

Suzanne Falkiner, *The Imago: E. L. Grant Watson and Australia* (UWA Publishing, 2011)

Elliot Lovegood Grant Watson (1885-1970) was a British biologist and writer who first came to Australia on an anthropological expedition to Western Australia. While awaiting the remainder of his party, he collected insects for European entymologists, and discovered an affinity for the Australian bush. He wrote of the deep sense of peace and awe evoked by the desert landscape, and over the span of his career, wrote six novels based in Australia. His first novel, *Where Bonds are Loosed* (London, 1914), was based on his experiences on Bernier Island off Western Australia.

At 502 pages, including notes, bibliography, credits and index, *The Imago* would no doubt present a daunting prospect for the reader with little or no interest in E. L. Grant Watson; which only goes to prove that one cannot judge a book by its cover, or in this case, its size. *The Imago* is an entertaining story of a restless, tortured character who prefers to wander the world alone. Yet despite appearing to be a shy and morose young man, Grant Watson is invited to accompany Alfred Reginald Brown and Daisy Bates on expeditions to Bernier and Dorre Islands, and mixes with luminaries such as Gertrude Stein, Joseph Conrad, and in later life, Karl Jung.

There appears to be no plan to Grant-Watson's path. Falkiner's reading suggests his inner life and most of his decisions are governed by his enduring love for a beautiful woman, Ida, whom he cannot marry. However, perhaps one a little less enamoured with Watson than Falkiner might contend Grant Watson is a self-centred individual with scant regard for other people's feelings: he marries a woman he does not love while continuing to pursue a married woman to the detriment of her health and social standing. He even goes so far as to enlist his wife's help when arranging a meeting with Ida in Florence. Ida's husband, James Bedford, finally insists that he cease all contact. Despite the ego-centric callousness he displays toward those close to him, Grant Watson presents as a likeable and interesting character, who as with any other individual makes mistakes and must live with the consequences.

To her credit Falkiner does not allow the love triangle of Watson, his wife Katharine and Ida to dominate the text. She reflects on their entanglements through their separate histories and reads the effects of Ida's estrangement on Grant Watson through his diaries and the letters he sent to his mother while wandering throughout Australia and Europe. In this way, the biography is not the story of one man, but contains insights into the social and domestic workings of the day. Likewise, Falkiner does not allow Grant Watson's writing to take a back seat to his personal life. His writing is studied within the context of his journeys in Australia and his personal experiences of the time, without bogging the reader down in extensive literary criticism. For the reader wishing to know more about particular works, an appendix of the 'Australian' novels is included. Each title has a brief description of plot, characters and theme. This approach works well: the international scope of Grant Watson's academic and personal life, and his writing, is recognised; there is no attempt to squeeze him into the role of 'Australian author'.

Falkiner pinpoints important experiences on Dorre and Bernier Islands in Grant Watson's fiction, but once again, does not take him to task for his ego-centrism.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless

<sup>1</sup> In 1907, the Western Australian government established the Lock Hospitals on Bernier and Dorre Islands for the segregation and cure of mainland Aborigines suffering from diseases. Females occupied the hospital on

she is not completely blind to the flaws in his character, even when she attempts to excuse them. She notes that he ‘makes remarkably scant mention of the Aboriginal patients (or prisoners)’ he encounters on Bernier and Dorre and suggests,

Perhaps, in his state of innocence, he found it easier to ignore the more sordid side of their sojourn: ... It was only in the immediacy of World War II (and after Bates’s own highly subjective account had appeared) that he would look back with mixed emotions, remembering, as well as his exultation, the darker side of their idyll. (134)

The exultation to which Falkiner refers is Grant Watson’s reaction to the landscape, and it was this more than anything else that permeated his Australian novels, and made him ‘a pioneer of literary themes explored decades later by Katharine Susannah Prichard, Randolph Stow and Patrick White’ (Back Cover).

The only complaint I have with *The Imago* is the tenuous link Falkiner attempts to forge between Grant Watson and White. She takes her lead from Dorothy Green’s assessment that ‘in his use of the central desert country of Australia as a symbol of the isolating journey into the self ... [Grant Watson] anticipates Patrick White’s *Voss* by thirty years’ (381) to overstate the coincidence of White’s attendance at Cambridge ‘some two years before the Grant Watsons moved’ there (323). Likewise she conjectures that the two ‘might have been in the same room together’ in February 1934 during a Cambridge Musical Society performance of *Jephtha* because Grant Watson ‘had visited Cambridge often in this period’ (324). While Falkiner’s research is admirable, there seems little to be gained from attempting to connect White and Grant Watson: she herself concedes there is no evidence that White was aware of Grant Watson’s writing.

Overall, *The Imago* is an ambitious autobiography that more than repays the reader for their time. There are too many details to mention in one review. To mention but a few: Grant Watson’s unorthodox early education; his mother’s unusual life, his wife Katharine’s permissive (or perhaps submissive?) acceptance of his passion for Ida, and the early years of Ida’s life in India. Falkiner’s research is exhaustive and her admiration for her subject apparent, but she maintains a sensitive touch, allowing readers to reach their own conclusions. Overall, *The Imago* is an engaging read that should, as the media release suggests, spark renewed interest in Grant Watson’s Australian novels.

## Kathleen Steele

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Bernier Island and males occupied the hospital on Dorre Island. Daisy Bates described the hospitals in 1910: ‘there is not, among all my sad sojourn amongst the last sad people of the primitive Australian race, a memory one-half so tragic and harrowing, or a name that conjures up such a deplorable picture of misery and horror unalleviated, as these two grim and barren islands off the West Australian coast that for a period, mercifully brief, were the tombs of the living dead’. By 1918, the Lock Hospitals were closed and the few remaining patients moved to hospitals on the mainland. Over nine years of operation, in excess of 700 Aborigines were admitted to the Lock Hospitals, of which at least 162 died on the islands.

Cf: <http://www.sharkbay.org/assets/documents/fact%20sheets/history%20bernier%20and%20dorre%20v2.pdf>