

THE IMAGO

E. L. Grant Watson
& Australia

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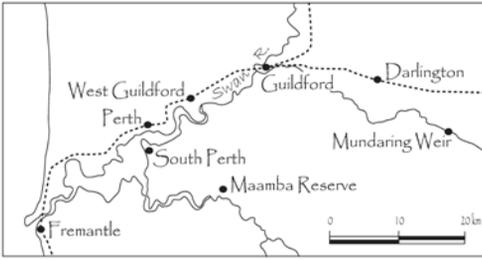
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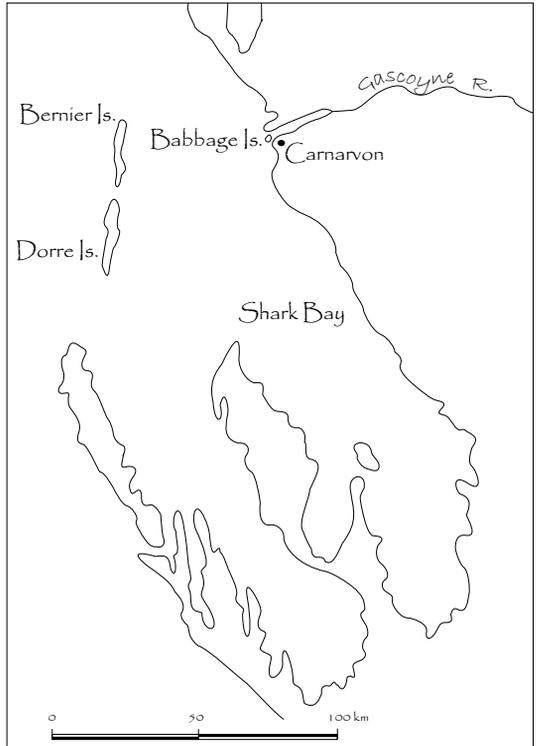
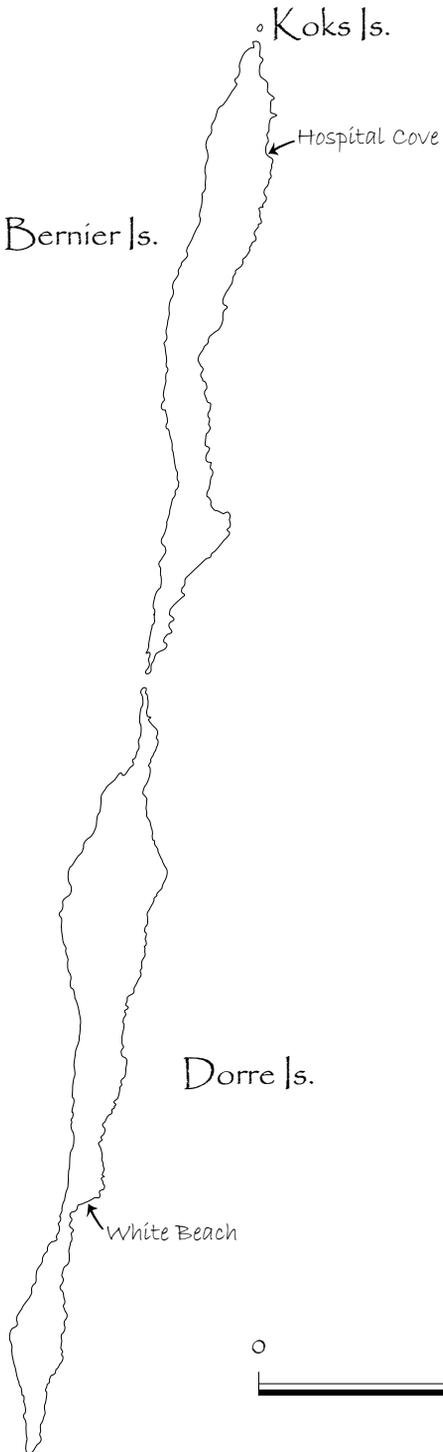
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Shark Bay

PREFACE

So it was that day after day, the bush questioned me...the veil of time seemed drawn aside, and eternity gaped in the sun's glare, or in the cracking of a seed pod.

– *But to What Purpose* (1946)¹

In 1910 Elliot Lovegood Grant Watson, a twenty-four-year-old biology student from Cambridge, steeped in the Darwinism, atheism and socialism fashionable among his contemporaries, joined Daisy Bates and the controversial young anthropologist A. R. Brown on an ethnological expedition into the Western Australian desert. From Perth his travels took him inland to the Kalgoorlie and Murchison river regions, and then back to the Aboriginal island lock hospitals of Shark Bay. The experience changed his life. Twice now in little more than a year he had fallen in love, once with a woman and once with the Australian landscape. Both would remain intangible and ineluctable, and both obsessions would stay with him for the rest of his life.

On his return to England he decided to become a writer.

Moving restlessly between the English countryside and the expatriate colonies of pre-war Florence and Paris; from Bohemian London and prohibition New York to Palestine and the Arctic Circle, E. L. Grant Watson navigated friendships with prominent figures such as Joseph Conrad, Rupert Brooke, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Gertrude Stein, Havelock Ellis, D. H. Lawrence and – later – Carl Gustav Jung. Through two world wars and the writing of

his six 'Australian' novels, he brought the cultural preoccupations of his generation to bear on the subject of the numinous Australian inland, as he sought to reconcile his Darwinian scientific training with his yearning for spiritual meaning. Running through all his novels was the subtext of his secret, lifelong love for a woman, extraordinary in herself, whom he could not marry.

Grant Watson's writing, well received in England and America, was noticed only by a select few in Australia. His use of the inland as symbol of the Jungian unconscious prefigured Patrick White's *Voss* by decades, just as his empathy with the Aboriginal understanding of the landscape presaged Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*,² and his iconoclastic treatment of relations between black women and white men anticipated Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo*. His work also foreshadowed the concerns of many future environmental thinkers.

Dedicated Grant Watson readers, always eclectic, have tended to engage closely in their attempts to unravel the conundrums of his life and works. Perhaps the most prominent was literary scholar Dorothy Green, who spent twenty years researching a critical biography of Grant Watson – only to present the world with a mystery when no trace of it was found among her papers after her death. Historians and anthropologists hoped that his writing might throw more light on his companions A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daisy Bates, both notoriously reticent or unreliable in their own accounts of their lives. The Melbourne filmmaker Paul Cox, 'drawn into the intoxicating landscape of a true visionary',³ was inspired to make feature films of two of Grant Watson's novels.

In the Australian inland Grant Watson found God unmediated by man; exhilaration – even reverence – in the flick of an insect's wings. The Taoist notion of the *imago*, with its symbolic association with the 'soul', paralleled his belief that humankind was metamorphosing to a higher state, and that life was not a meaningless accident. The recurring motif of the butterfly, so beloved of Grant Watson for the sequence of small 'deaths' that enable the nascent creature to transform itself from larva to an end state where it might finally flash its brilliant colours in the desert sunlight, seems an apt metaphor for a man who, throughout his life and his work, sought fulfilment, creativity and metaphysical understanding.

PART I

The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us;
and I for one must be content to remain an agnostic.

– Charles Darwin¹

One

THE STATUE IN THE MUSEUM

Around 1892 a slight, fair-haired boy of seven or eight took the train from Godalming with his widowed mother to visit the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. With this first excursion, later to become a regular school holiday event, ‘Peter’ Grant Watson would always associate a certain ineffable romance: from the grimacing gargoyles that clung to the exterior arches and buttresses to the vast cathedral-like interior, where a blackened dinosaur skeleton dominated the entrance hall and stone monkeys, lizards and exotic vines climbed pillars to the vaulted ceiling. Beyond these, he recalled, lay more intimate chambers filled with glass cases of familiar British birds and their nests.

Halfway up the echoing central stairway stood a marble statue of Charles Darwin, installed in 1885, the year of Grant Watson’s birth. Peter – his mother, Lucy, had always disliked his ‘Puritan’ Christian names of Elliot Lovegood – was mortified when Lucy, fiercely loyal to his dead father’s secular ‘religion’ of science, bade him doff his hat in reverence. What if some other boy should see him? Rebelling against a ritual that seemed to him as unnatural

as kissing the toe of a dead saint, he pondered the conundrum of being told to 'dare to have a point of view of your own' while being so ostentatiously subjugated to his mother's.

Even today the larger-than-life figure, now roped off at eye-level and buffeted by the shouts of children in the museum's noisy cafeteria, stares with a god-like intensity. Sporting a flowing beard and double-breasted waistcoat and seated with its milky marble coat draped over its knees, its stone shoelaces tied in complicated knots, the statue must have looked to a small boy like a representation of God himself. Until he grew older, Peter wrote later, he deliberately kept his explorations to the ground floor, so as to avoid an encounter with the patriarch looming above.²

Elliot Lovegood Grant Watson was born on 14 June 1885 at Staines in London, and, despite his parents' unorthodox ideas about religion, was baptised into the Church of England. His early years were spent in a large and comfortable house that his father, Reginald, a barrister, had rented at St Mark's Square near Regent's Park. Household staff included a nurse, man-servant, cook and housemaid, as well as Lucy's much-loved French maid, Florestine,³ called 'Tenie'.

Just across the road were the Zoological Gardens, where Lucy also took her small son, dressed in his black velvet jacket with big silver buttons, for Sunday morning walks while she told him interesting things about nature. Peter recalled his mother identifying the large black flints embedded in the walls of the Underground tunnel as fossilised sponges. One summer he was given a silver gibbon for a pet, but in winter the shivering creature had to be sent to the zoo for warmer housing, although they were still able to visit him. Later there was a squirrel, which was tame, but gnawed the furniture.

Lucy came from a prosperous rural family in Surrey. Her father, Francis Fuller, born around 1809, had grown up at Coulsdon Court, some ten miles from Epsom (where, allegedly, he never missed watching the Derby in over sixty years). After briefly farming a family estate he became a surveyor and land valuer for the landholders whose country was acquired for the railways. Fuller

amassed an even greater fortune when, pragmatically, he switched from representing the local farmers to acting for the new rail companies. Later he turned his entrepreneurial bent to promoting the building of the Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851, and made influential friends including the prime minister William Gladstone and Albert, the Prince Consort. Lucy, the thirteenth and youngest child of Francis and his wife, Mary Ann, née Drew, was born on 26 September 1860, at Belvedere Road at Norwood (later part of the larger London suburb of Crystal Palace), when Francis was in his early fifties and Mary Ann was forty-two.

Growing up at Kenley Manor at Coulsdon, Lucy and her siblings were cared for by two nurses and four female servants. Dora – nine years older – recalled her elder sisters being presented in society while the schoolroom and nurseries were still full of little ones.

This Victorian upbringing was ordered, but not unaffectionate. Each evening at six, accompanied by Nannie in her best black silk, the children filed into the drawing room for an audience with Francis Fuller. At Sunday dinner they were allowed to join the adults for dessert. Instructed to enter the dining room in an orderly manner, they ultimately would break ranks and run whooping to hunt for their father, who was often found hiding behind the curtains or under the tablecloth, after which each child was presented with a small glass of sweet Cape wine. Naughtiness was cause for shame and immediate exclusion from the hallowed circle. At morning and evening, with the servants lined up near the door, prayers were read.

Kenley Manor stood on a large estate adjoining Kenley Common. On Sundays, after church, some Fuller children were chosen to walk home through the fields and woods with their father, who instructed them in farming matters and identified every wildflower, animal cry and birdsong. The older girls hunted – Fuller was Master of the Surrey hounds – while the younger ones had ponies and all were taught to drive a buggy. Neither were literature and art neglected: Dora recalled her father pointing out to her, at ten, the classic simplicity of Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard', and musicians and artists were often invited to visit the house to entertain or paint and draw his family. The girls, initially instructed by governesses and tutors, progressed to a

boarding school at Brighton, where German and French – in which they were grounded already by their Swiss under-nurse – were spoken alternately in the mornings and afternoons.⁴

The eldest Fuller boy, called Francis and also a surveyor, had gone out to Australia before Lucy was born; others went to further colonial outposts. Dora, at twenty-three, would move to Sydney, to help Francis's frail wife run her household.⁵

Lucy, the petted baby of the family, had always believed herself to be her father's favourite. Her sister Geraldine, sixteen years older and her godmother, was also a great influence. Geraldine had undergone a religious conversion in adolescence and – against the family's will – taken holy orders. As a schoolgirl Lucy was devout, praying for hours and mortifying her flesh in winter by standing barely clothed before an open window. Fortunately, Geraldine's sway could not prevent Lucy, at nineteen, from attending dances at the local Star and Garter inn where, around 1879, she met Reginald Watson, a twenty-two-year-old articled clerk who, having lost his own father, was subsisting on the charity of an aunt.

The Watson family (Reginald later changed his name to Grant Watson, after a noble forebear) were similarly long established in colonial service and the military, with branches in India, Quebec and Australia. Reginald was born in 1858 in the East Indies. The Grant Watson branch of the family held titled estates in the Midlands, including Rockingham Woods and Rockingham Castle – an inheritance that Reginald maintained he had wrongfully missed through the breaking of an entail.

Reginald – a tall, strong-looking man with a fine moustache and bold, sensual dark eyes – was educated at Repton College. Athletic (he rowed with the Leander Club and was a skilful dancer and fencer), he was also a freethinker. Rebelling against a family line of God-fearing soldiers stretching back to the Plantagenets – or so wrote his son later – he had fervently embraced a revolutionary form of Protestantism that he believed would sweep away the decadence of the old church. This enthusiasm for radical ideas included a conviction that Darwinism, in helping to break down the rigid patterns of Church and State, would not so much destroy old values as open doors to a 'middle way' between science and religion.⁶

Regardless of Reginald's unconventional political views, however, the Fuller family would not permit him to marry their daughter until he could afford to keep her. As a result, Lucy and Reginald were engaged for five years. Nevertheless, they evidently found ways of spending time together: the 1881 Census shows Lucy, at twenty, as the houseguest of Reginald's brother-in-law John Goldie, a barrister at Ryland Road in Richmond. In the years leading up to their marriage, while no doubt also wooing her with his dancing and boating prowess, Reginald converted Lucy to Darwinism: 'Eros was the chief god, and Darwin and Huxley his henchmen', wrote Grant Watson.⁷ Consequently, something of a tug-of-war developed between Reginald and Geraldine, the latter encouraging Lucy to follow her into the convent. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Reginald won.

Despite his years of relative poverty, Reginald Grant Watson enjoyed the good things in life: his mother-in-law Mary Ann Fuller had always considered his habit of taking champagne before luncheon unduly extravagant. Fortunately, by 31 July 1884, when the couple were married in the parish church at Steyning, Reginald – then twenty-seven and living at St James's, Piccadilly House, London – was a practising barrister on £600 a year. Peter was born just over ten months later, by which time Reginald's annual income had risen to £1000. A photograph taken at around this time shows Lucy, at twenty-four, as a thin young woman with the same bony, intelligent face as her father. Lying back on a large cushion on a summer lawn, with fresh jasmine pinned to her collar and a small black and white dog at her side, she is nestled comfortably into her husband's lap in a pose that seems unusually intimate for the era.

By a few years later Reginald – now manager of the Law Union Fire and Life Insurance Company on a salary of £1500 – was spending his income largely on books, entertaining, guns and fishing rods and a rented shoot in Sussex. Peter's only memories of his father from this period were of his hard and muscular body, and the short, curly dark hair that a child could grip tightly when carried on his shoulders.



Lucy (née Fuller) and Reginald Grant Watson, circa 1884.

Not long after, however, things began to go badly wrong. Francis Fuller died in 1887, the same year that Lucy bore another son, who also died suddenly at the age of two. In November 1890, to help overcome her grief, Lucy set off on the *Kaikoura*, with five-year-old Peter, to visit Reginald's uncle Thomas James Watson in Australia. Sailing with them were Lucy's maid Tenie and two-year-old Maud Watson, the child of a recently-widowed brother of Reginald's.

Major General Watson, having served in India with the 9th Bengal Cavalry during the frontier wars, had retired some five years earlier with his family to a thirty-nine-acre estate at Northdown, on the Port Sorell Main Road near Devonport in Tasmania. Here he built 'Oulton', a rambling two-storey house framed by cast iron gates and a long drive. Grant Watson, writing in 1944, would recall a roomy wooden homestead warmed by ten fireplaces and shaded by verandahs laden with flowering creepers, with large second floor bedrooms under a steeply pitched roof and a ballroom and formal dining and drawing rooms below. Beyond the servants' quarters were a cherry orchard and a paddock, where the Major

had installed a clutch of ponies for his five children, who also sailed homemade boats in a dam surrounded by mimosa and paperbarks.

For Peter, this was a time of unclouded happiness. Now his nature walks with Lucy were among giant tree ferns, where they found leaf-like stick insects and strange Antipodean beetles, butterflies and birds' nests. One Sunday, when the household had turned out for the five-mile drive to church, his mother spotted a huge black snake sunning itself near the track. Peter and the younger girls were in a second buggy, he recalled, and twenty-four-year-old Tom, with Lucy up front beside him, was driving.

My cousin dropped the reins and jumped down with his whip, and began striking at the snake, which at first tried to make off, but very soon turned to defend itself. We children on the back seat soon tumbled off, and, picking up what sticks we could lay hands on, tried to help. My mother had all she could do to control the horse who became infected by the general excitement.

The contest lasted a good five minutes before the snake's back was broken. Tim [sic] managed to get a forked stick across the back of its head and then drove the blade of his pocket knife through the base of its skull. But the snake was by no means dead. Tim said it was not possible to kill snakes completely, and as this was an exceptionally large specimen, and he did not want to spoil the skin by knocking it about, he pinned its head [with the knife] to the bottom-boards of the buggy. We drove on to church with the stimulating feeling of the snake's coils writhing every now and then about our ankles.

...I remember the thrill of awe and revulsion which I felt when I was shown the fangs, with their inflated bags of poison at the base. Tim squeezed the poison out for us to see. Then came the skinning and the second and the third thrill. The flesh was astonishingly white, with a queer iridescence in the muscles which moved in rhythmical convulsions as the skin was peeled from them...The other thrill was afforded by the undigested or partially digested animals which came out of its stomach. Two complete kangaroo rats and a partially digested chicken...

At last the skin was clear of the carcass, and the white fleshed and still moving body was thrown on the rubbish heap. The next morning I went back, fascinated, to look at it and was relieved to see that it was at last properly dead with no lingering signs of vitality.⁸

The skin, which measured six feet, was nailed to a plank and left to dry in the sun. When it was cured and treated, a Hobart taxidermist mounted it on green baize and the family presented it to Lucy as a memento. Back in England it hung on their dining room wall for over ten years, Peter remembered, and yearly it seemed to shed another outer skin of diaphanous scales. For Grant Watson, this experience was the start of a lifelong fascination with snakes – and with their psychological and literary symbolism.⁹

Why it was believed that a prolonged period away from her husband would benefit Lucy's health remains unrecorded, but in her absence Reginald rented out the Regents Park house and travelled in Italy. Early in 1891, news reached them in Tasmania that he had contracted typhoid in Naples, and Lucy, Peter and Tenie immediately started for home. By the time they reached Hobart, however, another cable arrived announcing that his condition was critical. In Melbourne came one more, within ten days of the first, to say that he had died on 31 January that year, at the age of thirty-three. Grant Watson wrote:

I have but one memory of that time: I found my mother weeping and on her knees in the hotel bedroom. I begged her not to cry, and when she told her grief, I added my childish sobs to hers, not because I understood the significance of what had happened, but I felt her unhappiness as something too terrible to be allowed.¹⁰

Embarking in Melbourne on a steamer for the homeward voyage, Lucy herself was nearly killed when a stray mooring rope tautened and overturned the gangway. Thrown over its side, she managed to grab the chains and hold on, dangling above the water,

until a sailor could swing down hand-over-hand and rescue her. Having lost father, child and husband in rapid succession, Lucy was convinced now that her life had been saved for a purpose, and that was to devote herself with single-minded intensity to her only remaining son.¹¹

Arriving back in London, they learned that Reginald, on waking and feeling ill one morning, had gone for a workout with a fencing partner, which only made him worse. His delirium was so strong that four men were needed to hold him down, and he was buried in Naples where he died.

They also discovered that he had saved no money at all. Reginald's protracted legal battle (based on the alleged broken entail) to claim his rightful title as the next Earl of Rockingham, and thus to live in a castle of immense and uncomfortable antiquity, may have contributed to this. In any event, his almost Dickensian¹² court case ended with his death, and the nearest the family came to the earldom, a descendant recorded, was to own a Rockingham teapot. All the young widow now possessed was £4000 from Reginald's life insurance and the furnishings of the house, badly damaged in the interim by the tenants. Snubbed by the wife of one of her brothers when she called on him for help, Lucy decided to fight their battles alone. After selling the lease on the house, and its contents, in 1892 Lucy, Peter and Tenie retired to a life of genteel poverty in Surrey.

Although his father had gone to Repton, Lucy had decided that Peter should be educated at Charterhouse, and in 1894 Peter – aged eight, and much against his will – was sent to board at a local preparatory school at Godalming. With Lucy living close by in a rented cottage he saw her often, and his memories of the school were not unpleasant – at least in comparison with what was to come next.

From their previous income of £1500 they now had £180 a year, from which Florestine received an annual £12, later rising to twenty. Lucy kept up her standards. At home she continued to dress for dinner, as did Tenie in her maid's uniform, even if it were only to serve her very economical potato soup. In their front yard a

yew tree provided a good lookout over the road, while at the back, apple and pear trees leaned out over the railway sidings. When the railwaymen threw lumps of coal over the wall at the pears, Peter recorded, they were able to collect them for their fire.

Not even when we again visited Australia did my mother cease to behave as a member of a privileged and superior class – nor would Tenie have wished her to do so. As for myself, I might have other standards, though it was not without protest that I gave up evening dress, and that not till many years later. The thought did not, in those early days, ever occur to my mother that her position of privilege (even as a Darwinian variation) might have been the outcome of chance.¹³

Small in stature, Lucy was indomitable – and obstinate: in Switzerland, he recalled, when once she had determined on a certain walk, she waded fully dressed into a cold lake rather than be blocked by a spiked fence denoting private property.¹⁴ An energetic gardener, she never objected when Peter – then or later – filled the house with wild creatures, even receiving ferrets in a friendly manner when he brought them to her in bed. Fearless, she invented a way for him to carry snakes safely on his bicycle, using a knotted stocking slung from a handlebar, a method largely aimed at minimising harm to the snake.¹⁵

Already a dedicated bug hunter with a large collection of butterflies caught with his own net, Peter was trained to be observant. On country rambles Lucy would put her foot over any interesting object she saw and then ask him what was beneath it, a game they played turn-about for points. These walks, thought Peter, stood in Lucy's mind in place of church-going – 'God is there in the open, not in churches, nor hidden by priests in a dark box', she told him.¹⁶ Between Reginald's progressive Protestantism and Geraldine's religiosity, his mother had arrived at a simple Humanism: God was to be found in nature, which was sacramental and symbolic, but also in the works of men. Churches were for her places of suffocation where 'bat-eyed and materialistic priests' performed fustian rights; poets and scientists, she believed, were the true prophets.¹⁷

At the head of Peter's bed was a cross, with the words 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends',

while on a side wall hung a photograph of Charles Darwin, captioned 'Labour, Art, Worship, Love, these make men's lives.' But if Darwin, the centre of his mother's private religion, was primarily presented as a lover of nature (and thus, as the mind of God was present in nature, a lover of God), Grant Watson would later need to discover Darwin the scientist for himself.

Peter, his mother let it be understood, was also to become a great naturalist; perhaps a second Darwin. But the deeper implication of Darwin's work, as he eventually realised, was not so much that man had developed from lower forms of life, or was descended from an ape-like ancestor, but that he was produced by chance in a chance-made pattern, as were all living things. That by this revolutionary theory, where all but a mechanistic process was discarded, God (and thus good and evil) became superfluous, was obviously an idea his mother had not pursued to its logical conclusion.

Though a backward scholar himself, Peter developed also an early love of poetry through listening to his mother read aloud from Tennyson (along with her favourite nature books), and felt that, if not a naturalist, he might have liked to become a poet. When his Aunt Geraldine, stout now in her nun's habit, came to stay at Godalming, Lucy allowed her to preach at him without restriction – but also without effect, as afterwards they shared a private amusement at her cheerful and long-winded fervour.¹⁸

Some five years after her husband died, Mary Ann Fuller, now aged eighty, came to join their household at Godalming, contributing a further £100 a year to expenses. Mrs Fuller, a tiny figure habitually dressed in black with a white lace cap, was still active, and despite a severe manner – Peter was spoiled, she maintained, and boarding school would be very good for him – she had a kind heart. In his holidays she happily rambled cross-country with him on insect hunts.

From this period, apart from their regular expeditions to the Natural History Museum in London, Peter also remembered visiting North Wales with one of Lucy's sisters, where he was intrigued by the bare quarries of Palaeozoic rock in the slate and shale mining area of Blaenau Ffestiniog. On his first day, running



Peter Grant Watson and his grandmother Mary Ann Fuller, circa 1892.

barefoot over the volcanic hills clad only in shorts, he found sun-basking lizards of a type he had never seen before. A holiday in Brittany the following year revealed a similarly entrancing landscape, imbued with a glamour that distant and ancient places would hold for him for the rest of his life.¹⁹

In the immediate future, however, a more daunting prospect loomed.