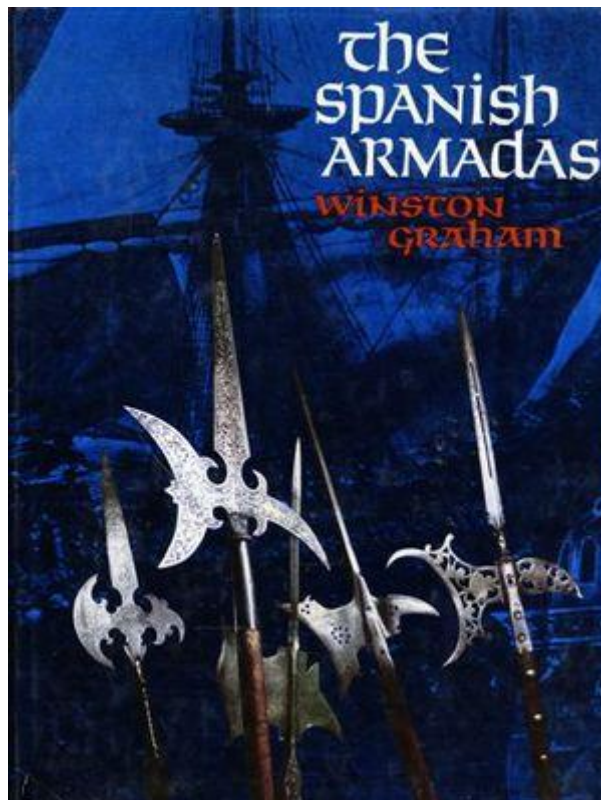


## Armadas and Memoirs: WG's book-length non-fiction

In his seventy-year career as a published author, Winston Graham wrote twelve Poldark novels, thirty other novels, four revised versions of early novels, one volume of short stories and three works of non-fiction: *The Spanish Armadas*, *Poldark's Cornwall* and *Memoirs of a Private Man* (hereafter called *Memoirs*). We will now consider these last three in turn:

### *The Spanish Armadas* (Collins, 1972)



WG's first book-length foray into non-fiction took him back to the Elizabethan period he had familiarised himself with thoroughly whilst researching his 1963 novel *The Grove of Eagles*. A "stimulus" is what made him write, he said – but why this particular subject? In a letter dated 8 November 1971 he told historian A. L. Rowse:

*An American publisher – not my own<sup>1</sup> – read THE GROVE OF EAGLES and so much liked it that he suggested to [British publisher George] Rainbird [Ltd.] that they should invite me to do one of their big illustrated books on The Spanish*

*Armada.*<sup>2</sup> *Being a little undecided what to do next [after completing 1970's [Angell, Pearl and Little God](#)], I accepted; but I stipulated that the book should deal with the four armadas and not just the main [1588] one, which has been written about too much already.*

Regarding the structure of the book:

*... I felt very strongly that almost all Armada books treated the sea fight or fights in a vacuum, or at most related the sailing of the first to the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, as if that were the cause of the war and not just a contributing event. So I decided to write about six introductory chapters [in fact five], as well as one or two [in fact three] linking the various battles.*

And concerning research:

*... All through the writing of this book I had five volumes of Rowse on the shelf behind me ... but ... I only turned to them occasionally for reference. It seemed to me, however wrongly, that I needed a new view of history to attempt a survey of thirty years in about 150 pages; so I read and took copious notes from four lives of Philip II, three of Elizabeth, two of Mary Queen of Scots, and many others on the general Elizabethan scene [the book's bibliography lists 98 source documents] and then began to write.*

When Gloria Newton of *The Australian Women's Weekly* interviewed him early in 1973, WG related that, after researching *The Grove of Eagles*, his knowledge about the first three armadas was extensive, but he knew little about the fourth, which sailed to Ireland. Additionally,

*One of the greatest problems was finding out about the Spanish captains. Luckily, I got hold of a book, written by a Spaniard about 1890, which gave character studies of these men. You see, I was interested in everyone who took part in those great battles. Generally in history it is only two or*

*three figures, two or three incidents, that capture the imagination and eventually come to monopolise the pages to the exclusion of other only slightly less worthy incidents and people. I went to Spain, to Toledo, Cadiz and Madrid and read in the State archives. Thank God for photostats! When I got back to England I knew what I wanted, so was able to send for it.*<sup>3</sup>

Dr. A. L. Rowse (1903-1997) was not just an Oxford history don, but one of the pre-eminent Elizabethan scholars of his day – and a Cornishman to boot. When WG completed *The Grove of Eagles* in 1963, his publishers sent Rowse a proof copy without WG's knowledge or consent, which disquieted its nervous author more than somewhat. All ended well; Rowse professed himself "conquered" – yet when eight years later the don came to cast his eye over WG's *Armadas* manuscript the result was rather different: this time the notoriously cantankerous and opinionated historian noted a "disgraceful mistake about the date and details of Raleigh's marriage ... a variety of [other] points [and] one or two pieces of sloppy writing". He condescendingly advised WG to "read Michael Lewis", whose book had in fact been one of the author's primary sources. WG acknowledged the Raleigh mistake (which he had already spotted) but stood his ground concerning issues Rowse deigned "impossible" (the number of guns sold to the Spanish by Sussex ironmasters) or "shocking, unfair and untrue" (the incitement of English Catholics by two popes and their cardinals to murder Elizabeth). Neither will WG concede that his book does less than justice to Hawkins.<sup>4</sup>

In its first five chapters WG does indeed, as promised, unpick the ravelled skein of events and circumstances which led to the sailing of the first Armada in 1588. He tells of arranged marriages to forge ties between the royal families of Europe, of the fervour, subverting power and often brutal repression of shifting religious or sectarian allegiances, of intrigue, treason, execution and assassination, of thrones claimed and held, usurped and lost, of Spain's struggle to subdue the Netherlands and to transport her New World plunder safe across the Main.

His narrative opens on 18 July 1554 – a wet Wednesday afternoon in the Channel, off the Solent – and he teases us by introducing a Spanish fleet

right away; but this one, we find, sails with peaceful intent, delivering Philip, "greatest prince in Christendom", come to marry Mary, daughter of Henry VIII and his first wife Catherine of Aragon, "the first queen the English had accepted for four hundred years".

This nimble flitting across the centuries (here referencing the obscure Matilda, daughter of Henry I) is one of the more pleasing aspects of WG's narrative. Elsewhere the reader is invited to recall 1066, and what might have been had Harold "come fresh to meet William at Hastings"; 1485, year of the first Tudor monarch; 1685, when "a Dutchman landed at Torbay and proceeded without battle to London to turn the last of the Stuarts off the throne"; 1170, the year Thomas à Becket was murdered; the time of Christ, when Europe last saw a standing army formidable as the Spanish one presently assembled in the Low Countries; WWI, when Fisher introduced Dreadnoughts into the British Navy; WWII, in which Eisenhower was "not the best general but the best generalissimo"; 480 BC, when for two long days 300 Spartans defied a Persian army, and 1805, when, in the book's closing sentence, WG references Napoleon, another tyrant who, encamped at Boulogne, gazed hungrily across the Channel with dreams of conquest. Thus far the author makes history come alive.

For the most part, however, his prose is flat, dull and workmanlike – *The Spanish Armadas* reads like a dry, dusty textbook because essentially that's what it is, slogging doggedly through the second half of a sixteenth century dominated by two monarchs – Philip II of Spain and Elizabeth I of England – related by marriage but separated by religion, heritage and more besides. When Mary died four years after marrying Philip, he wasted no time in proposing to his late-wife's half-sister. Had Elizabeth accepted, the history of the century and beyond would surely have been very different, perhaps even lacking armadas. But while she prevaricated, he impetuously married another Elizabeth – the French princess Elizabeth of Valois – and the Fates realigned accordingly.

The book's second and third chapters deal with the Europe over which these monarchs presided, a continent beset by religious turmoil, intrigue and war; the Netherlands and parts of France occupied by Spain; the French monarchy weak; Elizabeth's powerbase threatened by Mary Queen of Scots. We are then introduced to Francis Drake, whom WG clearly holds

in high regard: indeed, his account of Drake's doings in 1586-7, first in the West Indies then in Cadiz and along the Portuguese coast whilst "singeing the King of Spain's beard", reads too much like a *Boy's Own* adventure to be wholly credible. The same is true later when we sail with Grenville aboard the ill-fated *Revenge*.

The word "armada" first appears at the bottom of page 59, from which point on its spectre looms. Though there were indeed four armadas, only the first, of 1588, is widely remembered. It was the only one to engage with English ships – the second and third were both undone by foul weather (the third when just twenty miles from the Lizard with an unheeding and utterly defenceless England there for the taking) and the fourth, having landed soldiers in Ireland to support a native rebellion, achieved only limited and temporary success. As for the first, which we hear about interminably (the book's ninth chapter could be removed *in toto* with no detriment to the whole), the plan was not to attack English territories, ports or vessels, but rather to support an invasion force of 30,000 troops supposedly standing in readiness in the Netherlands.

WG's text serves to remind the reader of the relative unseaworthiness of sixteenth century ships, which prompts admiration for those who sailed in them; also of just how completely cut off from news everyone was in this era – how it might be months before knowledge of seminal events became widely or reliably known, in which circumstance whispers, rumours and alarms were the prevailing norm. Nonetheless, because assembling, equipping and manning an armada of one hundred and thirty-seven ships was such a long, involved and inevitably public enterprise, Spain's intention to launch "immeasurably the largest fleet that had ever sailed the seas" was an open secret known throughout the continent, with the war that must follow universally expected with stoic resignation:

*All Europe was waiting for the coming trial of strength, and not many gave a great deal for England's chances ... In that half-island musters were being called and trained in villages and towns throughout the land. They were a motley lot, some armed with pikes and pitchforks, others with ancient swords or bows and arrows, all making do with what weapons they could find ... They met every Tuesday.*

350 years on it would all happen again, different in detail but in essence the same.

The book paints persuasive pen-pictures of both Philip II and Elizabeth. It also provides an illuminating account of a French nation which, after suffering through years of civil war under an ineffectual monarchy and sustained oppression by the Spanish in both the Low Countries and Brittany, signed a treaty with Spain after Philip's death in 1598 and thereby at a stroke strengthened its position. Fortunately for England, its timely allegiance with the newly prosperous and increasingly assertive Dutch provided sufficient counterpoise to maintain the balance of power.

To accuse WG of being both "dull" and "too ... *Boy's Own*" may seem unreasonable; possibly he hoped a spice of the latter tone would offset an excess of the former, but one failing doesn't so much negate the other as compound it. *The Spanish Armadas*, unique in WG's canon, is a curate's egg. He seems in accepting the assignment to have dealt himself a weak hand – one that played to his extensive knowledge of history and willingness to research meticulously, but, crucially, *not* to his instinctive writing style. (I also found the book presuming knowledge in its reader – of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the geography of the Low Countries or what a Huguenot is – I for one did not possess.) Straitjacketed by the factual record, we find him here at sea in more ways than one, adrift, out of his element; his comfort zone. Occasional snatches of the familiar novelist's voice ring through, as when he recalls Elizabeth's last days:

*It was just age bearing her down: old age, fatigue, loneliness and a sad heart. Most old people not weeded out by one of the killer diseases suffer the same way, and it is as much a matter of mental stamina as of physical how long they survive.*

Ultimately, though, one can't help but wonder what someone like Patrick O'Brian, had he undertaken it, would have made of the challenge – and the answer, one concludes with reluctance, is a more compelling book.

*The Spanish Armadas* was published on 7 September 1972 and generally well-received:

*Mr Graham ... disentangles the complex threads of sixteenth-century European history with a novelist's expertise and calls up a host of brilliant characters to give the era its proper flamboyance. (Blackwoods Magazine, October 1972)*

*[Mr Graham's] approach is objective and his book is a real contribution [in putting] an important period of history in its proper perspective. (Sir Charles Petrie, The London Illustrated News, 1 November 1972)*

*Winston Graham's ... record is based on carefully researched enquiries into every scrap of available contemporary material in English and Spanish archives. This lends to his work (beautifully illustrated and produced) the authenticity which is meat and drink to the serious historian and the vividness which, for the general reader, transforms past history into the most vivid present reality ... a brilliant job ... enthralling. (The Church Times, 24 November 1972)*

*Painless and entertaining history. (The Australian Women's Weekly, 13 December 1972)*

although observations below concerning the book's title and sometimes unpersuasive exposition of naval battlecraft are right on point:

*Mr. Graham's ... gift for narrative and firm knowledge of his subject combine to make [The Spanish Armadas] an excellent piece of popular historiography. The catchpenny title is misleading, since the real subject of the book is the Elizabethan war with Spain. The war is never described as a whole and the operations in the Caribbean are omitted, together with their vital economic consequences; nor are European operations confined to armadas, since (inevitably) Grenville's fight with a flota is included, as are the Lisbon and Cadiz raids.*

*Five [sic] true armadas are distinguished, the Enterprise of England taking up half of the book. In his account of the*

*events of 1588 Mr Graham makes an illuminating comparison between the evolution of the race-built galleon and that of the twentieth-century Spitfire. He makes good use of Evelyn Hardy's recent book on the events in Ireland to give an exciting account of Cuellar's escape, but he accepts too easily the crescent formation of the Spanish fleet without explaining how the eagle's wings pattern made it so formidable. Also, he does not say anything about the recent discoveries of marine archaeologists among the wrecks ... Mr Graham avoids technicalities in the interests of a fluent narrative and this gives a well balanced if rather oversimplified record of events. ([The Times Literary Supplement, 29 September 1972](#))*

Originally published by Collins in the UK and Doubleday in the US, *The Spanish Armadas* has since been reissued by Fontana (1976), The Dorset Press (in hardback, 1987), Penguin (2001) and Bello (2013).

\* \* \* \* \*

### ***Poldark's Cornwall* (The Bodley Head and Webb & Bower Ltd, 1983)**

In a letter dated 9 February 1983 to fellow-author Denys Val Baker WG wrote:

*Glad you enjoyed "The Miller's Dance". By the time I got to the "end" I was just about pumped out with the effort ... After finishing it I took a busman's holiday and did 25,000 words of semi-autobiographical stuff for a picture book to come out this July to be called "Poldark's Cornwall".*

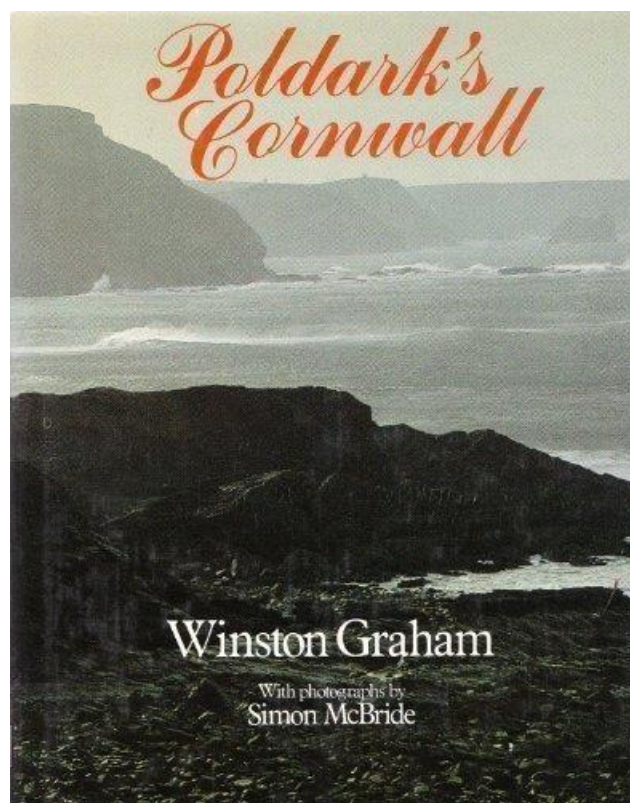
And *Poldark's Cornwall* does indeed read like something drafted quickly and with a minimum of thought or fuss by a "pumped out" seventy-four-year-old. Which is *not* to say it is bad – far from it; it is a loosely-structured, cynically-titled, superbly-illustrated but sparsely-filled grab bag of musings and memories that are a consistent pleasure to browse. Although WG states baldly halfway through: "this is not an autobiography" (which is strictly true, though it *is* a teaser for one), nonetheless the text does, as he



acknowledges to Baker, include significant autobiographical content. The other thing that becomes immediately apparent, especially if you've just come from reading *The Spanish Armadas*, as I did, is that his *voice* is back, distinct and authentic. These lines are from the book's first page:

*I drove all over the county, up and down precipitous hills,  
round the endless blind corners, through narrow lanes with  
wind-crippled hawthorn trees crouching overhead and  
bramble and briar clutching as we passed, into and out of  
grey little villages, across the scarred moorlands with the  
sea shimmering in the distance.*

Indeed, if the words were spoken into your ear by an author sitting by your side rather than being drawn by your eyes off the page they could hardly resound with more clarity.



On the question of titles (never WG's strongpoint<sup>5</sup> – see page 7 above), it's impossible not to conclude that the primary reason for commissioning *Poldark's Cornwall* was to cash in on the saga's huge, largely TV-fuelled popularity. Yet whilst perhaps a quarter of the text concerns itself with

things Poldark (both written and screened), it is by no means the book's major theme (which is *Winston Graham's Cornwall* – how's that for a title?) such that the P-word ill-deserves its place on the cover. WG persistently declined to republish his first dozen novels because he believed that to do so would be to "con" his public. In this instance, it seems, his scruples were less finely tuned.

After rambling through reminiscences of his early Cornish days, letting slip tales of a lonely old priest, of two dead samphire-gatherers, of a highway-woman and smuggler both named Bessie, of tin-stamps "thumping ... like the tread of manacled giants", of a disapproving miner who provided the model for Ben Carter, WG laments that the Perrancoombe he lived in has "died" and this regret – of the adverse effects of "progress" and pandering to the caravanners and summer hordes – becomes a recurring theme. His position, of course, is an awkward one since he was originally as much of an incomer or "foreigner" himself as any other non-native son (so too his Devon-born wife). He "deplores the gimcrack bungalows" – yet his parents bought just such a home in 1926 which he then lived in with his mother for thirteen years (and which the family own still). "The rush of the short busy season," he writes, "would leave one, when it was over, feeling peculiarly alone, and relishing that loneliness" – yet every time he returned to the county after moving to Sussex he too was just another "emmet", and who, post-'77, was more responsible for the choked summer roads and heaving beaches than he, Mr Poldark? (To be fair, this he wryly concedes.)

He sings the praises of body-surfing ("a very peculiar pleasure and a thrill") – though only in the sea: "the modern cult of the swimming pool seems symptomatic of this ersatz age". The National Trust is also lauded, so too Caerhays, home of "the pre-eminent show-piece garden of south Cornwall ... with perhaps Penjerrick second". He names his favourite beach – West Pentire, in the "cove ... which helped most to make up a composite picture of the Nampara of the Poldark novels." He ponders his reasons for quitting Cornwall in 1960: in part, he says, because "a writer is a queer bird ..." He talks of becoming "too comfortable too young" – yet at the time was fifty-one. How many of that vintage still consider themselves "young"? He describes a train journey through the Cornish early morning to Penzance and declares himself a "very poor linguist" (and anyone who's read the undated postcard he sent his pal Max Reinhardt from Vienna, written in

impenetrable German, would be inclined to agree)<sup>6</sup>. He recalls distant days spent honeymooning with Jean in Porthgwarra and Mousehole and describes the injustice that the reputation of the Cornish for acquisitiveness (especially where wrecks are concerned) outmatches that for the heroism for which he believes they should be equally renowned. We learn why no child named Joanna has ever been christened in St Levan Church.

We get a discourse (recycled from a speech given in 1976)<sup>7</sup> on the artificial distinction made between three types of historical novel; this, WG spits, is "pretentious rubbish". He then identifies sources for some of the events and characters in the Poldark novels and speculates on why he returned to the saga after an eighteen-year hiatus throughout which he swore he never would. He recounts the six-year (1969-75) rollercoaster ride of option / script / takeover / cancellation / second option / joint-production agreement which eventually brought his story to the screen. Talk, then, of locations: Port Quin, Roscarrock (where Jean's one cameo scene was shot), St Mawes Castle, Porthluney, Lanhydrock ("the finest Jacobean house in Cornwall"), St Enodoc and St Winnow Churches, the River Lerryn near Tregays. We find a short passage (again recycled)<sup>8</sup> concerning the derivation of some Poldark names and character traits. WG grouses at length without giving much away about the unnamed Jack Pulman's four "very bad" Series One *Poldark* scripts. Fortunately, "the frustrations of '75 gave way to the fulfilments of '77 and it [1977] became a wonderful year".

It is notable through most of the book that WG sticks resolutely to the coast (of which Cornwall has an abundance) until on page 198 he writes: "The inland towns ... have not a great deal to recommend them." He exempts two, Launceston and Truro, whilst conceding that Truro, once his "favourite ... a cut above everything else in the county", is that no more. The blame for this he attributes to the "business community within the Council" who, in the late sixties and seventies, by "hacking out the heart and destroying the character" of Cornwall's only city, left "a peculiarly depressing sight for anyone who knew the old town before."

With a little benign navel-gazing and a valediction from Catullus he signs off; too soon, we're done. "One of the most handsome books ever published about Cornwall,"<sup>9</sup> opined Michael Williams, who was well-placed to know. Now, another review:

*Never having read the Poldark novels nor seen any of the television series might seem to be a disadvantage in reviewing this book. On the contrary, the subject, both in prose and illustration, comes all the more freshly alive through one's having no preconceived ideas. Winston Graham's leisured prose, a personal excursion, is rather akin to basking in the sun on one of his beloved beaches while Simon McBride's handsome photographs vividly evoke the whole nostalgic atmosphere of Cornwall. Knowing only too well 'the gimcrack bungalows and chalets, the unsightly and badly sited caravan parks, the exploitation of many of the lovely beaches and coves', it might be thought that this book was a romantic vision of a lost world. Not so, for in spite of all the vulgarisation, much of that world survives and is conjured up equally by word and picture – which brings one to a salient feature of this attractive book: the fact that author and photographer have worked closely together, instead of the illustrations being garnered from half a hundred sources lacking an intimate connection with the text.*

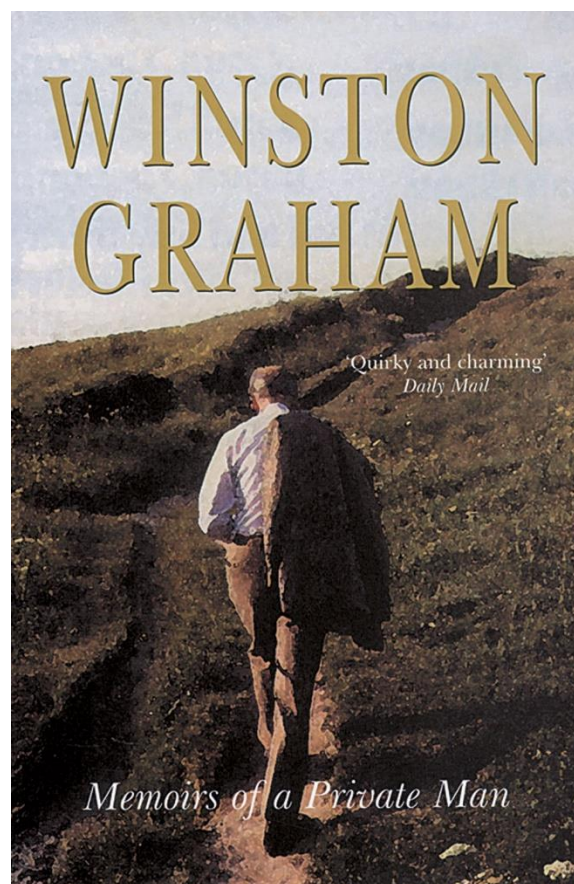
*As for the core of the book, the text itself, although its backcloth is necessarily Cornwall, it is of course also about the writing of the Poldark novels and the making of the television series. And in this, Winston ... is at his most interesting and perceptive, describing the provenance of his incidents, the moulding of his characters – and he causes a wry smile in touching on the occasional vicissitudes the writer, the primary producer, has to put up with. (Alan C. Jenkins, [The Exmoor Review, 1984](#))*

Originally published by The Bodley Head and Webb & Bower Ltd on 28 July 1983, *Poldark's Cornwall* has since been reissued by Michael Joseph (1989), Chapman's (1994), Trafalgar Square (1998) and Macmillan (2015). Potential readers should be aware that the 1983 and 2015 editions of *Poldark's Cornwall* differ significantly. For a start, all but one<sup>10</sup> of the first edition's 175 splendid Simon McBride photos are gone; in their place, a slew of garish, luridly-coloured, holiday-brochure fare that smacks too blatantly

(like twenty-first century *Poldark* alongside it) of the work of the Cornwall Tourist Board. The original text is also revised to remove all seventies TV *Poldark* references, thus reducing WG's overall contribution further still. Anachronistic pictures of Aidan Turner and Eleanor Tomlinson are inserted (note that neither Robin Ellis nor Angharad Rees or any other actor is to be seen in the 1983 edition). A new introduction by Andrew Graham, the author's son, is, while of some interest, ultimately small recompense for what is lost.

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***Memoirs of a Private Man* (Macmillan, 2003)**



*Memoirs*, like *Poldark's Cornwall*, is something of a mish-mash, flitting from friend to friend, place to place, theme to theme and time to time on a structureless, discursive, apparently random basis – and, like *Poldark's Cornwall*, is none the worse for that. But when and how was it written? Its first draft<sup>11</sup> opens: "I spent my seventy-fifth birthday at the Hotel Formentera ..." which suggests a beginning during the second half of 1983. But a

bit later WG writes: "I have been married forty-six years ..." which he would not have been until September 1985. Being deliberately close about dates relating to his personal life (on which more below) is an unfortunate habit which makes it harder to establish facts retrospectively than need or should be – so we'll settle on concluding that drafting began in the period 1983/5. The book's dedication reads:

*To Jean [his wife]*

*Who read most of it before she went away.*

This tells us that "most of" *Memoirs* was finished by late 1992, which is when Jean died. But WG did not submit a completed manuscript to his publisher for another ten years – in fact on 15 November 2002<sup>12</sup> – so, all in all, it seems the book was written in fits and starts over the last eighteen years or so of its author's life. Although it was published posthumously, on 19 September 2003, a little over two months after WG's death, this was *not* by intention. "With luck it should be published next year," he wrote after posting the MS off,<sup>13</sup> not knowing, of course, he then had less than nine months to live. Had he been granted rather longer – say another three or four years – there's no reason to doubt he would have seen the book in print. But it was not to be.

The title he chose gives advance warning not to expect a warts-and-all account of his life and times; that things would be kept back; certain reticences observed. He was clearly ambivalent about the worth of such a project – his life, he insisted, was "all very dull". Press scrutiny had always left him "intensely uncomfortable"; his writing, he pleaded, must have "revealed a fair amount of my own nature and personal feelings. Let that suffice." Whilst this guardedness, this reluctance is understandable to a degree, it surely behoves the writer, once he decides to press ahead, and having determined which areas of his life he is willing to revisit, to be candid, to commit – or what's the point? And, despite his reservations, WG's memoir is by turns informative, charming, intriguing, provoking, frank, occasionally revelatory – but, in key passages, unreliable too. Its author, though self-deprecating, emerges as keenly intelligent, very well read, a shameless, inveterate name-dropper with a lively sense of humour, but frustratingly, perversely enigmatic – sickly but sporty, shy but sociable,

until forty, a well-found pauper, a hard-working beach bum, a steely-determined lotus-eater, a happily married Lothario, a "private" public figure. Re the last, he eventually, in 2.3, [i.e. in *Memoirs*, Book Two, Chapter Three] discloses his birthday – 30 June – but declines to cite the year. "I was born ... before the First World War" we read in 1.1; "I have had a certain amount of fun in deceiving people" (2.3 again). "In *Who's Who* I don't give my birth date, and in four other similar publications around the world I have given different dates, all of them wrong."

In fact, he was born in 1908. Perhaps it would have amused him to find obituaries in *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Express et al.* informing readers he was born in 1910, as all of them did. But the trustees of Perranzabuloe Museum were not amused to find the Memorial Seat they'd scraped together funds for engraved with the wrong date (which they'd taken from *The Times*, never thinking a source so reputable could possibly be misinformed).

Whenever WG mentions his age, it's as well to be sceptical, and so here: twice he recalls his first trip abroad, to Paris, telling us in 1.1 he was "twenty-five" and had "two books published" (he was twenty-six before he'd published even one) and in 1.4 that it was "after the publication of my third novel" (when he would have been twenty-seven). We're left not knowing, which doesn't matter, but why? He dismisses his deliberate dissembling about his age as a family foible. Much more likely is that it helps draw a veil over and so better obscure his past, where lurks the wholly innocent "secret" that his birth-name was not Graham but Grime.

His mother's family name, Mawdsley – "a name of minor consequence in ... Manchester" – is mentioned numerous times in *Memoirs*, but his father's (and therefore WG's own) birth surname is not mentioned at all. The reader is left to assume, as most surely will, that it was Graham. Yet for the first thirty-eight years of his life, WG's name – around Perranporth, in the Plymouth Area phone book, in everyday life – was Winston Grime; Winston Graham but his pseudonym. In 1947 he changed his name formally and legally to Winston Mawdsley Graham – but his mother lived the whole of her married life as Annie Grime and his brother all of his life as Cecil Grime. On his wedding day WG signed the marriage register Winston Grime. Of all of this, in *Memoirs*, not one peep.

The text contains several factual errors, indicative perhaps of carelessness or forgetfulness or inattentive proof reading. (It should be borne in mind that the book was completed and brought to print only in the author's extreme old age.)<sup>14</sup> The house he lived in for twenty years from 1939 was called Treberran – yet in *Memoirs* the spelling jumps repeatedly between Treberran and Trebarran. He states that Begh put out a French edition of *The Forgotten Story* in 1949 – in fact it was in 1946, his first novel to appear (other than in newsprint) in translation. He describes Madame Passani as "still in her forties" in 1960 – but, born in 1907, she was a year older than him, in her fifties. In relating the early history of his 1961 novel *Marnie* he mistakes the year it was published (not "before we left England"), the year Hitchcock bought the film rights (not "just after we moved into our new house"), the time that elapsed before Princess Grace of Monaco was cast in the film's title role (not "some months" but a full year later) and when he became embroiled in a court-case involving disputed serial rights (not 1962 but 1964). He states that the first series of *Poldark* was repeated in 1981 – but it was 1987/8. (He and Robin Ellis even appeared together on *Wogan* to help promote it.) He says in the twenty years after *Warleggan* (1953) he wrote ten novels – it was nine – and that overall he wrote forty-three – it was (discounting the re-written ones, as he does) forty-two. He states that, *Poldarks* aside, he used his interest in gardening in "only two novels" – but it was more than that. He states that *The Sleeping Partner* was filmed "in America" – it wasn't – and made by Anglia into a "one-hour TV film" which ran ninety minutes. He says that when he moved into his new Buxted home his son Andrew was eighteen, but he was nineteen, almost twenty. WG says he served "seven years on the Committee of Management of the Society of Authors, plus two years as its chairman" – in fact he served twelve years in all, including two in the chair. He says that Chaplin appraised Tippi Hedren's performance in *Marnie* with a view to casting her in *A King in New York* – but that film was released seven years before *Marnie*; the film in question was *A Countess From Hong Kong*, Chaplin's last, released in 1966. Back on the vexed question of his age, he contradicts himself by claiming that, due to his secrecy about it, milestone birthdays were not celebrated – yet includes a photo of himself with the lovely Angharad Rees taken at his "90<sup>th</sup> Birthday Dinner".

Some errors – *Poldark* producer Maurice (correctly Morris) Barry and Gregory Peck's mother-in-law Shoshone (Chouchoune) Passani – are easily



explained away, but others are less so; for example, in his working notebook<sup>15</sup> WG made careful and wholly accurate notes about the involvement of his great grandfather, Thomas Mawdsley, in lobbying over a prolonged period in support of *The Ten Hours Act*.<sup>16</sup> "Mawdsley was in London from January to June 1847," WG wrote; "the Bill passed its final stage on 1st June 1847"; yet, disappointingly, in 1.1, the first "1847" becomes "1849" and the second "1850".

Worse, though, are statements seemingly intended to mislead. He makes it plain he believes his private life is not really the reader's business, so when he suggests he left Cornwall in 1960 not knowing where his next permanent home would be (which isn't true, because before leaving he advised Frank Swinnerton: "I think we shall eventually settle nearer London, perhaps in Sussex"<sup>17</sup>), he can shrug and claim "off-limits". But when a writer deigns to talk publicly about his *work* should he not come clean – at least, clean as he can?

In 1.10 WG states: "Never in my writing life ... have I ever been able to break [one novel] off for another ... and finish the first one later," which is patently untrue. Elsewhere in *Memoirs* he tells us that most of *The Merciless Ladies* was written before the war – but the book was not published until 1944, after at least three other novels had been started and finished. He began *Ross Poldark* in the spring of 1940 but, by the time it was completed, four other novels had preceded it to press. During the middle of the war in particular he seems to have had three novels on the go at once. But much later, in 1982, he lamented to Denys Val Baker that before writing *The Stranger From The Sea* [i.e. circa late 1979] he'd started "a modern novel on which I got stuck"<sup>18</sup> and so set aside. That novel was *The Green Flash*, which he took up again and finished only after three Poldark novels were penned in the interim. This also calls into question his claim in 1.10 that *The Green Flash* "took three years to write" – it may have taken three years of writing time, but from start to finish took more like six or seven.

In 1.3 he claims that, where his writing was concerned, Jean was his only confidante, which is also untrue. For the best part of twenty years up to 1955 he received very valuable help and advice from Tom Attlee (for more on this, see PDF file [Attlee](#)) – indeed, in view of the length and strength of

the association between the two men, it is surprising to find in *Memoirs* no mention of him at all. We learn that Fred Harris is WG's "dearest friend", Max Reinhardt his "closest friend", Ian and Marjory Chapmans his "most valued ... friends" but, of Tom Attlee, nothing whatever.

He claims that his 1944 novel *The Merciless Ladies* was "entirely" rewritten in 1979 – in truth, of the four early novels he subsequently reworked, *The Merciless Ladies* was much the least made over.

In 1.6 he describes a gravestone standing in Perranzabuloe churchyard he says helped inspire his 1949 novel *Cordelia*. It stands there still, though not inscribed quite in the way he claims.

In 1.5 he tells the story of his publishers' request that he should cut 20,000 words from the first half of *Ross Poldark*, which he declined to do. But what he doesn't say is that within six years just such an edit *was* made, and the revised text used thereafter – thus his comment that "no one ever since has said that the beginning was drawn-out or slow" is wholly disingenuous. For reasons best known to himself, he tells half of a story that, given the popularity of all things Poldark, many readers would love to hear in full.

His account in 2.4 of how the early Poldark novel copyrights passed from Ward, Lock to The Bodley Head is also unreliable. He claims that Ward, Lock passed back the rights to the four titles at the same time, which they did not. In fact they released the first three on 1 June 1959<sup>19</sup> but retained *Warleggan* until August 1960.<sup>20</sup> And, judging by Bodley Head's reader reports, WG didn't give his friend Max all four books to read but only *Ross Poldark* and *Demelza*.<sup>21</sup> In the greater scheme of things, to be sure, none of this is important, but why not take the trouble to get it right?

WG was a performed playwright before he was ever a published novelist and in 1.3 gives a short account of the writing and production of *Seven Suspected*, his first play. But he tittilates by referring in 2.4 to "one of the one-act plays I wrote [in the 1930s]" without expanding on that intriguing aside. Just one of his plays was produced professionally, in 1978/9, so you might expect to find something about that in *Memoirs* – and so you do: in a discourse about swearing he refers casually in passing to "the play I wrote, which was produced twice with different casts". No mention, even,

of a title (in fact it had two), never mind any reminiscences, thoughts or feelings ("it missed London by a hair" he told Denys Val Baker<sup>22</sup>); neither any word concerning how it came to be translated into German. All most unsatisfactory and, because the stuff of his writing life, hardly to be excused on grounds of protection of privacy.

WG closes *Memoirs* with six lines of verse he claims to have written "a few years ago" – but some of them can be found in his 1939 novel *Strangers Meeting*. Thus does he tweak his past to suit his purpose. In 1.10 he claims to "reproduce" a long article first published in "an American literary magazine" in the early seventies, and seems to do so. But if you compare what's in *Memoirs* with what's in the original magazine,<sup>23</sup> the texts differ, simply because WG couldn't resist a bit of buffing after the fact. He doesn't seek to please "the bibliophile," he explains in 2.11, but rather "the reader and myself". Later in that chapter he recycles more text, this time a reminiscence about Gilbert Harding first published in 1968 (the centenary of the Savile Club). Again a passage in the midpoint of the story is revised such that both versions can't be true, but – "truth" be damned – WG responds once more to his writer's instinct to polish. Quite a bit of text is reprised from *Poldark's Cornwall* (and some of that had previously come from elsewhere) and other sources: a story in 2.4 about a colourful Jud Paynter-like character is recast such that whilst the fundamentals remain the same the details do not, and a tale from the last pages of the 1983 book is retold with a *very* different, updated ending. Even Tennyson recurs.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst most of *Memoirs* reads very well, a few passages – the life story of Evelyn the maid (1.1), the political problems posed by inter-war Germany (1.4), Cars I Have Owned (and Hired) (2.9), the screed on swearing (2.11) – smack of filler. In view of his expressed aversion to self-revelation, it is surprising to find accounts of his wife being sexually assaulted ("a short but bitter struggle") in a Lebanese lay-by and slinking off into the Cap Ferrat night for a clinch ("Wow! What a kiss!") with Ralph Richardson. As for WG himself, we get to know him better, or a *side* of him better, but just conditionally, at arm's length, as he doubtless intended. To the cause of fiction he gave of himself unstintingly for a very long time. Come *Memoirs*, one senses, his heart wasn't really in it.

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## NOTES AND SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> This refers to Luxton Arnold, prime mover in the commissioning of *The Spanish Armadas*, to whom the book is dedicated. Oregon-born Melvin Luxton Arnold (1913-2000) was a journalist and publisher who spent the last years of his working life (he retired circa 1973) as president of prestigious US publishing house Harper & Row (now part of HarperCollins).

<sup>2</sup> The book was indeed "designed and produced by George Rainbird Ltd, Marble Arch House, 44 Edgeware Road, London W2" and published in the UK by William Collins and in the US by Doubleday & Company, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> *Australian Women's Weekly*, 14 March 1973

<sup>4</sup> Letter from WG to Rowse dated 8 November 1971 held by the University of Exeter in their Special Collections Rowse Papers; correspondence; "G"

<sup>5</sup> It must be hard, book after book, to come up with consistently apposite titles. Some – *No Exit, Take My Life, The Sleeping Partner* – hit the spot, whilst others – *The House With The Stained Glass Windows, The Riddle of John Rowe, Angell, Pearl and Little God* – do not. *Jeremy Poldark* and *Bella Poldark* are both unfortunately titled. WG's wife came up with *The Walking Stick* and his publishers with *Woman in the Mirror*. The play he wrote in 1977 was onto its third title before it disappeared from view. Such is the author's lot.

<sup>6</sup> Held in the British Library's Max Rheinhardt Papers

<sup>7</sup> Excerpted from an address given to the Royal Institution of Cornwall in June 1976 and subsequently published in abbreviated form in *The Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, New Series, Volume VII, Part 4, 1977

<sup>8</sup> From "My Poldark Characters", Redruth County Grammar School Souvenir Magazine 1907-1976

<sup>9</sup> *Writers in Cornwall*, Michael Williams, Tor Mark, 2010

<sup>10</sup> The single one retained is also used on the front cover of *Memoirs* – see page 13 above

<sup>11</sup> The first draft, subsequently discarded, of the opening of

*Memoirs* is in a notebook held by the Courtney Library of the Royal Cornwall Museum, River Street, Truro, TR1 2SJ in their Winston Graham archive

<sup>12, 13</sup> Letter to this author dated 16 November 2002

<sup>14</sup> The author's last novel, *Bella Poldark*, is similarly riddled with errors and inconsistencies (for more, see PDF file [Pass Pol](#)). The assistance in his late years of a diligent editor would have been a great boon to WG. Instead, it seems, he was left – or chose – to muddle on alone.

<sup>15</sup> Notebook #1, RCM, Truro Graham archive

<sup>16</sup> *The Ten Hours Act*, also known as *The Factory Act, 1847*, restricted the working hours of women and young persons (i.e. those aged from thirteen to eighteen) in UK textile mills to ten hours per day.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from WG to Frank Swinnerton written on 25 December 1959 held in the University of Arkansas's Swinnerton archive

<sup>18</sup> Letter dated 8 January 1982 from WG to Denys Val Baker held by Cornwall Record Office, Redruth

<sup>19</sup> Letter dated 26 May 1959 from Monica Bax, Assistant Fiction Editor, Ward, Lock to Michael Thomas of A. M. Heath & Co., Ltd.; part of the Ward, Lock archive

<sup>20</sup> Ward, Lock file note signed by C. J. Lock and dated 26 August 1960; source as 17

<sup>21</sup> The University of Reading's Bodley Head archive contains reader reports (by Hugh McIlvanney) for these two novels only.

<sup>22</sup> As 18

<sup>23</sup> *Writer's Digest*, Vol. 52, No. 10, October 1972

<sup>24</sup> A six-verse poem about Perran Sands allegedly (but not certainly) written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson during a visit to Cornwall in 1860 surfaced first in *All The Year Round* in October 1864 then again thirty-three years later in *The West Briton* of 19 August 1897. WG reproduces the fourth and fifth stanzas in *Poldark's Cornwall* and the full poem in *Memoirs* 1.3.