Tocqueville’s *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, first published in 1856, is one of the most famous accounts of the origins of the French Revolution ever written. Noted for its wide-ranging and subtle analysis of the government, society and culture of eighteenth-century France, it has always been an essential point of departure for any student working on the Revolution, admired not so much as a piece of historical research but as a brilliant study of political economy. If, today, many of its assumptions have been qualified in the light of recent research, it is still an extremely lively and powerful account of the underlying causes of 1789, which repays detailed attention. Moreover, the text is more than just a study of the causes of the French Revolution. Written in the aftermath of the coup d’état of Napoleon III in 1851, it was intended as an *oeuvre à thèse*, which would explain to contemporary mid-nineteenth-century Frenchmen their failure to establish a permanent liberal democracy.

Traditionally *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution* is taught by a wide cross-section of college tutors. Students will be introduced to the complexity of Tocqueville’s argument, in particular his conception of the centralized French absolute state, his views on the genesis and significance of class conflict, and his understanding of the role of the Enlightenment in causing the French Revolution. Beyond this, there are various way in which the text may be placed in a wider context. Students may examine the historiography of the causes of the French Revolution in order to compare and contrast Tocqueville’s analysis with earlier and subsequent explanations. They may seek a deeper understanding of the more recent historiography of eighteenth-century France to see how Tocqueville’s vision has been refined or challenged. Finally they may re-examine the text in the light of Tocqueville’s own intellectual development and political career.

The course is intended to give students the opportunity to develop their reading ability in the French language, and in the first term at least they should expect to spend much of the time getting to know the text in the original. It also enables students to get to grips with an extremely rich and influential work of history that will give them a graphic insight into the problems of historical method and the historian’s craft.