Archibald Watson was born in Tarcutta in 1849. His father Sidney Grandison Watson was a pioneer settler often referred to as “The King of the Upper Murray”. Archibald had three sisters and was the eldest of his three brothers. His early education was at Scotch College in Melbourne and there is a report from his Master calling him an excellent student.

Watson’s father was involved in several land ventures and travelled to Fiji to purchase some property there in 1869. When Archibald returned from Melbourne it is quite likely that his father dispatched him to Fiji to gain overseas experience and to report on his properties. This is the beginning of a controversial part of his life. There was a need of manpower in the Australian cane-fields and cotton fields elsewhere. Many entrepreneurs were trying to provide a labour force for these enterprises. The methods were suspect and neared the definition of slavery a common appellation was “blackbirding”. Archibald Watson arrived there in 1871 and joined a brig called Carl, owned by Dr. Murray, a Melbourne GP. In the previous voyage the Carl and its captain were involved in an incident which involved violent death of several natives. The British sent a naval force to apprehend the culprits.
. The crew and captain Anderson were jailed. Watson because of his age and considerable support from local authorities and lawyers, (Scutters and Truscott) has been released to face further investigation in Australia for a bail fee of ~$1000 (£200).

There is no doubt that Watson had been advised by many people and decided not to await the verdict of the government inquiry but sailed to Europe via North America. His decision to study medicine could have been influenced by his mother’s death. The cause of death was recorded as a ruptured ectopic pregnancy. It is also possible that Murray had some influence.

It is of interest that his first doctorate in medicine was from Gottingen. (1878) It confirms Watson’s linguistic abilities.

In 1880 Watson was in Paris and obtained another doctorate. The theme was dealing with complications of inguinal hernias.

In order to obtain his English (and Australian ) credentials he moved to London. Here he passed the English degrees:LSA, the MRCS and FRCS. He also instructed in Anatomy at the Charing Cross Hospital. In France Germany and in England, he met and spoke to the medical doyens of that time. It is said that he had a record of their vignettes. Lister, Hutchison, Charcot and others have been quoted.
When an advertisement for the Chair of Anatomy in Adelaide appeared in Lancet, the Athenaeum and other elite editions, Watson applied.

Of the 22 applicants there was a short list of four and Watson was a unanimous winner. Dr. Edward Stirling came from Adelaide and was one of the selectors. Watson’s references from Germany, France and England were impeccable.

Watson’s appointment was announced in 1885 and he and Stirling returned to Adelaide. They were met by Thomas Elder (later Sir) who provided the funding for the chair and Watson’s 34 year tenure as Professor of Anatomy (1885–1919) began. He was a charismatic personality. His past and present publications (hydatid disease, neurofibromatosis, myositis-ossificans and war injuries (Boer and WW1) as well as his past French and German papers would not be large by today’s standard yet his personality and tenure has been discussed and reported by many notable surgeons and historians. He has been remembered in the Royal Australasian College of Surgeon’s Archibald Watson Memorial Lectures and in numerous publications about his tenure and his life.

His diaries, illustrations detailing of operative procedures and day events are probably the only unique and fully personal record of such type.

The following represent some of the diary entries and photographs from the publications and collections stored by numerous national libraries and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

(LEFT)

Wednesday 15th “Caught a cab to a ball at Torrens Park – 6 people in the cab, paid 1/6 of 24 s”
[possibly]
Friday 17th coffee
Saturday 18th lunch

ARCHIBALD WATSON IN ADELAIDE WITH THE SKELETON OF MAX DREYSSIG. WATSON TREATED MAX WHEN HE FRACTURED HIS LEG AND LATER HE OPERATED IN HIM FOR STOMACH CANCER. MAX DONATED HIS SKELETON TO THE UNIVERSITY

PHOTOGRAPH OF WATSON TAKEN DURING THE BOER WAR AND A WW1 DOCUMENT.
ARCHIBALD WATSON OPERATIVE NOTES

SOURCE: Archives of Professor R.G. Elmslie
OWNER: Estate of R.G. Elmslie on loan to SAMHS.

Archibald Watson was the first Professor of Anatomy at the University of Adelaide. He was a controversial person and there are numerous anecdotes about his career. He kept numerous operative notes and a personal diary. The following operative note is a record of 2 procedures observed by him. The operators were Drs. Hopkins, McLean and Miller. The procedures involved breast and orthopedic surgery.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MYOSITIS OSSIFICANS IN A SKELETON DISSECTED BY ARCHIBALD WATSON AND FILETTED FROM THE CADAVER OF THE PATIENT. DR. LENDON PRESENTED THIS CASE AT AN IMPERIAL MEDICAL MEETING IN ADELAIDE.

A NOTICE ON THURSDAY ISLAND INDICATING THE PERSONS BURIED IN THE CEMETERY. KINDLY PROVIDED BY PETER DEVITT (RIGHT)

WATSON WAS MOST SPECIFIC ABOUT HIS OPERATING NOTES. HE DREW DIAGRAMS OF THE PROCEDURES, SOME IN COLOUR AND NAMED THE OPERATORS AS INDICATED ABOVE. LEFT. MAX DREIYSSIG OPERATIVE FINDINGS ARE RECORDED BY WATSON ON THE RIGHT.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MYOSITIS OSSIFICANS IN A SKELETON DISSECTED BY ARCHIBALD WATSON AND FILETTED FROM THE CADAVER OF THE PATIENT. DR. LENDON PRESENTED THIS CASE AT AN IMPERIAL MEDICAL MEETING IN ADELAIDE.

A NOTICE ON THURSDAY ISLAND INDICATING THE PERSONS BURIED IN THE CEMETERY. KINDLY PROVIDED BY PETER DEVITT (RIGHT)
Watson was 70 when he retired from Adelaide University. His father’s estates made him financially secure and he travelled widely. One hobby among others was fishing and there are several photographs of him with his catches. He rode his motorcycle in his eighties. He also had a comprehensive collection of fishing lures. His last years were spent on Thursday Island. Again his personality, risque remarks and demonstration of a beating shark’s heart in pail of water are remembered.

He was admired, and loved by his friends but he also was ostracised by some others in the medical profession who occasionally found his actions and forthright comments difficult to tolerate. The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons established a series of Memorial Lectures about him. The first was given by Sir Henry Simpson Newland and others who followed traced his life in Australia, Germany, France and England.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:
Professor Simpson made frequent references about him in his Medical Doctorate Thesis from the University of Adelaide “The Adelaide Medical School, 1885–1914, A Study of Anglo-Australian Synergies in Medical Education.”

Professor R.G. Elmslie studied his life and wrote about the dispute concerning Dr A.D.L. Napier and Professor Watson in 1896: “Mrs. L’s case, A celebrated South Australian surgical case,” (Aust N Z J .Surg 1991; 61: 780–788). He and Sue Nance also wrote about him in the Journal of Australian Biographies (vol. 12, 1891–1939, Smy-Z, pp 394–396). Professor Elmslie collected numerous photographs of Watson and has copied his diaries and operative notes. These are now stored with The Queen Elizabeth Historical Society and provided most of the above material.


All of the above were a valuable sources of information.