

Winston Graham: 'I found the atmosphere and history exciting'

By [Cornish Guardian](#) | Posted March 04, 2015

When you are about to interview an author in his nineties, you don't expect him to turn up in a sports car capable of 150mph, but Winston Graham was not your average man.

His Poldark novels were not only highly readable and bestsellers, they also translated into superb light television drama, with the whole of Britain gripped every Sunday night to see the latest saga of the dashing Captain Ross Poldark, who had returned to his Cornish estate from the American Revolutionary War to find that his bride-to-be, Elizabeth, believing him dead, was about to marry his cousin Francis.

Ross's romance with the servant girl Demelza Carne and the financial uncertainties of tin mining, all played against a superb backdrop of Cornish countryside, was compulsory viewing when the series was first broadcast in the UK between 1975 and 1977. It gained audiences of about 14 million viewers and was so successful that some vicars rescheduled or cancelled church services rather than have them clash with the transmission of the Poldark series.

I was one of those devoted Poldark fans and had an added interest in that I was covering the filming for the Western Morning News.

I spent an evening or two in local hostelries with some of the cast and crew, including a memorable night at the 1975 Padstow May Day.

I also met Winston Graham at that time, as he made occasional visits to the film set, and he graciously took part in the pictures I took of the wedding scene filmed at St Winnow Church. He had also spoken to me to compose an obituary for the paper when his wife, Jean, whom he had met at Perranporth in 1926, died at their home in Sussex in 1992.

However, when we met at the Carlyon Bay Hotel in 2002, where he arrived in a new Jaguar sports car at the launch of his last novel, *Bella Poldark*, he

was nearly 94. It was probably his last interview before his death in July, 2003.

He was accompanied by his daughter Rosamund Barteau, who had lived in St Agnes for many years.

Winston was in jovial form as he remembered his days in Cornwall.



Winston Graham (1908-2003)

“If I wrote it today Ross Poldark would be a captain in the SAS who had been abroad or spent a considerable number of years in Ulster and various places, and had returned with a scar wound on his face and had come back to a rather broken down farm house, probably somewhere just outside Truro, where the lanes are still narrow and no one cuts the hedges so that they are a riot of bluebells and campion and white flowers.

“He might have a small legacy from an uncle but be rather poor, and his aim in life would be to agitate for Cornwall to have more autonomy from central government in London.

“With that he would be persuading the Cornish not merely to welcome visitors, as they do now, but to be a bit more upmarket in their ambitions to attract the right sort of visitors.”

I asked him whether he thought he might find Elizabeth and Demelza among the local girls, and he told me with a twinkle in his eye: “I saw one or two the other day who were quite attractive and I don’t think he would have any trouble finding good-looking girls down here. One wouldn’t expect him to pick up a waif from Redruth Fair, whose father beat her – that could be rather out of date.”

He said he thought there was a George Warleggan among the Cornish aristocracy, but would not be drawn into who it could be.

Winston said it was Cornwall itself which prompted him to write the Poldark novels. “I moved from Lancashire with my family when I was 17 and fell in love with the countryside immediately.

“But it took me five years to get to know the Cornish people, and the more I got to know the Cornish people, the more I liked them. I found the whole atmosphere and the history exciting and romantic.”

His own first meeting with Jean Williamson was in church at Perranporth when he was 18 and she was 14. Their friendship was very much fostered by her mother “who seemed to like me”.



Jean Graham née Williamson (1912-1992)

In January, 1937, he decided to go to a dance at the former Droskyn Castle Hotel (now flats) and noticed Jean had changed greatly from their first

meeting: “She had so much more character than anyone else there, male or female.”

Later when he was dancing with her he said: “I can’t afford to marry yet, but when I can, will you marry me?”

Her smiling bright eyes met his for a few seconds, then she said: “I think I just might.”

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