WINSTON GRAHAM: AN APPRECIATION

Winston Graham published 50 books – mostly but not exclusively fiction – in 70 years. He wrote all his adult life; clearly had an irresistible compulsion to express himself that way. His claim in Memoirs\(^1\) that his works contain and reveal the essence of him – his "own nature and personal feelings" – would seem to be true. He was aware of his standing in the pantheon of literature – no Thomas Hardy or George Eliot, he wished in old age "for little different, except to be a better writer"\(^2\) – yet was compared through the decades to Alexander Dumas,\(^3\) Guy de Maupassant,\(^4\) Graham Greene\(^5\) and W. Somerset Maugham\(^6\) and acclaimed "a born novelist"\(^7\), "one of the best half-dozen novelists in the country"\(^8\), "an author with an almost unique understanding of the modern mind"\(^9\) and "one of our best modern story-tellers"\(^10\) whose bountiful legacy will surely endure.
It's sad that, thanks largely to television, future generations are likely to associate his name with the single word *Poldark*, or, at best, the two words *Poldark* and *Marnie* – words that, collectively, miss the totality of WG by a country mile. Not that he'll be the first or last in that boat – think Trollope and Barsetshire, Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, Christie and Poirot / Marple, Wodehouse and Jeeves / Wooster, Simenon and Maigret *et cetera*. As for the legacy, while Mammoth Screen's *Poldark* may traduce the wonderful source novels more cynically with each passing year, it is doubtless effective in shifting by the shedload DVD sets and wall calendars, jigsaws and colouring books, personalised gift wrap and coasters – but paperback reprints too, so that's alright. Except where is a comprehensive *Collected Short Fiction*, or a decent biography, both overdue, but don't hold your breath.

Graham never worked at anything other than writing through the course of a long life, but, despite a diffidence that never left him, took his calling seriously as any careerist. He made up for a dearth of formal education by reading widely and deeply; study of local history in particular left him rock solid on *period* and *place*, and a gregariousness which (despite protestations to the contrary in *Memoirs*) was natural to him as his keen intelligence rendered him sound on *people* too, giving him, underpinned by unswerving resolve, a strong hand to play. In the Coastguard Service during WWII, he used long hours on watch or patrol "to think ... meditate and ... dream" and in the last weeks before demobilisation "shamelessly ... spent the time writing." No hour was wasted, perhaps because, as he told Valerie Grove, "writing is in your head all the time." He never started a novel he did not finish and never set aside one book to write another before returning to the first. But the work, by and large, did not come easily: he abandoned *Marnie*, written in the first person, halfway through and re-wrote it in the third person, only to realise that "the new version was losing enormously in the change" – so back to square one it was. Some chapters of *Ross Poldark* were drafted "nine times"; he wrote the first half of *The Tumbled House" about five times*. Thanks to the prodigious effort required to settle on the right form of its telling, *Angell, Pearl and Little God* took three years to complete, as did *The Green Flash*, which posed "infinite problems" and *The Grove of Eagles*, which required an inordinate amount of research at a time when, domiciled abroad,
access to materials was not easy. Such resolution, such zeal to deliver his conceptions come what may, is admirable. Yet, remarkably, even after they were published, he didn't necessarily regard his books as "finished" – the first two Poldark novels in particular were very extensively revised not only before their first publication, while still in manuscript, but also subsequently, prior to their republication in America. First and later editions of Take My Life and Fortune is a Woman differ notably and other titles were tweaked less substantially also. Such was the standard he set himself, once established, that he insisted his first twelve novels should not be republished (without revision, at least) because he considered them "horribly inferior" and the idea of their sale "a con". The irony is that several of them, like almost all of his books, well repay the effort – some are scarce – of searching out to read.

The length of that apprenticeship – twelve years, twelve novels – speaks eloquently of his perseverance, after which success came quickly: no sooner had he found his feet with The Forgotten Story and Ross Poldark (both 1945)
than he co-wrote a screenplay that was accepted, produced and the resultant film acclaimed: "most intelligently written", said one reviewer; "the dialogue – unusually literate and worth listening to – must have been a pleasure for the actors to speak" purred others. After that, whether writing in contemporary or period mode, WG never looked back, with scarcely a misstep amid a long string of superior works through more than forty years. Five of his novels published in the period 1950-1967 were adapted for the silver screen, the first, *Night Without Stars*, by himself and the fourth, *Marnie*, by Jay Presson Allen for Alfred Hitchcock. *The Sleeping Partner*, Poldarks I-VIII and *The Forgotten Story* were all dramatised for television, with the two mid-70s BBC *Poldark* series seen all around the world. (At the time of writing, three series of the twenty-first century remake have been aired, with more to come.) Radio dramatisations of *The Tumbled House*, *The Little Walls* and *Marnie* were supplemented by readings from several of his other works. *Marnie* has been presented as both theatre (2001, adapted by Sean O'Connor) and opera (2017, adapted by Nico Muhly).

WG's own stage play, *Circumstantial Evidence*, was produced at Guildford, Richmond and Brighton in 1979, but it's his novels that show him to best advantage, delivered, some quicker, some fatter, some contemporary, some historical, but with consistent excellence for so long until, in his eighties, both *Cameo* and *Stephanie* fell slightly below the high water mark of his most assured (though, typically, gamely, with late-era page-turners *Tremor* and *The Ugly Sister* he proved that he had it still). It's interesting to note that only twice did he write books after "substantial advice from (an) outside source", since in both cases – *Woman In The Mirror* and (especially) *Cameo* – the result was disappointing. But such minor relative failings are outweighed by a host of superb books and teeming tumult of immortal characters just waiting to be discovered – or rediscovered – and savoured, whether anew or as old friends.

That WG chose to spend long stretches of the last seven decades of his life by himself, scratching away with paper and pen sounds grim; something like a prison sentence, and indeed he was a prisoner of his siren compulsion to write, or muse on writing, all the time. But the reward – his and ours – is worth the sacrifice, I believe. I hope he did too.
Broadly speaking, three factors contributed equally to WG's success: the first essential was his innate talent, without which the rest would not matter; the second, just as important, was grit, exemplified in his case by an unwavering determination, backed by self-confidence, to apply himself, come what may, over years and despite the lack for so long of much in the way of encouragement, and the third was his healthy instinct of becoming, within his purview, very well-connected. Reaching right back to pre-war days, he was attracted to, and cultivated, first-class minds: Tom Attlee and Fred Harris are early examples of men whom he befriended and who served him diligently. Running a B&B during the war years brought him into contact with first Benno Moiseiwitsch and then Peter Latham, the second of whom in 1950 put him up for the Savile Club. His association with actress Valerie Taylor, which led in short order to his name being projected onto cinema screens around the world, proved very beneficial to his career.

Once a Savilian, his associative instinct was greatly facilitated: like minds Richard Church, Max Reinhardt and Frank Swinnerton were already members and the opportunity to network provided by this select environment was surely grist to his or any writer's mill. When, in researching the background of *Night Without Stars*, he wished to contact an eye-surgeon – no problem. Similarly, he liaised with insurance loss adjusters re *Fortune is a Woman*, electrical engineers re *The Sleeping Partner*, a Chief Constable and a psychiatrist re *Marnie*, a safecracker and a safe-manufacturer re *The Walking Stick*, a boxing promoter re *Angell, Pearl and Little God*, a cosmetics executive re *The Green Flash* and more. Though all of those books could have been written without such primary input, none would have been half so authentically or persuasively realised: in short, so successful. When in 1961 WG called himself "the most successful unknown novelist in England", the journalists to whom he spoke probably thought he was joking. If they but knew.

The environment of the Savile – intellectual and convivial – was itself "a tremendous mental stimulus" (*Memoirs*, 1.7). The writer who lives a narrow life soon exhausts himself – talent alone, in other words, is not enough on which to get by. Thanks goodness there was so much more to WG than merely that.
A WG Top Ten
(ordered by year of publication)

The Merciless Ladies (1944)
Poldarks I-IV (read sequentially, as one)
Fortune is a Woman
The Sleeping Partner
The Tumbled House
Marnie
After The Act
The Walking Stick
Angell, Pearl and Little God
The Ugly Sister

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NOTES AND SOURCES

1 Memoirs of a Private Man, Macmillan, 2003, about which The Daily Mail enthused:

To read [WG's] memoir is to meet a charming, decent, old-fashioned sort of character with an enormous capacity for friendship and a wonderful interest in other people ... Every gentle page offers us a shining example of prolific creativity and a good life well-lived.

Quite so.

2 From a letter, dated 2 August 1999, to this author.

3 Richard Church, in a 1963 Bookman review of The Grove of Eagles

4 The Daily Telegraph's Richard Baldick, in a 1970 review of Angell, Pearl and Little God


Quote from *The Sunday Times* recycled on the front cover of *The Little Walls* (H&S, 1955)

Quote from *Books and Bookmen* recycled on the back cover of *The Grove of Eagles* (H&S, 1963)

Quote from *The Birmingham Mail* recycled on the back cover of *The Grove of Eagles* (H&S, 1963)

Quote from *The Birmingham Mail* recycled on the back cover of *The Walking Stick* (Collins, 1967)

On 5 July 2015, *Mail Online*’s Hannah Flint reported speculation from Mammoth Screen that fans could soon hope to buy Poldark-themed wine, watches, aftershave, wallets, lunch boxes and even dried fruit. As of September 2017, the range of such products listed on Amazon included CDs (music from the TV series), cookery books, fridge magnets, eco-friendly cotton tote bags, birthday cards, bumper stickers, tea towels, tee shirts, pendant sterling silver necklaces, aprons, "cream tea" and "country ploughman's lunch" hampers, ale and coffee mugs, cider, gin, rice paper cake-toppers, cross-stitch charts, Christmas tree decorations and more.

In his sixties he described himself (in a letter to Richard Church dated 6 February 1970) as a "(still) self doubting writer" and on the last page of *Memoirs* suggests his place is among "the least important [writers] of all." See also 2 above.

WG's presentation of himself in his memoir should be taken with a pinch of salt: for example, his active lifestyle (tennis, swimming, surfing, golf, hands-on gardening, regular travel) suggest health less "delicate" than rude; his obvious thirst for and appreciation of the society of a wide circle of friends belies the "private man" tag – he was more clubman than recluse; and though "an instinctive feminist" in his own estimation, others (not least his son and daughter-in-law, who were well placed to know) saw him differently. Said Peggotty Graham (quoted in *Hitchcock and the Making of Marnie* by Tony Lee
Moral, The Scarecrow Press, 2013): "He had a very old-fashioned view of women ... I wouldn't have thought he understood what feminism was."

14 Memoirs, Book One, Chapter Five
15 The Times, 7 May 2002
16 This claim, made in Memoirs 1.10, is not borne out by the facts, since, though most of The Merciless Ladies was written before the war (Memoirs, 1.5), it was not published until 1944, with contemporary novels Night Journey (1941) and My Turn Next (1942) conceived and completed in the interim; similarly, though the first few chapters of Ross Poldark were written "while [WG] was waiting for call-up" i.e. in the spring of 1940, no fewer than three later-started works – Night Journey, My Turn Next and The Forgotten Story (February 1945) – appeared before it. The Green Flash was started in 1979 but only finished after three Poldark novels (VIII-X) had been conceived, written and published in the interim, and so on.
17 Memoirs, Book One, Chapter Ten
18 Memoirs, Book One, Chapter Five
19 Books and Bookmen, October 1959
20 Memoirs, 1.10 (Angell, Eagles); 2.11 (Flash)
21 Four of the twelve were eventually republished after more or less extensive revision with the other eight remaining out of print or, as WG liked to say, "suppressed".
22 Memoirs, Book Two, Chapter Eleven
23 That's not counting Black Beard, WG's second novel, never published and now sadly lost.
24 Alan Dent in The News Chronicle
25 The quote is a conflation of comments made by Catherine de la Roche on the BBC and an unknown reviewer in Punch; all three quotes in 24 and 25 are taken from blurb on the back cover of Take My Life (WL, 1947)
26 Memoirs, Book One, Chapter Three
27 When in November 1977 WG appeared on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs, the author knew himself well enough to
concede to presenter Roy Plomley that his castaway's luxury would have to be not a comfortable bed as taken by Paul Merton, Michael Caine, Seb Coe and several others or a rum and raisin ice cream maker (Desmond Tutu's choice) or even, in common with Margaret Thatcher, Hugh Laurie, James Stewart and more a photo album of family and friends but rather "a large number of exercise books and ... Biros",* as befitting one who, first, last and always, whether in reality or on a fantasy desert island, lived to write.

* An unlimited supply of paper is chosen often, supplemented by pens (Beryl Bainbridge, J K Rowling, A S Byatt, Ralph Fiennes); by pencils (P D James, Nigel Hawthorne, Andrew Motion and many more); by a typewriter (Philip Larkin, Tennessee Williams, Alan Coren, Roy Plomley himself etc); by brushes and paints (Jon Snow, Trevor McDonald, Debbie Harry, Vera Lynn et al.) or, in the case of Terry Wogan – intent on sending messages – by pens and bottles.

NOTE A full transcript of WG's Desert Island Discs appearance is reproduced in pdf file "In Profile part two".

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