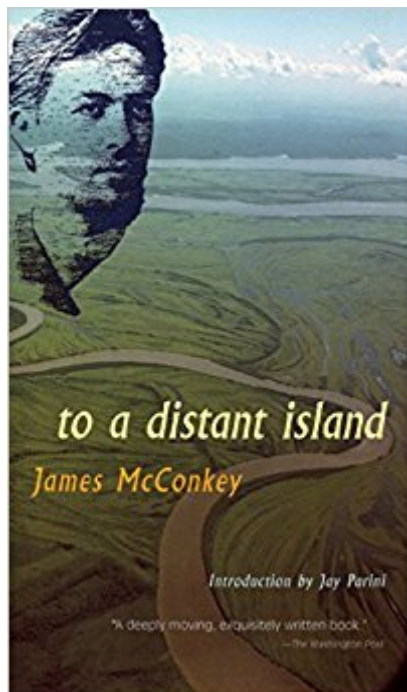


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To A Distant Island



Synopsis

"One of our finest writers." —Annie Dillard "What a pleasure, and how much there is to learn from this short book!" —Denise Levertov "A deeply moving, exquisitely written book." —Washington Post Book World "Exceptionally serene prose; leveled with sharp observation and subtle wit; neither history nor fiction, but rather a kind of reimagining of the past." —Michael Dirda, Smithsonian Magazine "We have had many straight biographies of writers in recent years; that leave their subjects curiously diminished. Mr. McConkey's achievement is to send the reader back to the Russian master with renewed wonder." —Harvey Shapiro, The New York Times In 1890 Anton Chekhov; thirty years old and already a famous writer; left his home and family in Moscow to travel 6,500 miles across Russia, over frozen land and sea, by train, ferry, and troika, to visit the island of Sakhalin, a penal colony off the coast of Siberia. What was Chekhov seeking by undertaking such a harrowing journey to that God-forsaken island? Ostensibly, he went in his role of physician, to observe the medical conditions and to collect statistical information (Indeed, Chekhov wrote that during his stay he filled out more than 10,000 census cards based on interviews with prisoners and exiles.) But his motivation, as James McConkey reflects, was more likely escape: escape from the sense of confinement that fame, fortune, and family had brought; a search, in other words, for freedom in a place where no one was free. In *To a Distant Island*, McConkey recreates Chekhov's remarkable journey in all of its complexity, while interweaving a journey of his own. As McConkey guides us through the Russian wilderness and into the soul of this great writer, he uncovers the peculiar and hidden forces that shaped two lives. "The genre in which McConkey does his best writing has no name. He invented it. What McConkey does is to create meaning out of ordinary life. He'll take a tiny incident and by linking it through memory with a series of past events, he'll create what is not exactly a story but a pattern in time. By then the incident is no longer small; it has become the focus for a revelation. His books should be famous." —Noel Perrin, *U.S.A. Today* James McConkey is the author of *Crossroads*, *The Tree House*, *Confessions*, *The Novels of E.M. Forster*, and *Court of Memory* (a continuing biography that appeared serially in various magazines, primarily *The New Yorker*), and many other books. He is Goldwin Smith Professor of English Literature Emeritus at Cornell University. Jay Parini is Axinn Professor of English at Middlebury College. He is the author of *The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year* and *Robert Frost: A Life* and many other works of fiction, criticism, poetry, and biography.

Book Information

Paperback: 196 pages

Publisher: Paul Dry Books; 1st Paul Dry Books ed edition (November 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0966491351

ISBN-13: 978-0966491357

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.6 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #603,426 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #106 in [Books > Travel > Asia > Russia > General](#) #214 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > Russian](#) #402 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Russia](#)

Customer Reviews

Praise for James McConkey and *To a Distant Island* "One of our finest writers." —Annie Dillard "What a pleasure, and how much there is to learn from this short book!" —Denise Levertov "A deeply moving, exquisitely written book." —Washington Post Book World "Exceptionally serene prose — leveled with sharp observation and subtle wit — neither history nor fiction, but rather a kind of reimagining of the past." —Michael Dirda, Smithsonian Magazine "We have had many straight biographies of writers in recent years — that leave their subjects curiously diminished. Mr. McConkey's achievement — is to send the reader back to the Russian master with renewed wonder." —Harvey Shapiro, The New York Times "The genre in which McConkey does his best writing has no name. He invented it — What McConkey does is to create meaning out of ordinary life. He'll take a tiny incident — and by linking it through memory with a series of past events, he'll create what is not exactly a story but a pattern in time. By then the incident is no longer small; it has become the focus for a revelation — His books should be famous." —Noel Perrin, *U.S.A. Today*

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In 1890, Anton Chekhov, then thirty and at existential loose ends, undertook a trip across Russia to Sakhalin Island, the 600-mile-long island off the eastern coast of Russia north of Japan. He traveled by train, by horse-drawn vehicles, and by river steamer. It was an arduous journey, taking eleven weeks. At the time, Sakhalin was essentially a huge penal colony to which the Russians exiled many of their worst criminals as well as some political prisoners (similar to France's Devil's Island). Chekhov spent about three months on Sakhalin, conducting a census and interviewing hundreds of its inhabitants. He later wrote a book, "The Island of Sakhalin", which helped to spur some reforms there. More important for Chekhov, his trip to that distant island reinvigorated him spiritually. It was a pivotal event in his life. Author James McConkey, then fifty, experienced a similar reinvigorating event around 1970. A Professor of English at Cornell, he was deeply disturbed by the late Sixties clashes within America and racial unrest at Cornell. With his family, he took a year's sabbatical in Florence, where, among other things, he began reading the letters of Chekhov and learning about Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin. The year in Florence gave him a new outlook on life and new meaning to life. McConkey writes about these two transformative trips abroad in *TO A DISTANT ISLAND*. The principal story concerns Chekhov. There is a moderate amount of biographical information (I learned that Chekhov's father was born a serf) and some discussion of Chekhov's short stories. The major part of the book concerns Chekhov's trip to Sakhalin and its personal significance for him. The account of his traversal of the steppes of central Russia and Siberia was of moderate interest (the Russian people along the Amur River could speak openly of whatever they wished, for there was "no one to arrest them and nowhere to exile them to"). Even more interesting, though grim and disturbing, was the account of the Dante-esque prison colony on Sakhalin. (I append in the comment to this review one sad interview between Chekhov and a ten-year-old

boy.) Interspersed with the account of Chekhov and his trip to Sakhalin are briefer discussions about McConkey's personal life and his transformative year in Florence. For me, the book would have been better without them, but they don't bulk so large as to mar the book significantly. All in all, *TO A DISTANT ISLAND* is a singular stew of biography, literary history and analysis, travelogue, and memoir. The writing is above average, but it doesn't quite bear out Annie Dillard's encomium that McConkey is "one of our finest writers." The style is slightly florid; there is a know-it-all tone to the book that grates on me; and McConkey occasionally engages in flights of fancy that are too flighty. He also draws lessons as to human existence that to me seem dubious, akin to wishful thinking. Withal, I found *TO A DISTANT ISLAND* valuable in understanding Anton Chekhov, some of whose stories and plays I am in the midst of reading.

In 1890, Anton Chekhov traveled across Russia to the island of Sakhalin to visit a prison colony there and write a book about what he found. The trip was so arduous as to be almost suicidal, and no-one has ever clearly understood why Chekhov desired such a journey. James McConkey's *To a Distant Island* is partially a chronicle of Chekhov's journey, but there is much more to the book than that. McConkey uses Chekhov's letters, the book he wrote when he returned, and various biographies to weave a speculative narrative. There are many gaps in the documentary evidence, and McConkey fills these gaps in with fictional scenes and suppositions, adding color and depth where previously there have only been shadows. He links moments in the journey to Chekhov's own stories and plays with tremendous insight -- indeed, McConkey's odd book offers some of the best literary criticism of Chekhov written in English. Additionally, the book is a sort of memoir. McConkey first discovered Chekhov's Sakhalin letters while traveling in Florence and fleeing depression and discontent with his life, a confluence of psychology and situation which allowed him to be particularly empathetic to Chekhov's journey. At first, his discussion of himself within the book seemed anachronistic and intrusive, but I came to enjoy and even relish the memoiristic elements of *To a Distant Island* as much as I did the material about Chekhov. I don't know of another book like *To a Distant Island*. It is lyrical, surprising, informative, and deeply affecting. Chekhov comes alive far more in this slim volume than in all the hundreds of pages of Donald Rayfield's exhaustive recent biography. This book could serve as a fine introduction to Chekhov's life and works, it could be tremendously fascinating to people who are already familiar with Chekhov, and I expect it would even prove to be a rewarding read for lovers of literature in general who have no particular interest in Chekhov. At the very least, if you appreciate fine writing, you will appreciate this book.

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