Book Reviews

Chris Tiffin, ed. *South Pacific Images.* St. Lucia (Queensland): South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, 1978. pp. viii 222, $A7.50

H.H.Anniah Gowda, ed. *Powre Above Powres: Essays in Pacific Literature.* Mysore: The Centre for Commonwealth Literature and Research, 1978. pp. 245. n.p.

South Pacific Images is a selection of the papers presented at the first conference of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, held in Brisbane in May of 1977. As such, it displays both the virtues and the shortcomings of the conference turned into book. Chris Tiffin has, however, edited a text which deserves attention.

The virtues come from expected and unexpected sources. Expected, for example, is Bruce Benett's lucid examination of Hal Porter and Randolph Stow, a paper that has obviously overcome the mechanical rigidities that an oral presentation demanded. Expected also is the academic correctness of David Tacey's "Search for a New Ethic: Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*," for the article is punctilious in its approach to White and studiously safe in its conclusions. Indeed, safe and accepted approaches are the hallmarks of many of the articles in the book: "Two Figures of the Artist"; "The Philosophical Basis of the Poetry of . . . "; "Fragmentation, Reconstitution and the Colonial Experience." These are titles (and articles) to gladden the heart of any editor, but they do little to stimulate the reader, for while they convey a great deal of information about the authors and the works involved, they manage to hide rather than to reveal the vitality and the diversity of what is now obviously in grave danger of becoming labelled "Pacific" or "South Pacific Literature."

Diversity may, nonetheless, be the crux of the book's problems. "Indo-Fijian Fiction and the *Girmit* Mythology" and "The Rhetoric of Rejection: Janet Frame's Recent Work" are articles which, whatever their respective merits, deal with literatures which are but tenuously linked by the common bond of language and which reveal cultural differences which linguistic and geographical proximity are hard pressed to bridge. The result is, in the case of Vijay Mishra's "Indo-Fijian Fiction", criticism which must desperately strive to fill in the historical and even the psychological background from which the literature has sprung. We realize, as a consequence, that few of the critics involved can make large assumptions of knowledge on the part of the reader and the literature is lost in a morass of historical and cultural meanderings.

Are there exceptions to the general pattern of articles that are either studiously safe or historically and culturally oriented? Of course there are. John Docker's "The Neocolonial Assumption in University Teaching of English" forces a reassessment of the premises found in many of the other articles, even though it is a variant of arguments that have taken up a good deal of energy in other contexts (as in the writings of A.A. Phillips or, for that matter, in Docker's own *Australian Cultural Elites*). In addition, articles by Lolo Houbein and Reba Gostand examine ethnic writing in Australia and the violent language of Australian drama in a manner which is bound to provoke more analyses of these subjects.

The nature of *South Pacific Images* results in inevitable omissions which any reviewer mentions with trepidation, for conference has obviously dictated content. They must be mentioned, however, and there is, for example, an article about "Papua New Guinea in Recent White Fiction" and one which allies Wole Soyinka, V.S. Naipaul and Patrick White, but there is nothing on indigenous Papua New Guinea writing which, from its beginnings under the aegis of Ulli Beier, has gone on to flourish so dramatically.

Without doubt, *South Pacific Images* was not intended as a primer, or even as a survey of criticism of "South Pacific" writing, but disappointments about its inevitable omissions cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, the book is worthy of examination; the eclecticism of the text may be daunting, but enough virtues are evident to recommend it.

H.H. Anniah Gowda's *Powre Above Powres: Essays in Pacific Literature* is a curious complement to *South Pacific Images*. The title belies the content and while some of the criticism is weaker than that found in Tiffin's collection, and while the book may be one of the first you will encounter in kit form (the binding and the typos force you to construct it yourself), there is, in spite of this, a strong sense of the vitality of the literature now being written in the South Pacific. This is accounted for, at least in part, by the fact that *Powre Above Powres* includes some of the writing of the area. The Frank Moorhouse story "The Airport, The Pizzeria, The Motel, The Rented and (sic) Car and the Mysteries of Life" is evidence enough that some of the literature is vigorous enough to overcome typos, the company it keeps — "The Function of Ray and Thelma Parker in *The Tree of Man*" — and, yes, even its own title.

Ken Goodwin and Peter Alcock contribute a useful bibliography, "References in South Pacific Literature"; and there are good critical essays by James Tulip on "Recent Australian Poetry" and Henry W. Wells on "Verse of the Australian Frontier." These features, along with the volume's original poetry (including some in pidgin from the New Hebrides and Papua New Guinea), help *Powre Above Powres* to overcome its less than prepossessing format and allow one a sense of the literature and the region.

Grant McGregor

Michael Levey. *The Case of Walter Pater*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978. pp. 232 + illus. Sterling 8.50.

The would-be biographer of Walter Pater faces the challenge of grasping the character of a man who lived a singularly uneventful life, who never achieved great popularity and who, by design, discouraged an examination of his private life. The enterprising biographer will be painfully aware of Arthur Symons' prophecy that no "official" life will ever appear. Assessing the man and his achievement is no easy task because his writings lie somewhere between criticism and fiction and because no satisfactory collected edition exists. He must study Pater's letters (fewer than 300 have survived), but he will find few revelations. He must study the memorial and reminiscent articles that have been preserved, but he will find few observations that penetrate the "mask" behind which Pater composed his thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, as Michael Levey has tried to do, the biographer will have to correct the distorted portraits produced by A.C. Benson (1906) and, especially, by Thomas Wright (1907). If he wishes to rescue Pater from misunderstanding he will have to establish matters of fact, chronology and perspective and produce an image of Pater that will withstand the fluctuations of literary fashion.

Levey justifies his biography, the third to appear since the "unreliable though invaluable efforts" of Wright, by pointing out that "Some of Wright's errors of fact have crept into even the longest and most detailed studies of Pater," which by implication include Germain d'Hangest's massive study (1961) of Pater's interior life and Gerald Monsman's equally uninspiring study (1977) of Pater as myth-maker. Levey's case is based on Pater's courageous struggle to rescue the appreciation of art from, to use Symons' words, "the dangerous moralities, the uncritical enthusiasm and prejudices, of Mr. Ruskin." Reading *all* of the writings as oblique autobiography, he sees Pater as a self-explorer who in the process of recording the dialogue of his mind with itself "encouraged the concept of personally scrutinizing a work of art." His method is expository, not evaluative. Wherever possible, he bases his inferences on facts (the first chapter in particular provides many new details about the Pater family).

In order to recover "the sense of Pater as a living, evolving personality," Levey concentrates on the divergence between the highly wrought prose and the personality "of extreme emotional ardour, keen sensibility and high, often satiric, humour" that is concealed behind it. This contrast between Pater's outer and inner life baffled even his sisters, with whom he lived for twenty-five years. Predictably, he emphasizes (in the first three chapters) the conditions and circumstances that formed this elusive personality and that promoted Pater's themes of isolation, sympathy for suffering, the desire of beauty, the fear of death and the search for the ideal male companion. The picture is rather poignant: Pater spent the first six years of his life amid the suffering, poverty and filth of the slums of Stepney; before he was fifteen his father, uncle and mother died; for most of these years he lived in a household "watched over by a group of women, cloistered, subdued and more than slightly sad." According to Levey, such "confessions" as *The Child in the House* show the young Pater discovering the uniqueness of his personality, determining to become famous and evolving a prose style and a "philosophy" that would give it expression.

The focal point of this book is the long exegesis (chapters six to nine) of the essay on Leonardo, the germ of *The Renaissance* and the prototype of Pater's subsequent writings. Levey begins with details about Pater's visit to Paris, where at the Louvre he probably saw the Mona Lisa for the first time, re-creates Pater's visit with C.L. Shadwell to Florence, where at the Uffizi he saw the Head of the Medusa, and traces the development of the train of thought that linked these visual experiences with the essays on Coleridge, Winckelmann, Morris and Leonardo. Pater approached each figure as a congenial personality, and in each he found partial expression of his own feelings. This process of identification culminated in the realization "that in Leonardo's childhood lay the formative experience which had shaped the personality — realizing it by his knowledge of himself."

Levey argues that, in writing about Leonardo, Pater discovered a personality and a period, as well as the motive for writing, namely self-portraiture. The rather unsympathetic response to his first book, the near ridicule of him as Mr. Rose the aesthete in W.H. Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877), together with his fear of scandal, convinced him that "To explain and express his personality, he needed the freedom of a fictional *persona*." The "imaginary portrait" (discussed in chapters ten and eleven) answered Pater's needs exactly. In his "complete biography of an imaginary person," *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater freely explored the sensations and ideas that had made him the person he was.

For reasons that relate directly to his approach, Levey's is an engaging but rather unsatisfying biography. In abstracting Pater from his intellectual, social and cultural contexts, Levey produces an unsubstantial portrait, not unlike that sketched by Benson. Regrettably, he glances over such matters as Pater's sources, aesthetic theories, religious position and influence, not to mention the reliability of Wright's evidence. On a minor note, Levey's references, gathered together at the back of the book, are often exasperating and his list of Pater's writings is incomplete. In places, his style is excessively mannered: "Browne's *Vulgar Errors* he owned an early edition of, but he might anyway be stirred by a writer who had been a doctor, who mused so much on death and was master of a freakish yet wonderfully sonorous prose style." But, despite these reservations, no student of Pater can afford to ignore Levey's sympathetic and suggestive study.

R.M. Seiler

Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. pp. 283. $11.95

Mitchell A. Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf From Beginning To End,* afterword by John Lehmann. New York: The John Jay Press, City University of New York, 1977. pp. 264. $9.50.

The Unknown Virginia Woolf is a spirited and sympathetic biography that sets out to reinterpret the facts of and speculations about Virginia Woolf's life so as to redress the wrongs that the author, Roger Poole, maintains have been done to Mrs. Woolf by previous biographers and critics. Given that the "official" versions of Virginia Woolf's life, written by Leonard Woolf and Quentin Bell, still hold considerable sway over modern critical attitudes to Woolf, Roger Poole must have expended considerable courage and/or been fairly emotionally involved in his subject before he dared to challenge in such a trenchant manner the firmly established view of Mrs. Woolf's life and personality that now exists. Indeed, the opening chapters of this book are scattered with numerous defensive references that indicate how aware Poole is of living dangerously. In his radically new interpretation of material taken from Mrs. Woolf's novels, diaries and letters, he may indeed walk perilously close to arousing critical disapproval on two counts.

In the first place, against all the stern admonitions of the "New Criticism" that has dominated literary criticism for the past few decades, Poole insists that an artist's life and works are mutually illuminating and he proceeds, on this assumption, to use the events of the novels to interpret the facts of Mrs.

Woolf's life, and *vice versa*. Many a well-trained graduate of recent years will find himself shrinking in horror from such a sacrilegious attempt on the godhead of the "New Criticism," but the plain fact is that, at least in this one book, the method works admirably. In the introduction, the author says:

> This study is offered as a hypothesis. Its aim is to illustrate a whole series of connections which have not been made before, such that a coherent pattern emerges from what have been, up to now, dispersed particulars and missed clues. If it does illuminate these connections, the aim of the work will have been achieved. (p. 5)

That the "connections" have not been made before is true; that Poole succeeds in illuminating them is also true. *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* presents a closely argued and well-illustrated case for seeing Virginia Woolf as a victim of social pressures, an incompatible marriage and inept medical practice, a case that may well be an acceptable "hypothesis" to all but the most firmly devoted admirers of Leonard Woolf and Quentin Bell.

A second reason for possibly adverse critical reaction to this book is the resentment that will be felt over Poole's attempted demolition of the myth that Leonard and Virginia Woolf were an ideally-suited couple. This myth, originating in part from Mrs. Woolf's last letter to Leonard Woolf before her suicide in 1941, in which she declares, "What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you," and, "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been," has certainly been perpetuated by Leonard Woolf in his autobiographies and, being reinforced by Quentin Bell in his biography of Mrs. Woolf, has come now to have acquired the status of accepted belief among students of modern British literature. The suicide letter is dealt with fairly satisfactorily as an aberration, in the face of the immense amount of evidence of contrary feelings used by Poole to back up his position. The myth itself can be said to disintegrate as Poole goes about proving that, far from being ideally suited, the Woolfs were incompatible in every significant way, although, on the surface, this state of affairs remained unacknowledged during their entire married life.

Apart from the obvious matter of sexual incompatibility, hinted at in several works on the Woolfs, the more distressing possibility of intellectual estrangement is examined with considerable success. Beginning with the early acquaintance between the two as members of the Bloomsbury group, Poole draws attention to basic differences in their thinking, differences that Mrs. Woolf was later to explore in her novels, between an arrogant, reductive, rational, essentially sterile way of thinking that was male, and a sympathetic, synthesizing, intuitive, fertile mode that was female. The male element of the Bloomsbury group, of which Leonard Woolf was an important part, was, as Poole points out, dominated by the former kind of thinking, and the favourite weapon was the destructive and unanswerable question, "What exactly do you *mean* by that?" The very few representatives of the other side, Vanessa and Virginia (Stephen) and Lytton Strachey, were careful to maintain their own attitudes unobtrusively in the face of the unanswerable question. Poole's position is summed up later in the book in a statement that will no doubt cause acrimonious response because of its uncompromising attack on the authorized version of the Leonard-Virginia relationship. Here, Poole collects all the novels under one roof, indicating that, for him, they share one theme: "It is the theme of emotional, rational, intellectual and human incompatibility between two human beings, Leonard and Virginia Woolf" (p. 231). Such a sweeping statement may be open to suspicion or rejection, but Poole brings so much evidence to the support of his argument and applies it so well that one is almost forced to agree with his conclusions.

The motivation for Poole's attack on previous accounts of Mrs. Woolf's life, however, is not only his desire to establish a new picture of the marriage. In fact, he acknowledges that he would not have inquired so searchingly into what is, after all, a private matter, had it not been so closely bound up with another matter that concerns him above all others. Poole admits that one of his main impulses in writing the biography was his outrage at the careless, destructive and yet authoritative use of the word "mad" by previous biographers to describe one of the most sensitive literary minds of the twentieth century. It is certainly true that, mainly because of the reports of Leonard Woolf and Quentin Bell, it has become a commonplace that Virginia Woolf "went mad" from time to time, as though that were an absolutely necessary and inherent part of being Virginia Woolf. The emotional impact of this biography arises mainly from the strong crusading spirit that Poole brings to his task of wiping out the word "mad" from Mrs. Woolf's reputation. His anxiety to bring the reader to seeing Virginia Woolf's point of view in all of the evidence he presents for his argument; his desire to demonstrate that many of the incidents cited as instances of her "madness" would seem that way only if one were already convinced of a person's insanity; and his sympathetic yet searching investigations of the more famous incidents, such as the birds speaking Greek, all contribute to a view of Mrs. Woolf's "madness" that is now surely more acceptable to a world grown more accustomed to matters of psychiatry and mental illness than was general in the early twentieth century.

It is true that the word "mad" has become more offensive to us the more we know about the condition, and that it is usually a word now reserved for cases of hopeless, prolonged or even permanent insanity. The primitive state of psychiatry in 1912 (and Poole demonstrates all too well just how primitive it was) would account for the ignorant use of the word, at that time, to describe Mrs. Woolf's breakdowns, but Poole's point is that the Woolf and Bell accounts of Mrs. Woolf's life are of fairly recent origin, and yet the opinion of the two biographers has been unaffected by the passing of the years and the acquisition of more sophisticated knowledge.

Going back into Mrs. Woolf's childhood, Poole demonstrates, quite persuasively, the growth of a sexually-inhibited and disturbed young woman, by linking recorded crises in her life with the dates on which she "went mad." Each breakdown, he shows, was immediately preceded by a crisis, often months in the making, sometimes involving sexual assaults on her person by half-brothers, sometimes centring around the death of family members (her mother, father, a brother, Thoby, and her half-sister, Stella Duckworth, all died within nine years, when Mrs. Woolf was a young girl). Mrs. Woolf's first recorded bout of "madness" (designated thus by Quentin Bell) occurred when she was thirteen, after the death of her beloved mother. As Poole says, "was it not likely that her mother's death should have stirred her profoundly, and that she should have had a nervous collapse? But that is not 'madness' " (p. 22). So the evidence piles up in the book, incident after incident that Poole reinterprets free from the blindness of judgment caused by the assumption that Mrs. Woolf was, in fact, mad so that every new occasion gave weight to that belief.

The Unknown Virginia Woolf has its faults: repetition, both of argument and quotation, is perhaps the worst of these. Nevertheless, the book is well worth reading not only because it allows us new scope in future Woolf criticism as a result of the close linking of the life and the work, but also because, scattered throughout, there is some excellent literary analysis of the novels as works of art. And even if one remains sceptical after reading it, it's good to know at least that someone has the courage to challenge, in such a perceptive way, the bastions of accepted belief.

Michael Leaska's title, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf From Beginning To End* is a trifle misleading, for two reasons: it concerns only the development of her characters, and how they see the world and other people; and it omits (deliberately) *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*. *Orlando* is not included, as the author confesses, because it does not fit the pattern of his findings, and *Between the Acts*, published posthumously, is excluded because Leaska feels it is unethical to comment on a work that has not had the author's final approval. One may quibble about these decisions, one of which hovers on the borders of the argument about authorized versions of texts, but the point is perhaps minor when one acknowledges Leaska's achievement with the books he does include in this study.

The author's purpose is defined clearly in his introduction, and the boundaries of the book are firmly set. "This book," he says, "is happily not addressed to those experts [other critics who take a more philosophical approach]. Its humbler concern has been to show those who are reading Mrs. Woolf for the first time *how* one arrives at a reasonable meaning of the novels . . . " (p. 5). Through detailed examination of character Leaska does, in fact, provide novices in Woolf studies with a solid body of basic interpretation that performs very well the task of explaining the ground rules of Mrs. Woolf's characterization, and of delineating the types of personality with which she is concerned in novel after novel. Leaska is not afraid to state the obvious in order to give as detailed an account as possible of relationships between characters, but then "the obvious" is a term used often to cover those details that we all instantly are aware of the minute they are presented to us and that seem to be so self-evident that we cannot imagine ever having been unaware of them. Thus Leaska's book, although at first sight seeming to be aimed at an undergraduate audience, is full of synthesizing statements about Woolf's characters that even initiates will find useful as catalysts for their own thinking about the novels. It is quite true, as Leaska suggests, that most Woolf critics, led on by the density and difficulty of the novels, head off fast into ethereal or metaphysical regions and therefore are talking mainly to a specialized audience. Leaska pays attention to the edict that one should walk before one tries running, and the result is a basic but perceptive study of a type we should welcome, particularly in the area of Woolf criticism.

This is not to suggest that the book is dull or plodding. On the contrary, Leaska writes easily, succinctly, and with effect, apart from the irritating habit, which contributes considerably to the undergraduate tone, of italicizing words on almost every page, in case we miss the intended emphasis in the argument. One also feels that there is more explanation than analysis involved in many of the chapters, but, given the type of audience Leaska says he is writing for, this is no doubt inevitable.

Alexandra A. West

R.A. Gekoski. *Conrad: The Moral World of the Novelist.* London: Paul Elek, 1978. pp. 208. Sterling 7.50.

Conrad: The Moral World of the Novelist is part of the "Novelists and Their World" series edited by Graham Hough. Both titles indicate the central task of the book, which is not only to study the novelist and his individual works, but to define a coherent "world" to which all his works, and indeed all his writing — including letters, essays and prefaces — contribute. In this view, the job of the critic is to propose a model of this world and to examine the principles of its organization. Everything that Conrad wrote takes its place in a homogeneous system whose character depends ultimately on the mind and temperament of the author. Conrad once referred to his novels as "temperamental writing," a hint which Gekoski expands by interpreting temperament to mean "the 'angle of vision' that a man takes upon himself and upon his world." He proceeds to consider this vision as a moral one, in the special sense that it discovers and elaborates the "riskiness of values."

In so doing, Gekoski takes his place in the ranks of those critics who for the last twenty years have sought to define Conrad's fiction in terms of the ethic, metaphysic, or psychology that it dramatizes. Often, they propose a dialectic to encompass and organize the diverse elements of Conrad's literary world. For example, M.D. Zabel analyzes it in terms of chance and recognition, Ian Watt of alienation and commitment, Avrom Fleishman of community and anarchy, R.F. Hodges of the romantic and practical strains in Conrad's heritage. Conrad himself both prompts and challenges such a dualistic approach. In his novels, he frequently makes grand pronouncements on the fate of man, which his stories then subvert or fail to justify. He uses commentators, notably Marlow, who puzzle over their tales, only to narrate themselves into confusion. He offers observations that defy our desire — a desire he has already encouraged — to make secure moral and psychological distinctions: as he does when he comments on "the convention that lurks in all truth and on the essential sincerity of falsehood"; or when he refers to the crew of the "Narcissus" as "highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent." To account for such complexities, the critic requires a flexible system that can discover and make sense of the unresolvable conflicts in the novels.

To this end, Gekoski proposes his own dialectic based on two visions of human life: "the one asserting the absolute loneliness and tragedy of the individual in a world without values, the other stressing human solidarity, and demanding self-sacrifice, loyalty to the group, and unreflective stoicism." Conrad does not reconcile these two views; rather, he insists on their opposition and their complementary character: "The best of Conrad's fiction holds the balance between the facts of existence (autonomy and isolation) and the necessities of existence (social responsibilities), and keeps them in greatest tension." Tension is a great merit in Gekoski's eyes, and directs his attention at the novels. He analyses, often with great subtlety, the dilemmas, ambiguities, ironies and paradoxes that torment Conrad's reluctant heroes. In each work, he seeks a "moral centre," not in the sense of a central doctrine or conviction, but of a dramatic or symbolic focus on which conflicting values converge. Conrad would probably approve of this strategy since, as he said in "Heart of Darkness": "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out as a glow brings out a haze." Similarly, Gekoski is not concerned with a kernel of truth, but with a means of illuminating complete truths. Consequently:

> it is not a weakness, but a virtue, of much of Conrad's writing that, rather than expressing a philosophy of life . . . it consists of an exploration of the difficulties inherent in the search for such a philosophy. If *Lord Jim* is morally ambiguous, it is so because its subject is moral ambiguity. Marlow's understanding of his involvement with Jim, and what Jim represents, does not lead to any given moral truths, but rather indicates the lurking paradoxes that underlie *any* given moral stance.

Gekoski's concern with moral ambiguity of this sort causes him to favour those novels ("Heart of Darkness," *Lord Jim, Nostromo, Under Western Eyes*) which are most problematic. In contrast, he finds *The Secret Agent* too simple, lacking the "complexity of thought and emotion . . . the balanced points of view and tensions upon which so much of his greatest works depend"; a judgment that ignores the intricate ironies which provide the "tensions" in the novel. His approach also helps him to identify Conrad's major themes: the fate of idealists who are corrupted by the pursuit of their ideals; the intricacies of responsibility and freedom, intention and action; the opposition of public and private values; the danger of illusions that both sustain and betray us; the correspondence between paired characters, doubles and contrasting figures who represent opposing sides of a "dialectic of belief and skepticism."

I believe that Gekoski is correct in treating Conrad's world as fundamentally a moral one. This approach is more fruitful and more faithful to Conrad's own comments on fiction than are approaches that stress the political, psychological, mythological or metaphysical. These categories overlap, but as Gekoski demonstrates, for example, it is the moral concern that directs the political psychology and the psychological politics of *Under Western Eyes*; and we do greater justice to the dilemma of Razumov, and to the novel as a whole, by approaching it from a moral perspective. Gekoski's study, however, is essentially conservative. It breaks no new ground. It depends mainly on established critics such as Guerard, Baines, Leavis and Stewart without drawing on more recent works, although many of these are acknowledged in the bibliography. It does not pursue some of the issues that it raises, such as the questions of temperament, irony, the role of art in Conrad's world. Occasionally it falls back on plot summaries. But it is a well-informed, discriminating account of what Conrad called "the mysterious universe of moral suffering."

Jon Kertzer

Books Received

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ALLOTT, MIRIAM, ed., *Matthew Arnold: Selected Poems and Prose*. London: J. M. Dent, Everyman's University Library, 1978. pp. xlviii, 296. Sterling 4.95, 1.95 pb.

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