

# THE MASTER OF POLDARK

*Author Winston Graham waits in the wings for a new Ross and Demelza to hit our TV screens*

Winston Graham is enjoying our attempt to find a piece of Kent coastline which resembles the granite cliffs of Cornwall. The writer of the Poldark novels has a dry sense of humour and as we drive up to yet another sweep of chalky white rock face, he points out amiably that Cornwall's crags are usually black.

The idea is to photograph Graham somewhere Cornish-looking. His latest novel, Tremor, is set in Morocco, but he is best known for the historical tales of the Cornish Poldark family. It is a world of smuggling and saucy wenches to which a whole new generation will be introduced when HTV puts out a Christmas special which has yet to be scheduled.

Graham had a hip replacement earlier this year and is not in the first flush of youth, so we try to cheat by finding somewhere nearer home. "If you'd asked me, maybe I could have thought of somewhere," he says.

Graham is secretive about his age, but he was already a well-established and well-paid novelist and screenwriter by the time the BBC series of his Poldark books made him a household name in the Seventies. By 1962, he had earned enough to leave his beloved Cornwall to become a tax exile in France. "I didn't put down any roots at all, I didn't feel happy. I decided I'd rather be taxed in England than bored abroad."

He came to Cornwall at the age of 17 when his family moved from Manchester to improve his father's health. The young Winston was bedevilled with pneumonia throughout his childhood, supplementing his patchy education with voracious reading. "I discovered the public library and read a novel a day for years."

Once in Cornwall, he started writing and never looked back. "I'd wanted to write all my life, to tell stories because I loved reading them." However critical he is of his early work, he had a natural gift for old-fashioned storytelling and believable characters. His knack for dialogue meant they translated well to the big screen. Marnie was made into a film by Hitchcock with Sean Connery trying to cure Tippi Hedren of frigidity.

"I didn't like the film at all; the story was distorted and a lot of subtler points were lost. When it came out, the critics disliked it, but now they look on it as one of the most important of Hitchcock's canon. God knows why. I remember Hitchcock complaining about the cost of using Sean Connery."

Forthright as ever, he doesn't mince his words about the first Poldark television programmes. "I didn't like the series, they destroyed the character. I'd made a great study of 18th-Century dialogue to get the language correct and they said things like, 'You must be joking.' I made a fuss and the second series was more faithful."

Colin Firth may have been setting female viewers' hearts aflutter in the recent series of *Pride and Prejudice*, but two decades ago Robin Ellis was doing an equally stirring job, striding about in tight breeches, tempted by the charms of the spirited guttersnipe Demelza and the delicate, vapid Elizabeth.

Graham has no doubts about his books' appeal. "They were romantic, which is a four-letter word in the ears of the critics." Yet, although passions may lurk, you won't get creaking bedsprings in his work. "I just think it is more effective when it is not all spelled out."

Behind the plunging necklines was a solid historical context. Graham read *The Times* and the local Cornish newspapers from the 1790s, contemporary diaries, chronicles and sermons. So if he says characters rise at cocklight and sleep at cockshut, that's probably how they described it themselves.

The original Poldark series finished when the BBC ran through the first seven books and Graham said he had written all he wanted to. Yet, five years later, he found himself returning to the characters, writing four novels taking up the story of Ross, now an MP in London, and the new generation. HTV finally revived the characters, producing the peak-time Christmas special to test the water for a series next year. At first it was reported that the original stars, Robin Ellis and Angharad Rees, would play Ross and Demelza, but bosoms were well and truly heaving at the Poldark Society when John Bowe, of *Prime Suspect*, and Mel Martin, of *Lovejoy*, were cast instead.

Winston Graham is in a difficult position because he didn't have any say in the casting and he knows the original actors, particularly Angharad Rees. He treads carefully. "I met the two new people and I find them very good actors and very charming and delightful and I'm entirely behind them."

He went on location for the HTV special and produces snapshots of a ball scene shot in Bath. Still observant and interested in people, you suspect he is a little lonely since the death of his wife, Jean, and may welcome the diversion of going on set.

He and Jean met in Cornwall and were married for 53 years. "We met at church – very respectable. I was 19 and I just thought she was a nice schoolgirl. It was some years before it became something more."

He still lives in the large house they used to share in the Home Counties, with a swimming pool and tennis court. It is full of beautiful antiques, paintings and photographs, including one of Graham standing next to Charlie Chaplin as they both stand as godfather to theatrical producer\* Max Reinhardt's child. Graham and Jean's son, Andrew, is a fellow at Balliol College, Oxford and daughter Rosamund is married with three children and lives in California.

The couple used to travel at least three times a year, visiting Morocco in the early Sixties after the earthquake which decimated the city of Agadir. It inspired his latest novel, Tremor, about an ill-matched assortment of people whose lives are changed by the disaster.

Graham says he has always been a romantic. "I have a dry sense of humour, but so did Jean. She could reply in a flash – and yes – certain things about Jean went into Demelza's character, particularly her gamine sense of humour and ability to find happiness in small things. We both swore that if one lived longer than the other, as one obviously would, that the one left would live life to the utmost and I've been doing so."

Although he says he will never write another Poldark novel, another contemporary novel is starting to form in his head. Meanwhile, Poldark enthusiasts from the Seventies, pining for the Ross of old, can be of brave heart. From Graham's snapshots on set, actor Nick Gleaves who plays the stranger from the sea, stealing the heart of Ross and Demelza's beautiful daughter Clowance (Kelly Reilly), cuts as dashing a figure as Ross did.

*\* Ms Hinton has confused two men of the same name. The Austrian-born American theatrical producer (1873-1943) and WG's friend and publisher (1915-2002) were not related.*