

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 [\[1908\]](#). 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, 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, *Memoirs of a Private Man*, will be published in September.

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

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Winston Graham

The author of the Poldark series and Marnie, he kept his readership by always being ahead of his time.

When Alfred Hitchcock made his 1964 film of *Marnie*, the novel by Winston Graham, who has died aged 93, he was wary of the antihero who blackmails for sex a beautiful girl he knows is guilty of kleptomania. Hitchcock wheeled the dark, tall and handsome Sean Connery into the part, gaining glamour and losing some plausibility: would such a man have to resort to such manipulation?

Graham himself had made the twisted sexual blackmailer less attractive and more darkly believable, a piece of decidedly contemporary noir. With his elf's face and elfin eye for a slightly off-centre character – villain or hero – Winston Graham was a popular novelist who kept his readership because he was arguably, in terms of emotional flavour, always ahead of his time.

He wrote over 40 novels, which were translated into 17 languages. The television series made from his dozen Poldark historical novels were watched by 15 million people. In Cornwall, churches altered the times of their services to avoid clashing with Poldark.

On video, the stories were the most popular historical series ever, after Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. They made Graham a fortune, though even at the height of their popularity – they were first shown from 1975 to 1977 – he himself remained a strangely (by modern standards) unknown figure.

He rejoiced in being described as "the most successful unknown novelist in England", and gave few interviews. But this was a defensive professional ploy, and evidence of a conventional upper middle-class mistrust of self-hype, rather than a mark of reclusiveness: he did in fact enjoy being a member of several London clubs.

His creation of Ross Poldark, Cornish mine-owner and saturnine adventurer, is likely to be the factor which keeps him in the literary canon. Graham always

maintained that he had never received a rejection slip, but his first novel, published when he was 23, *The House with the Stained Glass Windows* (a title typical of his flair for the off-centre) made him only £29, and his first 16 novels, written in longhand when he was still a very young man, were also not successful; he had to be subsidised by his widowed mother. But in 1945, *Ross Poldark: a Novel of Cornwall, 1783-1787*, was published, the first of the sequence, all bestsellers.

Ross Poldark was created as a hero with shades of Cornish barrenness and darkness, including an unpredictable wife of lower social class, Demelza. Graham had every reason to be aware of social class – his father was a tea importer, his mother was a member of the Mawdsley family, who ran a firm of grocery wholesalers, and his great uncle, James Mawdsley, contested the two-seat Oldham constituency for the Conservative party alongside Winston Churchill.

The Liberals won in each case; Churchill joined that party, and the author's mother, a keen Liberal, later insisted on calling her second son Winston. Though he did not go to public school himself, Graham sent his son, Andrew, to Charterhouse and saw him become, in 2001, Master of Balliol, which the author jokingly regarded as being "next door to being God".

But in his monetarily leaner youth it was the Cornish terrain that created the atmosphere and character of the Poldark saga; Graham experienced it at first hand through a family tragedy. Though the family came from Manchester, where Winston was born, and expected to go to Manchester grammar school, it moved to Cornwall when his father was disabled by a stroke at the age of 54. Graham was later to ask himself what he could possibly have written about if the family had moved instead to Southport.

As it was, his dark-tinged imagination had plenty of places to roam in Cornwall. For the 2002 Poldark novel, *Bella Poldark*, which he said was to be the last, he maintained his habits of always writing with a fountain pen and always doing hands-on research. Bella was an opera singer, and though Graham and his wife Jean used to go to Vienna for the opera every year, he

knew his familiarity with the subject was superficial. So he persuaded English National Opera to let him watch a rehearsal of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, which was to feature in the novel.

This was typical of his preparation. For his boxing novel *Angell, Pearl and Little God* (1970), he went into a pub on the Old Kent Road, met the boxer Henry Cooper and the promoter Mike Barrett, heard managers talking about "purses" and sat in the front row of a boxing match at the Albert Hall. When he wanted to know about safebreakers, he took one to a smart restaurant.

His relations with the film industry were guarded. As a young author, his first whiff of serious money came from his film script of *Take My Life* (1947), a J. Arthur Rank production. Rank provided £150 a week, a flat and a RollsRoyce with chauffeur. He was delighted when Rank seemed to tire of him, and hastily returned to Cornwall, having, as he saw it, avoided the pitfall that claimed so many novelists who wrote for the films: writing future novels as if they were scripts. His next novel, in 1949, was the historical *Cordelia*, which gratifyingly sold 560,000 in hardback, but was deemed by him to be safely unfilmable.

His relations with high tax avoidance were similarly guarded. At one stage, through some arcane manoeuvre, he lived in France and paid tax in Switzerland, but came back home because, as he put it, he preferred to be taxed to death than bored to death.

He braved the public stage as chairman of the Society of Authors from 1967 to 1969 and was a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1983 he was appointed OBE. But always he was a real writer of the old school, above all interested in the job itself, and steadily productive to the end – his autobiography is due to appear in September.

Dennis Barker, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2003

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Winston Graham

Versatile writer whose books ranged from the Poldark novels to 'Marnie'

Winston Graham was fond of referring to himself as "the most successful unknown novelist in England", knowing it was at once an urbane self-putdown (something at which he was particularly adept), yet largely the truth.

Female viewers of a certain age still surely tremble at the memory of Robin Ellis in tight breeches (the Colin Firth de son jour) as Ross Poldark, the tough, passionate, conspiring 18th-century Cornish squire and tin-mine owner, fighting and swaggering his way through hour upon hour of the Poldark television series during the 1970s and 1980s; the veins at the temples of male viewers still doubtless throb at the thought of Angharad Rees as the feisty, wayward Demelza, Poldark's wife.

Yet, even though nearly 15 million viewers tuned in, week after week (rather more than for the new version of 1996), gripped by plot lines highlighting love, lust, revenge, mining, wrecking, smuggling, feuding, plunder and riot, all played out against some of the wildest, starkest scenic backdrops in all England, Graham kept the lowest of low profiles, preferring to get on with the business of writing. And not for him the word processor, or even the typewriter, electric or otherwise. He wrote in long-hand – over 40 novels in a full-time writing career that stretched from 1934 to 2002, when his last book, *Bella Poldark*, was published.

The Poldark saga, in its original novel form, began life in 1945, when television was little more than a freakish technological gimmick. In *Ross Poldark*, the eponymous hero returns to Cornwall from the catastrophe of the American revolutionary wars, determined to make something of his rundown estate, and his life. *Demelza* (1946) continues the tale; *Jeremy Poldark* (1950) chronicles the birth of his son, *Warleggan* (1953) the near triumph of his bitterest enemy. The entire sequence owed a good deal to John Galsworthy, as well as Hugh Walpole, whose chronicles of "Rogue" Herries and his tempes-

tuous, swashbuckling Lakeland family and descendants stretched from the 1730s to the 1930s.

Every Poldark story – there are over a dozen books – has as its subtitle "A Novel of Cornwall", followed by two dates which circumscribe the action (Graham was always a precise plotter). The chronicle starts in 1783 and is unusual in the sub-literature of the "family saga" in that Graham's (and thus Poldark's) sympathies lie with the poor, the starved, the dispossessed; the outcast who is forced by wretched circumstance and an unforgiving fate to become an outlaw.

There is more than just a tinge of incipient socialism in Poldark's views and actions, which are mirrored on a much larger, even heroic, scale across the English Channel, where revolution, which will directly affect the Cornish fisher-folk, is breaking out. All this chimed in perfectly with the recent coming to power of a reforming Labour government under Clement Attlee.

When the narrative finally reaches the 1820s, a vast familial octopus has been created, its tentacles curled round most of the major historical landmarks of the period, with a cast of characters – mainly the Poldarks and their deadly rivals the Warleggans, together with each family's hangers-on and minions – which runs into the hundreds. Even so, the saga was never sprawling or ill-disciplined; Graham always ran a tight ship.

Historical fiction was not the only arrow in Winston Graham's quiver. He was equally proficient at novels of adventure and intrigue, the psychological thriller, detective(ish) yarns (in which it was clear that mere clue planting did not much appeal to the puppet-master). He was also one of the few male writers who could triumphantly carry off, even at an advanced age, the "Gothic Romance", with all its plot and characterisation singularities.

However, in the wider world he scored a far greater success even than with his Poldark novels, when his psychological suspense story *Marnie* (1961) was turned into an Oscar-winning 1964 movie by Alfred Hitchcock, with Tippi Hedren as the tragically mixed-up, kleptomaniacal heroine, and Sean

Connery. The original screenplay had been by Evan Hunter ("Ed McBain"), who had worked with Hitchcock on the script of *The Birds* (1963), also with Hedren (one of Hitchcock's most put-upon leading ladies), but he and Hitchcock had fallen out and Jay Presson Allen, a prolific screenwriter responsible for the scripts for such classic movies as *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Cabaret* and Graham Greene's *Travels with My Aunt*, had taken over, to impressive effect.

Yet another writer (George Bluestone) took on the task of translating Graham's 1967 suspense novel *The Walking Stick*, which featured yet another psychologically, but also this time actually, scarred heroine Deborah (she's beautiful, but limps), into a film-script. This time the girl (played by Samantha Eggar) helps with a major jewel heist – in the novel, Graham turns the prelude to the robbery into a sequence of almost intolerable tension, and then, in a brilliant *coup de roman*, entirely upends the reader's expectations.

Winston Graham was born in Manchester in 1910, and seems to have been only very accidentally educated: a bout of pneumonia as a child caused his doctor to proclaim that he was "not long for this world" and that for his education he should travel no further than the local day school – his father, a comfortably-off tea merchant, had set his sights on Manchester Grammar.

When the family moved to Cornwall and his father died (after a crippling stroke) Graham was kept at home and supported financially by his mother, a passionate believer in her youngest son's writing abilities. Graham paid her back by cracking the short-story market in the monthlies (such as the *Windsor Magazine*) and getting welcomed aboard one of the busiest library suppliers of the day, Ward Lock, whose mainly young writers churned out genre fiction by the yard for a pittance (sometimes as little as £30 per book, all rights).

Although his early novels made little or no impact, and even less money, Graham (like the tiro adventure-story writer Ralph Hammond Innes at around the same time, although for the publisher Herbert Jenkins) virtually taught himself how to write by turning "the product" out on a regular basis. His sales rose steadily: readers began to know what to expect when ordering "the new

Winston Graham" at the library. If you liked E. Laurie Long, say, then your taste was for thrillers set on the Seven Seas; if "Mark Cross" (A. T. Pechey – father, oddly enough, of Fanny Cradock) light and by no means brain-racking detective yarns; if Winston Graham socially aware thrillers and vibrant, red-blooded tales of eighteenth century Cornish life (in which the county itself almost becomes a character, so fiercely is its spirit limned).

In 1950 he transferred his talents to Hodder & Stoughton with a "breakout" thriller, *Night Without Stars*, which was bought by J. Arthur Rank, who then offered Graham £150 a week (an eye-popping sum in late-Austerity London) and a flat, to write his own screenplay. From then on Graham lived the writer's life, and "never [did] an honest day's work" again.

This was typically self-deprecatory; in any case not true. Graham, like many crime and historical writers, had a passion for research and put in a good deal of hard graft, especially on his backgrounds. Having no experience of the noble art of fisticuffs, he decided he needed a boxing setting for a new novel and hung around seedy pubs in London's East End watching the broken-nose and cauliflower-ear brigade. Henry Cooper and the promoter Mike Barrett helped him. At his first match in the Albert Hall he sat too close to the action and got spattered with blood. The result was the impressive thriller *Angell, Pearl and Little God* (1970).

For the robbery details in *The Walking Stick* he managed to elicit the services of Chubb's then managing director, R. J. Pilgrim, who fed him a good deal of useful information on safe-cracking – although obviously (Graham noted wryly later) not the most crucial information of all.

One of the distinguishing features of a Winston Graham novel was his attitude towards women which, certainly 50-odd years ago, was light years ahead of the times he wrote in. In the main the Graham heroine fights to live her life the way she – not anyone else; not even her lover – wants to live it. In the main she succeeds. Another Graham characteristic was his special re-creation of old Cornwall itself: his vivid images of the land and its struggling yet defiant people have rarely been bettered in British popular fiction.

A writer of many parts, Winston Graham was a success in as many fields. His *The Little Walls* won the very first Golden Dagger awarded by the Crime Writers' Association in 1955; his contemporary and Victorian-Gothic suspenseurs were snapped up for the movies; he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1968, appointed OBE in 1983; and the old Wendron tin mine near Helston was renamed Poldark in his honour only last year. Before his death he had completed an autobiography, *Memoirs of a Private Man*, which is to be published in September.

Such was the success of his Cornish family saga – with its own flourishing appreciation society; most of the books still in print; a new audio version (read by the excellent Michael Maloney) recently released – that it cannot be long before someone has another shot at bringing it back to the small screen. Perhaps even, now that swashbuckling historical spectaculars seem to be back in fashion, the very large screen.

Jack Adrian, *The Independent*, 11 July 2003

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