

## **Profile**

*An interview with BBC correspondent Ted Harrison recorded at WG's home on 22 December 1977 and broadcast on BBC Radio 4's Profile on either 9 or 16 January 1978.*

TH: The works of the novelist Winston Graham have gripped the imagination of thousands of people around the world for over thirty years. A number of his books have been made into films and his Poldark series has become a great success as a television serial. To meet Mr Graham is to meet a shy but immaculately courteous English gentleman. I visited him at his country home and asked him whether at the age of eighteen when he had first begun writing he had intended writing to be his career?

I don't think I thought of it as a career. I don't think I thought it was unusual. I think it was instinctive for me to want to write and I just started writing. I don't think I looked that far ahead to feel that I was definitely taking up a career. All I wanted to do was to write a novel and to get it published and to go from there. About that time I wrote a play<sup>1</sup> which was performed successfully by amateurs, but immediately after that my first novel was published and I never after that thought of the play form because the novel was obviously what was offering me the opportunity of making a living. I didn't have any encouragement from my family, and my mother, who had a small private income, absolutely tiny by today's standards, had the enormous and marvellous faith in her son which many mothers misguidedly do have in their sons, that I might make a writer, and she had that sort of faith. I don't think it was encouragement from any other member of my family.

Was she also your critic when it came to showing your work for the first time to somebody else apart from yourself?

No, I don't think she was, but I think that I've always been very secretive about my books and there's scarcely ever been much criticism either invited or given between the time that I have written them and the time that I've sent them off.

Your books have always been books about subjects that you've had to research in that you've been a writer from such an early age that nothing has ever been strictly autobiographical.

I think a lot of things eventually become autobiographical. One of the great problems, of course, of being a writer from the very early days is that one hasn't had a background of a lawyer or a doctor or something of this sort, but on the other hand, I think, I hope that over the years one develops a fairly sensitive set of antennae and one sets them out or puts them out in a particular area or a particular direction and they enable one to find that background that one is aiming for. Sometimes the backgrounds are things that I did know. More often than not, they are backgrounds that I didn't. In, of course, the Cornish novels, the background, in so far as it's not historical, I knew intimately. I knew the whole of the coastline and the weather and the people of Cornwall very well.

How did you set about researching the history, to make sure that the dialect was right, that the slang of the time was right, that you had the price of tin right?

Oh, simply reading. Endlessly reading. If you go back into the manuscripts of those days, there are quite a lot that can be found and these do give you the price of tin and there are cost books and when I first went to Cornwall there was quite a residue of old miners, men who had been miners in Cornwall, perhaps, or had been abroad mining and come back to live in Cornwall and they knew a lot about the old Cornish tin mines and copper mines and, of course, nearly every Cornishman is a historian at heart and they're very keen to impart any information they have. As for the dialect, this again is something that I studied by conversation and also by a number of dialect books that I was able to read and study and turns of phrase which I collected which are marvellous and innumerable all over Cornwall.

How many Poldark novels have you now written?

Seven.

Are there going to be any more?

I doubt it. It's difficult to say at this moment. Certainly I finished the last feeling that this was the end of all I had to say. You see, I wrote the first four a long time ago and many people think that they were sequels of each other but they were not. They were one novel which happened to break into convenient parts for publishing. Then I felt that I'd said all I had to say about

them, that that was the end of the story, the end of the shape that I had made, and therefore it wasn't for many years that I again took up the story of the Poldarks. I then began another group which have come to three novels and it's taken me three novels to express the theme that I had when I began *The Black Moon – The Black Moon, The Four Swans* and *The Angry Tide*. That is now complete again. I wouldn't say that I could never write another Poldark novel, nor would I say that I'm contemplating one at the moment.

The Poldark novels became extraordinarily well known with the television version. What did you feel about that, to see the characters that you created having to be made into flesh and blood in the form of actors and actresses? Were they the right faces?

I have very, very few complaints about the actors and actresses. I think that in certain cases where they were different in appearance they were so often able to make some adjustment of their own character or of my character so that the two became one and I have no real complaints about the actors or actresses at all. The first series there were parts of it I didn't like at all because there were considerable changes from my books, particularly the first four episodes and the last two episodes, but the last series they have kept very close to the books at my insistence and, on the whole, I think they've turned out very well from my point of view.

Is the world of television very different from the world of the film-makers?

Of course, compared to the world of the film-makers, everyone is very ill-paid in television. In the world of the film-makers, everybody is grossly overpaid. I think that, on the whole, I've found myself more in sympathy with the actors and the technicians in the television world. They are totally professional and without any apparent form of excessive egoism. They all seem to work together as a splendid team, whereas I think, in the film world, the prizes are so much greater in every way, even for the writer, that I think they become more competitive one with another.

You yourself, though, had a sojourn in the film world and turned down many of the potential prizes. What happened in that particular episode of your life?

Oh, that was a long time ago. That was when I was just finishing *Demelza*. I'd written a film script called *Take My Life* and it was bought by the Rank

Organisation and they decided to make a film of it and they thought, quite mistakenly, that I was their sort of golden-haired boy who was going to write a lot of scripts for them, so I was brought up to London and given a flat – a free flat and a secretary to work for me and a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce to take me to and from Denham Studios, as it then was, every day and it didn't really work out. I left them after, I think, six months, finally and totally disillusioned with the whole idea of becoming a scriptwriter, I think probably about a month before they decided that they were disillusioned with me and I then went back to Cornwall determined to write a novel that nobody would ever turn into a film, just to ensure myself that I wasn't becoming solely a scriptwriter, which I did. It was a novel called *Cordelia* and to my surprise that was the first book which made an entry into the American market and it sold 540,000 copies in hardback in America. That was in 1950. I had six novels made into films. Three of them were quite close to the originals, three varied enormously – I mean, some were so distant that one could hardly recognise the novels. Others like the Hitchcock film had enormous differences which I didn't agree with and didn't like.

Did it make you angry?

Yes, it did, but I felt that a professional writer writes a novel and any attempt to alter that novel by one comma is something that he must resent and refuse to accept with all his might, but once a novel is sold to a film company, a novelist cannot then break his heart over something that is happening in another medium. It's part of the professional hazard, as it were.

So you've become very philosophical about this. In the early days, would it have worried you a lot more?

Oh no, this was fairly well in the early days – well, not so far ... the Hitchcock was 1963, I think. Before that there was an earlier novel that was very badly distorted,<sup>2</sup> but I think I've been philosophical in that respect all along. I've cried all the way to the bank.

Looking back on your career as a writer, what do you think of your first works?  
The first five?

Well, I don't like them at all. A carpenter, an ordinary carpenter who hasn't been trained spends his time learning to use his planes and whatever the

other tools are and a writer such as myself who has never been trained and had no sort of tuition or any particular literary background, except plenty of books to go at, also has to learn to use his pen, and these books were books which I think are – show too much evidence of a failure of sheer technical ability. There's nothing particularly wrong with the stories except that they're just, I think, badly written and I won't allow them to be republished because so often in my life I've come across a book, perhaps in a library by someone and thought "This is a marvellous book" and I've gone next time on a railway journey and bought a paperback in a stall and got on the train and thought "Gosh, this is terrible!" and I looked it up and discovered that it was published about 25 years ago and was one of this man's early works, not worth reading, and I don't think that should happen to me.

I believe you take between eighteen months and two years to complete any individual novel. Do you describe yourself as a perfectionist?

Yes, I suppose I am. They vary. I suppose the shortest I've done was about eleven months but the most was three years – *The Grove of Eagles* and *Angell, Pearl and Little God* both took me three years. I think I am in the sense that I hate to let it go. Once the book is written then there's endless rewriting to be done and that part I can go on with quite happily, but the thought of letting it go without one more read-through and one more checking and one more adjustment of adjectives or cutting out of adverbs, this is something that I find very difficult to allow to happen.

When you're writing, are you totally absorbed in the idea and the environment in which you're writing or do you have an imaginary reader that you always bear in mind?

I have myself. When I'm reading a book I get very easily bored and if I'm writing for myself then I tend to be afraid of boring myself so I think the only reader I consult is myself. Once the book is published or written then I naturally hope other people will like it, but I think it's much more a subjective judgement at the time.

Are you the sort of person when reading somebody else's work, the sort of person who will notice the little mistakes? And they stand out?

I'm not, I suppose, so terribly critical. I think that there are certain things which immediately put me off – the overuse of adverbs is one of them which

I detest very much in anybody's writing – but I think, on the whole, I make allowances because I know it's such a jolly hard job.

Would you advise any young writer these days to set out in the way that you set out at the age of eighteen or nineteen determined to become a professional writer and just setting down to do it?

I don't think any writer worthy of his salt needs advice or anything else. I think that if he's got the urge within him he'll do it irrespective of anything that I or anybody else might say. It's extremely difficult to get one's name known. I was lucky in the sense that I had very little difficulty in getting my books published<sup>3</sup> but I had a great deal of difficulty in getting any sort of a public, and this was the time of disillusion and disappointment – for quite a number of years when I was publishing novels and was known as a novelist and yet nobody much was buying them. I suppose I should add a particular tribute to the publisher<sup>4</sup> who on those occasions still went on merrily publishing them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Seven Suspected*, first performed in Perranporth on 30 May 1933

<sup>2</sup> *The Sleeping Partner*, which was filmed in Brazil and released in South America as *Sócio de Alcova* and the USA as *Carnival of Crime*

<sup>3</sup> WG glosses over the extreme difficulty he had in getting his first novel accepted for publication. Only after that did things go more smoothly.

<sup>4</sup> Ward, Lock & Co, Ltd

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