a field day taking jabs at Mary. They described her as a sickly woman, ill tempered, and a “foreigner”: poor, plain, and Protestant. In the eyes of the aristocracy, Mary’s greatest sin by far was the fact that she was five years and eleven months older than Alexis. Some historians believe the age difference was as great as nine years. Age difference was considered an impediment to child bearing, and perhaps because Mary was not a member of the aristocracy coupled with this perceived shortcoming, there was no apparent interest in checking her date of birth in the civil register, or the marriage certificate at St. Thomas Aquinas in Paris. One can understand that if Mary was frustrated by this confusion
and offended by the criticism, she would never have bothered to set the records straight. Detesting idle gossip, she could easily avoid it by refusing to retaliate.

On 8AM on October 24, 1835, the two were married at Thomas Aquinas church. Unfortunately only the principal witnesses are listed in the marriage certificate so it is unclear if any of Mary’s brothers and sisters attended the wedding. It is hard to believe that her aunt Elizabeth Belam, who raised her from the time she was a child, was not one of the honored guests. Mary’s parents must have had misgivings as they sat in the Catholic church and witnessed a marriage that was a “cause célèbre” yet unwelcome in Parisian society.

The fact that Alexis’s mother, Louise de Tocqueville, was unable to attend the ceremony led to rumors that her absence indicated her disapproval. These rumors proved to be unfounded, however. At the time Louise was ill and died at her home three months later. Alexis writes of his wife’s sorrow upon learning the news of his mother’s death because Louise had been kind to Mary. It would have been uncharacteristic of his mother to have behaved otherwise. Louise had suffered immense tragedy in her life and was a devout woman who would have been sensitive to the pain of others. Also, regardless of class differences and social mores, as a mother would she not have wanted her youngest son to be happy?

As Chatelaine¹¹ of the Tocqueville manor, Mary de Tocqueville—known in France as “Marie de Tocqueville”—proved to be an excellent manager and bookkeeper. When required, she did not hesitate to make decisions and apparently was competent when meeting other domestic challenges as well. A frugal person, Marie was never without a private income of her own.

Mme. de Tocqueville was a puzzling person, lonely at times, stubborn and strong willed, yet vulnerable. Her love for her husband was as deep and sincere as was his for her. Their expectation of marriage differed only in the lifestyle of the societies in which they were born. Mary was drawn to the traditional home and hearth marriage of her class and

¹¹ A woman who owns or controls a large house [Fr.] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatelaine
Alexis, to the salons of Paris that provided him stimulating conversations with a variety of interesting people.

Women were naturally attracted to Alexis especially after he had become an acclaimed author and raconteur on two continents. Although devoted to Mary, he also enjoyed the company of other females. Mary chose not to compete, although she was certainly not happy about Alexis’s Parisian social life.

Toward the end of his life, Alexis noted that his wife became closer to her English heritage and especially to her brother Joseph. Her family never abandoned her as is shown in the family wills. Mary was always included and named as a beneficiary. She was also a beneficiary in her Uncle Thomas Belam’s will. Her aunt, Elizabeth Belam left her entire estate to Mary, but by the time she died at the age of 91, all that was left was a piece of property in England and a small amount of money.

The two were married for twenty-four years until Alexis’s death in 1859. In an era of socially arranged marriages and strict adherence to rules of class, both Alexis and Mary set the stage for a new paradigm. They showed the world that marriage could be based on another set of values that eschewed pedigrees and other class distinctions as undemocratic and elitist. These new egalitarian values were based on genuine attraction for each other—a chemistry between two people who each found each other exciting as well as inspiring, and a companionship that bonded them intellectually as well as physically and emotionally.