

Open Book, BBC Radio 4, Sunday 14 September 2008

Presenter: Mariella Frostrup (MF)

Guests: Winston Graham's son Dr Andrew Graham (AG) and editor of *Popular Narrative Media*, Nickianne Moody (NM)

MF: Although Winston Graham wrote some fifty books, it's the twelve Poldark novels for which he's renowned. Their immortalisation in the extremely popular television series of the seventies, attracting fifteen million viewers, must have helped, but the books were fantastically successful in their own right, their fans identifying with the eternal love triangle at their heart. Ross Poldark marries his kitchen maid, Demelza, but holds a flame for Elizabeth, in turn tyrannised by the books' villain, George Warleggan, all this set against the wild, windswept, storm-beaten backdrop of eighteenth century Cornwall.

The series was published over an extraordinary six decades. The first Poldark novel, called *Ross Poldark - A Novel of Cornwall*, appeared in 1945 and the last, *Bella Poldark*, was published in 2002, the year before Graham's death ... Now, here's Winston Graham's son, Andrew, recalling what happened when, aged twelve, he ventured into the forbidden territory of his father's study.

AG: I don't to this day know what I expected to see. I was just curious, and I was in the room, and it was dead quiet and I remember looking at his desk and even now I can recall my feeling because I suddenly saw this letter and the letter said: "Dear Winston, About that girl you strangled and put under your pile of anthracite three weeks ago. I take it you buried her at once?" And I think you can probably think that, in a boy of twelve not knowing what to expect, that was a bit of a fright.

I think my father was particularly imaginative in his use of names in books. Just to give a few examples, he knew a man called Polgreen but he didn't think that that was somehow hard enough and so Polgreen became Poldark, which has got the hardness and it also sounds completely authentically Cornish, although Poldark isn't a Cornish name. And then the other great person who's in constant tension and competition with Ross Poldark is George Warleggan. Well, George Warleggan is based on a smelter who made his money in smelting and banking in Cornwall whose actual name was William Lemon, but Lemon is soft and watery, where George Warleggan is really vicious.

MF moves on to discuss with Nickianne Moody the significance of the books' appeal.

MF: Now Winston Graham is known for his meticulous research, as indicated there by his son, but how do you explain the books' unprecedented appeal, which has seen them reprinted 27 times since the 1950s?

NM: I think it has to be that they have cultural resonance. Ross Poldark is a post-war democratic hero and for the readers of the 1940s he appeals to the concerns of the recession of the 1930s, so he's a responsible landlord, we deal with the rights of the unemployed, we look at good housing and yet we've got that terrific upbeat 1950s culture of new technology, enterprise and this sort of sense of new medicine - all those post-war democratic areas are addressed by the book. And, of course, Graham chooses the 1790s, this period when you have all this immense social change, where people are trying to decide whether it's for better or for worse. In the 1950s you have the social contract, you have the NHS, you have the welfare state, and you have this sense that all this injustice that Poldark is fighting is going to be resolved.

MF: So in many ways d'you think he was before his time to some extent?

NM: I think he was of his time. I think that he was fascinated by the native injustice of Cornwall and how this is taken up on a national scale, and people are still borrowing them from libraries, you can still pick them up quite easily. I think people are still reading them and I think as we move into a recession possibly more people will start reading him.

MF: He continued writing his books until 2002. Did they continue to be a barometer of social change?

NM: I think what's interesting about the later books is that he picks up on issues of parenting and ... intergenerational responsibility and I think in the 80s we had a real concern about the family and about the longevity of the family and how the family is sustained into the next generations and I think those types of conflict which are at the heart of the later books provide, again, fascination.

MF: You describe it as popular fiction and it's fair to say, I suppose, that while not a great prose writer, he did have a very good emotional grasp of his characters, didn't he, both men and women.

NM: I think so, and I think with the female characters, there are some fantastic female characters, right across the spectrum and if you talk to readers they will come up with lots of different characters, some of them like Verity, who is the woman who makes a marriage of love and is a sort of a spinster; Morwenna, who comes out of a very difficult marriage and manages to find happiness; Demelza; of course, Elizabeth, and even Prudie the servant - they're really fascinating characters because they're developing and growing and that's what Graham's very good at.

MF: Now that you've traced a renewal of interest in Poldark every time we go through dark times, what are the qualities in these books that you think appeal to people during these difficult economic times?

NM: I think it's because he's looking at the black economy of smuggling, and popular protest. He looks very much at private enterprise and people being able to take charge of their circumstances but it has a social realism in that you don't have a happy ending every time but you have a sense of people not being passive and I think that he achieves that in a way that allows people to recognise a character which they can identify with in relation to this idea of social change.

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