

2008

Transcending Borders: Imagined/Real and Primitive/Civilised Communities in the
Novels of E.L. Grant Watson

Angeline O'Neill

University of Notre Dame Australia, aoneill@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference



This conference paper was originally published as:

O'Neill, A. (2008). Transcending Borders: Imagined/Real and Primitive/Civilised Communities in the Novels of E.L. Grant Watson.
The Novel and Its Borders Conference.

This conference paper is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at
http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference/4. For more
information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



**TRANSCENDING BORDERS: IMAGINED/REAL AND PRIMITIVE/CIVILIZED COMMUNITIES IN THE
NOVELS OF E.L. GRANT WATSON**

Dr Angeline O'Neill, College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Notre Dame, Australia

Questions of myth, landscape and self constituting a sense of place have played a significant role in much literature written in and about Australia and continue to do so; from the folkloric works of Henry Lawson and "Banjo" Patterson in the 1890's to the novels of Katharine Prichard, Patrick White and Tim Winton, for example. Perhaps surprisingly, the novels of English biologist, amateur anthropologist and psychologist, metaphysician and colonialist E L. Grant Watson(1885-1970) belong to this tradition.

Watson sought to represent Western Australian landscapes, the most enduring of which were inspired by personal experiences of Western Australia and its Aboriginal peoples. He sought landscapes which had not been domesticated by European signification or codified by its ideology, and he argued that language was neither "pure truth" nor "pure fiction". Instead it became a way for undermining the distinction between the two and uncovering subtle correspondences between various ways of knowing and writing about Nature and the Self. As such, it was also a means of representing an otherwise unrepresentable unseen realm. This sort of space, which is a source of creativity and renewal, a centre for orientation, was removed from the fragmented universe produced by a materialistic and mechanistic society. It seemed to offer some unity and harmony which might after all underlie reality and provide an answer to the significant ideological and socio-cultural challenges of late nineteenth and early twentieth century English and European thought. Significantly influenced by the works of Joseph Conrad, Watson's genre of choice was the novel, which he believed offered a space where imagined and real communities could merge, transcending borders between supposedly primitive and civilized cultures.