

Wilderness and garden: Vegetation change in a cemetery landscape

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abstract

This paper traces the story of vegetation change in a Victorian cemetery in Christchurch, New Zealand. Its pattern of physical and attitudinal change over time is at once specific to this particular landscape and also echoed in many such burial landscapes across recently colonised settlements. The establishment of the cemetery first required the removal of the indigenous vegetation—the taming of the wilderness. Once the cemetery had been closed for burial this ‘new’ vegetation was left untended to fend for itself, and much of it grew out of control. The cemetery itself became a wilderness again, in European eyes.

Eventually human control was again reasserted in the cemetery and the destructive potential of this imported nature was countered with its co-option in the evocation of different strands of idealised memory. Different aspects of Time itself are constantly referenced through this particular kind of landscape, from the geological, such as the deep time of Gondwana vegetation, to the mythical, such as the unreachable Edenic past, and the time beyond time when all will meet again in Paradise.

Given the complex layers of historical and cultural meaning given to vegetation in the cemetery setting, this narrative explores some of the many influences and readings of Time within landscape change.



The landscape of remembrance

“In the morning it is green and growth up: but in the evening it is cut down, dried up and withered. Psalms XC”¹

The ‘natural’ realm of landscape and its constituent parts is so deeply embedded in our lives that it is easy to forget how they are constantly interpreted symbolically, morally and metaphorically. The predictable daily and seasonal changes are frequently linked symbolically to the human life cycle, and the unpredictable changes of the weather are described in terms of human emotions. Physical features such as mountains and rivers are woven into complex narratives of human struggle and achievement, As Merleau-Ponty suggested, “humans make perception out of things perceived.”² These processes and features occur ‘naturally’, yet are interpreted and given cultural meaning, and the interpretation itself seems ‘natural’ and inevitable, even though human activities may have affected these processes and features.

This paper traces the history of vegetation change in a Victorian Cemetery in Christchurch, New Zealand, addressing both the physical manifestations of change over time and the attitudes which both influenced, and responded to, these changes. Many studies and histories of cemetery landscapes focus on the monuments and grave furniture which are constructed to preserve the memory of the dead. The vegetation in a cemetery plays a powerful role in both the intentional and the inadvertent ongoing creation of the landscape. As an inherently growing and changing landscape element, the vegetation plays in counterpoint to the monuments and inscriptions which are established to mark or resist time.

Throughout the narrative of change in the vegetation of the cemetery there is no straightforward singular story that moves from the past to the present and into the future. There are always echoes of other times, and other notions of time—primeval, Biblical, the time before the cemetery fell into disrepair, the time when a loved person was still alive, and the future paradise when their loved ones hope to meet them again. The simultaneity of these allusions to time embodies both the notion of time as arrow and time as cycle.

The arrow of time represents the European post-enlightenment conception of time as linear and unidirectional—life being an unrepeatable series of events happening in a unique stretch of time, with, at the end, death. Preserving the dead in memory is one way of circumventing this finality, as does the notion of history, by fixing the past and thus protecting it from loss. The cycle of time accommodates the regenerative, endlessly repeating processes of death, decay and rejuvenation that characterise the continuity of life. The ‘life cycle’ itself is at the same time a unique individual’s life-history, as well as a part of an infinitely repeating pattern which reproduces life. Likewise, the history of this cemetery is at once a unique landscape narrative, and part of an ongoing recognisable pattern of landscape change.

The Barbadoes St Cemetery was established as part of the 1850 plan for the city of Christchurch, in the South Island of New Zealand. It comprised a large twenty-two acre section for Anglican burials at the corner of the city grid plan, and two much smaller plots of one acre each for Catholics and Dissenters, across the road. As a Victorian cemetery transplanted to the ‘New World’ it has many features and characteristics common to the English cemetery landscapes which were familiar to the European settlers who founded the city. Some of these features provide a link back through time to the culture and burial practices of the ancient Romans. The Barbadoes St



Cemetery also reveals a palette and sequence of vegetation which is characteristic of the colonial transplantation of a European landscape tradition to the other side of the world, and unique to the specific conditions of this landscape.

Roman cemetery traditions

The tombs and inscriptions of ancient Rome are an enduring record of the importance in that society for the dead to be remembered by the living. These tombs, many of which are still visible, such as those along the Via Appia Antica in Rome, were placed outside the city, as the Ancients were anxious to keep separate the worlds of the living and the dead, to “prevent the dead from returning to disturb the living.”³ These tombs were visited, and festivals and family occasions were celebrated there.

Funerary gardens were also associated with many Roman cemeteries. These gardens were, according to Curl, “charming places where the dead could not only be commemorated but could themselves experience, as they were thought to be capable of feeling. The ideal landscape of an Elysian after-life could also be enjoyed on earth, for the funerary garden symbolised the other world.”⁴

The funerary garden was thus experienced simultaneously as an ideal and a real place, in the same sense that the dead were both present and absent. Certain trees, which were also held to evoke ambiguous meanings, were used symbolically in these gardens. The symbolism of trees and plants is complex blend of the plant's physical characteristics and poetic interpretation, which is gradually laced into myth and legend.⁵ Pine trees and other evergreens could signify everlasting life, (a reference to the perpetual growth which was believed to have existed in Paradise⁶), as well as death, as they do not re-grow if cut down. Willow trees also have a dual symbolic meaning in the cemetery; even a bare twig will shoot leaves and begin to grow, but the weeping willow is also a symbol of grief and mourning.

The trees of these gardens, the cypress, fir and yew, as well as the urns obelisks and sarcophagi of Roman burial custom, have persisted, and are still evident in Victorian cemeteries. Not only have the physical elements of the Roman burial landscape endured, but the concern for visiting and memorialising the dead, and of the symbolic potential of the garden have also survived. These characteristics, however, were submerged for almost a thousand years, as the beliefs about the afterlife underwent a significant change, in combination with the spread and development of Christianity.

Christian traditions of burial

The emerging Christian religion adopted many of the sacred landscapes and buildings of the older pagan cultures and adapted them to its own purposes. The prohibition against burying the dead near the living gradually became weakened. The first cemetery actually inside the walls of Rome was formed in the fifth century and the practice became customary from the seventh century onward. Whereas for the Romans the tomb was the significant element, in the following centuries the enclosed space of the cemetery itself became gradually more important.⁷ The churchyards were physically demarcated by walls to keep undesirable activities out,⁸ and were spiritually demarcated by the ritual of consecration.

The desire to perpetuate the identity and personality of the dead at the site of the grave gradually disappeared, and from the fifth century until their gradual reappearance in the twelfth century,

the inscriptions and distinct graves which had characterised the Roman cemetery were virtually unknown. During this period the dead were buried in graves which were anonymous and undated. Towards the end of the eleventh century, graves began to be marked by epitaphs, signalling a new concern for the individuality of each person,⁹ and marked the beginning of a gradual change in attitudes to death, and to the place of the dead in the city.

The state of burial grounds during this time, according to engravings and written record, was far from the Elysian gardens of Roman times. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, prompted perhaps by the effects of plague and increasing population, mass graves which held up to six hundred corpses were employed, and the bones of the dead were later dug up and placed in charnel houses,¹⁰ and newly dead bodies buried in their place. Black slime covered the over-saturated earth; bones and semi-decayed corpses emerged as new graves were dug amidst the old.

Even up until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the exact destination of the corpse was of little concern. The sculpture and funerary art of this time, however, began to exhibit a fascination with the destruction and horror of death. By the sixteenth century, death began to be viewed as a rupture¹¹ or break, which was to be reflected in the separation of the cemetery and the city, where the living and the dead had co-existed for centuries. The separation of these two worlds, which had been evident in Roman and early Christian times, was deemed essential again from the eighteenth century on, as "the accumulation of dead within churches or small churchyards became 'intolerable' at least to the enlightened minds of the 1760s."¹²

The emergence of the landscape cemetery

The closure of now extremely crowded inner city burial grounds necessitated the creation of new cemeteries. These were planned to take advantage of the ample room then available in the outskirts of cities and towns. This landscape of death also took on a new aesthetic and tradition, that of the landscape garden. The new cemeteries were to create an idealised Arcadia scene in which the monuments and mausolea sat within the verdant landscape. The first of the cemeteries planned in such a fashion in Europe was the great Parisian cemetery of Père-Lachaise which opened in 1804.¹³ Père-Lachaise was to have an enormous influence on the subsequent development of cemeteries in Western Europe as well as America and the other colonies.

In England, the rapidly expanding urban population and high mortality rates which accompanied the Industrial Revolution increased the pressure for hygienic cemeteries. Many entrepreneurial cemetery companies were set up, as a secular rather than religious initiative,¹⁴ to cater for the desire to create a monument to perpetuate the memory, as well as the social status, of the dead. Two of the most celebrated were the Highgate and Kensal Green cemeteries in London. The tradition of the landscape park was also adopted for these cemeteries. People were attracted not only to the opportunity to bury their dead in such a place, but the cemeteries also enjoyed great popularity among the public as places to visit and promenade.

This popularity had an impact on the vegetation and appearance of the cemeteries, and there was considerable debate about styles and appropriate materials. One of the most influential cemetery designers and theorists of the time, John Claudius Loudon, objected to the laying out of cemeteries to resemble pleasure grounds, particularly the inclusion of flowerbed displays. He was moved by a desire to encourage "the improvement of the moral sentiments and general taste of all classes and more especially of the great masses of society."¹⁵ Loudon published lists of trees which were most



suitable for cemetery plantings, which could be labelled and botanically arranged for educational purposes, and advocated a distinctive landscape character, favouring evergreens, as “the effect produced by deciduous and flowering trees is not favourable to the expression of either solemnity or grandeur.”¹⁶

This trend lasted until the 1870s in England, when there was a growing reaction to the sombre planting and formality, and flowers and flowering trees began to appear again in cemeteries. As towns and cities steadily increased in size, many of the cemeteries planned for the outskirts were eventually surrounded by housing, and the pressures that had seen burial grounds removed from the cities again began to emerge, even more strongly as these once elegant and popular landscape cemeteries began to fall into disrepair.

These, then were some of the debates and circumstances which surround the issues of burying the dead at the time when European settlers were embarking on their colonising mission. Just as the Romans carried their burial customs across the known world with them as they colonised it, so the Victorians brought their ideas of landscapes of death from the Old World to the New.

Transplanting the cemetery tradition

The transformation of New Zealand into an idealised version of ‘the Old Country’ was achieved with both the intentional and unwitting introduction of European plant, animal and insect life.¹⁷ The importation of familiar flora and fauna, for comfort and familiarity, as well as productive purposes, rapidly brought about great changes in the landscape that the settlers had found when they arrived. The indigenous vegetation was perplexing and strange to the Europeans, in particular its lack of seasonal variation, which gave an impression of primeval timelessness. This impression was reinforced through its association with the supposed original ever-green state of the Garden of Eden, at a time when the Biblical record was still largely considered as literal truth.

The settlers crossing the Port Hills to make their homes in what was to be the city of Christchurch were greeted with the site of an enormous swampy plain, covered with harakeke of New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) and raupo (*Carex secta*), plants which could grow up to three metres in height. Their generally negative impressions of the vegetation were no doubt affected by the degree to which it indicated the extremely wet and boggy nature of the ground.

The swamps on which the city was built were systematically drained as settlement progressed. The indigenous vegetation was uprooted and replaced with the trees, shrubs and grasses of Europe, many of which were deciduous and thus exhibited the familiar seasonal variation. Likewise, the establishment of the cemetery began with the clearance of the indigenous swamp vegetation and the planting of trees and shrubs which already had particular associations with cemeteries and death. These included yew, holly, cypress, sycamore, laurel, willow and oak.

The combinations of particular trees and plants for symbolic reasons had aesthetic consequences, and the distinctive visual character of cemeteries is in part due to these characteristic plant associations. Early photographs show, however, that there were also non-traditional eucalyptus trees brought over from Australia and planted in the cemetery and elsewhere around the city and plains. Their rapid growth created an impression of establishment and settlement on the otherwise virtually treeless land, although none of these trees have remained in the cemetery to the present day.

Once the cemetery reserves were under the control of the Cemetery Boards the planting and maintenance of trees and shrubs was subject to their regulation and approval, and both the both the Church of England and Dissenter Cemetery Boards also provided a grave tending service. Many of the trees shrubs and flowers planted in the cemetery were gifted by members of the different churches. The care and ornamentation of the cemetery grounds was a matter of pride, though the theft of plants and flowers was occasionally recorded in the court pages.

The nature of the grounds was also a matter of disagreement, echoing the debates about appropriateness and style in England over the same time.

“Sir—having for some time been absent from Canterbury, I took occasion yesterday to visit our cemetery, and I must acknowledge that I was very disappointed at the alterations which had taken place. In the old days, when it was entirely cut shut out from the world by a thick gorse fence, any demonstration of grief was necessarily excluded from the vulgar gaze. But now-a-days such a demonstration would assume the character of ostentatious parade, and the idea of seclusion is entirely ignored. In the old days the ground bore the character of a cemetery: the object at the present day appears to be to convert it to a botanical garden. Yours &c. CONCERNED.”¹⁸

The reference to the botanical garden also alludes to another interpretation of time, as the origin of the botanical garden has itself been interpreted as an allusion to Paradise. For many of the great European explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth century the search for the Garden of Eden was an important aspect of their mission. As it became apparent that it would or could not be found, their collections of plants from around the globe gathered the scattered pieces of creation together, often in a layout which made direct reference to the legendary landscape of Paradise.¹⁹

Attention paid to the arrangement and planting of the cemetery could not counteract the growing concerns noted by health officials and the general public about the dangers posed by the presence of the cemetery in the city. Agitation for its closure was eventually successful and the cemetery closed from 1885 onward. In his report recommending the closure of the cemetery Dr Nedwill, the Medical Officer, also recommended that “the planting of trees and shrubs of rapid growth should be encouraged, with the double object of absorbing dampness from the soil and noxious exhalations.”²⁰ Vegetation was to be used to improve both the visual and atmospheric qualities of the cemetery landscape. Shortly after the recommendation many of the trees and shrubs already planted actually required thinning and a report of clearing in the cemetery noted with approval that it had admitted more light and air, also ingredients promoting health, to the ground.²¹

Once the cemetery had been virtually closed, the income from burials largely ceased. The Church of England Cemetery Board had money invested for perpetual maintenance. Although it still struggled to generate sufficient income for the maintenance of the grounds and graves the Board was able to continue employing a sexton. The Catholic and Dissenter cemeteries, however, fell rapidly into a state of disrepair. As systematic human intervention in these parts of the cemetery was reduced some of the introduced plants extended into other areas of the site; ivy covered large areas of ground, including graves and monuments, while other trees, especially sycamore, began to self-seed and establish themselves, gradually threatening to overwhelm the cemetery;

“Not only are sheep, cows and horses allowed to roam over it, but it is over grown with broom, gorse, etc., until it can hardly be recognised as a cemetery...”²²



Berries contained in wreaths began to grow and spread. The growth was covering these parts of the cemetery and obscuring it, and also beginning to dismantle and destroy the graves within it;

"Many have been dislodged from their pedestals and are almost covered by grass and weeds. One marble tombstone had fallen flat along the grave and was broken in two, and grass has grown up through the cracks... In the case of one grave the dense growth of ivy has lifted the headstone from its pedestal and held it suspended off the ground."²³

The wilderness versus the ideal

As the vegetation grew out of control in the Catholic and Dissenter parts of the cemetery, instead of an Arcadian landscape it became regarded as a wilderness, which was thought to conceal and encourage lewd and dangerous behaviour. The Anglican portion, however, still under the regular care of a sexton, depicted the ideal cemetery landscape, which recalled an idealised past time and distant place;

"The Anglican cemetery of the other side of the road... presents a much more inviting appearance—green close-shaven lawns, low grave mounds covered with a carpet of grass... Trees and shrubs that must be as old as the settlement, and an aged yew or so give an atmosphere of Old World peace."²⁴

The western section continued to offer a contrasting, destructive picture of the effects of growth and of time;

"...time and neglect have hidden them beneath a riot of weeds, tall wild pea, and thistles... the cemetery allowed to degenerate in parts into a tangle of undergrowth filled with broken headstones and rusty iron railings..."²⁵

The report noted how the cemetery seemed to be reverting to nature;

"Two headstones have been clothed in a thick covering of ivy so at first they might be mistaken for tree trunks."²⁶

The small plot gardens that had been intended for flowers began to sprout with self-sown trees, including a number of indigenous Ti, or cabbage trees (*Cordyline australis*). Even in the Anglican cemetery the relentless growth was getting the better of human efforts to contain it. In the face of the inabilities of the church authorities to deal with the increasing problems of maintenance the Christchurch City Council inherited the maintenance and control of the Catholic and Dissenter areas of the cemetery in 1916 and of the Anglican area in 1948. The Council's initial proposal to redevelop the site aimed to enhance its ornamental and recreational qualities as a landscape;

"... the grounds throughout the cemetery will be levelled where possible, graded and sown in lawn grass, and further ornamental trees, but not still and sombre conifers will be planted."²⁷

The 'sombre' conifers, although a traditional and recognisable feature of the cemetery landscape, were not in keeping with the new, open, pleasant, park-like landscape which was to be created. When these plans for redevelopment were shelved, due to public dissatisfaction and legal constraints, the overall state of the cemetery continued to deteriorate, although the Council did undertake regular mowing and weed-spraying.²⁸ Similar plans for improving the grounds were revived in 1966, when new legislation gave the Council the power to relocate or clear headstones.

The proposed landscape alterations were still orientated to creating an open, grassy, park-like area, with new ornamental rather than melancholy vegetation.

The importance of the existing trees to the experience and significance of the cemetery was noted in a 1967 report on the cemetery, as they marked the passage of time, and formed a direct physical link, as well as an evocative one, between the present and the past:

“But what closes the graves into the seclusion of their own memories is the size of the trees which were planted there early in the history of the place and of Christchurch: yew, oak, laurel, elm, sycamore. All are of great size and all contribute to a sense of permanence.”²⁹

“Yet”, the writer further noted, “nothing is permanent.” The growth of the vegetation in the cemetery had obscured and destroyed much of the stonework erected over the graves. This undergrowth was itself subject to clearance and removal by the Council and by the Barbadoes St Preservation Committee, which had begun to organise working bees to involve the public in the clearing of the cemetery.

Re-planting the past

One aspect of the Council's next plan for the cemetery in the mid 1970s included the planting of indigenous species in the cemetery, particularly around the boundaries. As part of a general city-wide council policy to increase the use of native plants small areas along the river bank were also planted in a mixture of species, including the flax which had originally lined the river. This deliberate reference to the vegetation of the past was echoed by the discovery in the Dissenters' Cemetery of a variegated Euonymus (spindle tree), donated by early nurseryman Thomas Abbott, which had reverted to its original green.³⁰ The proposal to include a Garden of Biblical Plants³¹ as part of a 'Garden of Memories', recalled an even more distant past. In the face of the impermanence of the actual landscape, the use of specific plants could evoke memories of the past; of the people buried in the site, the Christian traditions brought to the site and the site itself, before those particular traditions arrived.

Unlike the graves, which were by now protected by the cemetery's status as an archaeological site,³² the trees in the cemetery had no historic status or protection. The balance between the natural and the constructed was still officially oriented in favour of the constructed. The endless growth and change of the cemetery's vegetation thus had to be matched by the ongoing process of clearing, as the vegetation not only threatened the built fabric of the cemetery, but also provided a haven for people who deliberately damaged the graves. The trees which had been planted because of their traditional, symbolic relationship with European places of burial had themselves become weeds. The Preservation Committee was anxious that the 'new' native, biblical and ornamental planting should not recreate the problems that they were trying to eradicate, and in the end this proposed garden was not constructed.

The tendency for trees to become troublesome weeds, and conceal 'undesirable persons', was a reflection on the ambivalent relationship between the vegetation and the cemetery. While specific trees and plants can be used deliberately for their symbolic and evocative qualities, they also have their own patterns of growth which are beyond complete human control. These growth patterns may themselves be experienced or interpreted as symbolic when they occur, especially in such a landscape with as much human significance as a cemetery.



Wilderness and garden

The change in the type of vegetation in the cemetery is an expression of a desire to transplant a society and its attendant familiar landscapes to another land, initially obliterating the unique characteristics of the site, literally and metaphorically. It is also a story of the changing sense of identity that is particular to this place and culture. When the familiar form of the cemetery was transplanted across from Europe, to a place the settlers was a desolate wilderness, the indigenous vegetation was erased and a different "traditional" vegetation was imposed. The removal of the indigenous vegetation was a crucial part of the transfer of European symbolism to the 'New Country'.

This imported vegetation itself became a kind of wilderness, once human control over the cemetery was relaxed, and monuments erected to perpetuate human memory were overwhelmed by the growth of nature. The destruction wrought by trees, grass and ivy and the vandals they helped conceal, was greeted with dismay. Eventually human control was again asserted in the cemetery and the destructive potential of nature was countered with its co-option in the evocation of idealised memory, by replanting native species in the cemetery and adjacent riverbanks. The same plants removed as the swamps were drained, as part of an effort to create a 'better future', are now replaced to create a rejuvenated sense of the past. The swamp vegetation that was a sign of an uncultivated wasteland to the early European settlers is now planted as a mark of identity and distinctiveness of place.

The 'ideal' landscape motivating this decision to plant this particular vegetation is the primeval wilderness, which now gains particular power from its scarcity, destruction and loss, much as the cemetery was revitalised when faced with loss and decay. The very 'naturalness' of this return to the 'original' vegetation obscures the extent to which human preferences, decisions and actions have brought about this change. As Duncan notes, the landscape's "history as a social construction is as unwittingly read as it is unwittingly written."³³

The cemetery landscape embodies this ongoing conflict between growth and decay, literally and metaphorically. As such, it acts as a poignant reminder of the complex notions of time potentially present within every landscape to which humans attach meaning and memory. °

Endnotes

- 1 Monumental transcripts of the Barbadoes St Cemetery, 1982, Area 4, Row W, No. 720.
- 2 M. Merleau-Ponty, (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London p.5.
- 3 P. Ariès, (1974) *Western Attitudes towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore. p. 14.
- 4 Curl, (1972) *The Victorian Celebration of Death*. David & Charles: Newton Abbot. p. 42.
- 5 Davies (1988) "The Evocative Symbolism of Trees," in *Iconography of Landscape: Essay on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*. Cambridge University Press: New York.
- 6 H. Partin, in Eliade(1987) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Macmillan Publishing Co: New York. p.185.
- 7 Ariès, p. 19.
- 8 Curl, p. 71.
- 9 Ariès, p. 28.



- 10 R. Etlin, (1984) *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth Century Paris*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England. 1984, p. 3
- 11 Ariès, p. 56.
- 12 Ariès, p. 63.
- 13 This 'modern' form of burial had already been established in colonial India and Louisiana, necessitated by the climatic and ground conditions. See Curl, 1993, pp 135–150.
- 14 Curl, p. 368.
- 15 Loudon, 1843, p. 93, quoted in Curl, p. 245.
- 16 Loudon, 1843, p. 148, quoted in Curl, p. 250.
- 17 Crosby, (1986) *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- 18 The Press, 09.08.1870, p. 3.
- 19 W. McClung, (1983) *The Architecture of Paradise: Survivals of Eden and Jerusalem*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London.
- 20 The Lyttleton Times, 04.09.1883, p. 5.
- 21 The Lyttleton Times, 02.09.1884, p. 4
- 22 The Lyttleton Times, 10.03.1913, p. 4.
- 23 The Press, 17.07.1913, p. 10.
- 24 The Press, 04.05. 1929, p. 19.
- 25 The Christchurch Times, 04.01.1934, p. 10.
- 26 The Christchurch Times, 04.01.1934, p. 10
- 27 The Press, 21.02.1950, p. 3.
- 28 The Press, 20.04.1966, p. 1.
- 29 The Press, 04.04.1967, p. 6.
- 30 The Press, 27.09.1975, p. 12.
- 31 The Press, 11.05.1977, p. 10.
- 32 Historic Places Act 1980.
- 33 J. Duncan, (1990) *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, England; New York. p.19.

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