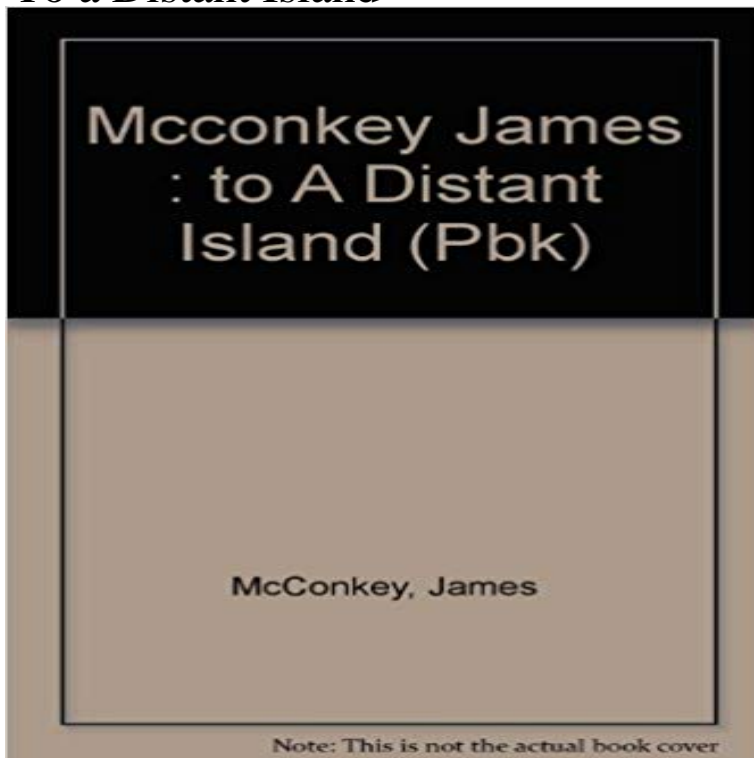


## To a Distant Island



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 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. Hell take a tiny incident and by linking it through memory with a series of past events, hell 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.

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