

# Mining gold with Poldark

The high point of Winston Graham's fame was the TV dramatisation of his Poldark novels, set in 18th-century Cornwall. It had 14 million viewers glued to their sets in the Seventies and Eighties, and made stars of Robin Ellis, who played Ross Poldark, and Angharad Rees as Demelza.

Six other novels were made into films. The best-known of these was Marnie, the Alfred Hitchcock classic starring Sean Connery and Tippi Hedren. The Walking Stick was filmed by MGM, and when J Arthur Rank commissioned the film script of Take My Life, in 1947, Graham was given a flat, a secretary, £150 a week and a chauffeured Rolls Royce.

However, perhaps the proudest boast of a man who left school without going into higher education was that his son Andrew became Master of Balliol College, Oxford – possibly the most elite academic position in the country.

Winston Mawdsley Graham was born in Manchester on June 30 1910 [actually 1908]. His name was a legacy of an election where his great-uncle, James Mawdsley, had stood as a Conservative alongside the young Winston Churchill in Oldham. Both lost to the Liberals. Then Churchill changed sides and Mrs Graham, a passionate Liberal, insisted on calling her second son Winston.

He should have attended Manchester Grammar School but he had pneumonia as a boy and the doctor advised that he attend the local school.

The family moved to Cornwall when a stroke crippled his father, a tea importer, at the age of 54. The move was lucky for Winston. "How could I have written stories about Southport?" he said. His parents bought a plot of land and his brother opened a men's outfitters in Perranporth, though the family wholesale business, Mawdsley & Co, had traded in groceries.

He was 17 when he decided to become a writer. Unlike most budding authors, he did not need another job because his mother supported him for several years. "It suited her to keep me at home after my father died and my older brother had left," he said. It was his "inestimable good fortune" not to have to worry that his first novels made no money.

He spent 30 years at Flat Rocks in Perranporth,<sup>2</sup> which inspired his Poldark novels about the early years of tin and copper mining. [Lech Carrygy (a Cornish name meaning Flat Rocks) was the wooden chalet bungalow, hired after the war, where most of Demelza was written – but WG's two Perranporth homes were Tresloe Vean and Treberran.] The first, Ross Poldark, was published in 1945, followed by Demelza in 1946, Jeremy Poldark in 1950 and Warleggan in 1953.

He kept curious working hours: after lunch he would have a snooze and at 5pm he would begin to write, working for three hours. In the morning he did ordinary things, paying bills and talking to the gardener – his garden being his great pride and joy.

He took his research extremely seriously. The Poldark books were not only good yarns, they showed his knowledge of tin-mining and the clash between Wesleyanism, with its egalitarian doctrines, and the decadent Church of England dominated by fox-hunting parsons in the 18th century.

When he wanted to set a novel in the boxing world, he spent time in the Thomas à Beckett pub in London – a regular haunt of boxers. He also met Henry Cooper and boxing promoter Mike Barrett, and went to a fight at the Royal Albert Hall. Barrett subsequently became a great friend.

He married Jean Williamson in 1939 and they had two children, a daughter and a son. His success briefly tempted him to become a tax exile and the family spent a year in Provence. The children loved it but he didn't, preferring to be taxed than bored to death. When they left Cornwall, they settled at Abbotswood House in Sussex.

He loved opera, and until Jean's death in 1992 they went to Vienna to see productions every year.

He was a clubbable man. It was only when he broke both ankles in 2002 that he gave up his lunches at the Savile – a club he was first taken to in 1951.

All his publishers had nothing but affection for him. Ian and Marjory Chapman, at Collins when the Poldark series was televised, said: "He was the perfect companion. He was like family."

His last publisher, David North of Macmillan, agrees: "He was the most charming man you'd ever meet. He knew I liked Dover sole and we would have that if we met in London and he'd have it prepared if I visited him in Sussex."

When Graham came up to London, he used to stop off at Claridges and have his hair done by Ken in Gentleman's Hairdressing there. Recently Ken travelled down to Sussex to do his hair and have lunch.

"I started doing Mr Graham's hair in 1975. When he'd been staying at the Savile, I took an hour off in the morning to go and play snooker with him," he recalled.

Graham wrote a final Poldark novel in 2002. When I reviewed it for the Express, I got a charming handwritten letter thanking me. He said he had embarked on it with trepidation because, "I was aware that time's winged chariot was hurrying near and I would have been very annoyed to leave the novel half finished."

However, it was not his last book. His autobiography, *The Memoirs Of A Private Man*, will be published in September.

Maggie Pringle, *The Daily Express*, 15 July 2003

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