

Whose hand? Who revised the early Poldark novels?

Ward, Lock & Co. Ltd. (WL) published Winston Graham's *Ross Poldark* – the first Poldark novel – in the UK in December 1945, with *Demelza* following a year later. When Doubleday & Co. Inc. (DD) re-published the two books in the United States in 1951 and 1953 respectively, the text of both was very considerably revised, with some long passages – including one whole chapter – removed and others edited harshly down with or without re-drafting. Additionally, more than a hundred single words or short phrases in *Ross Poldark* were changed – *squabbling* to *quarrelling*, *grave* to *serious*, *beaus and damsels* to *men and women*, *Spanish onion* to *French onion*, *blow* to *knock*, *most kind* to *very kind*, *bouquet of sea campion* to *posy of sea pinks* etc – on an apparently arbitrary basis, and this latter feature in particular has led some readers¹ to question whose hand was responsible for these revisions.

The first thing to note is that, prior to the first (UK) publication of *Ross Poldark*, WL suggested to WG that he cut its first half by 20,000 words, which the author declined to do, after which the publisher accepted the manuscript and published it as submitted.² So, in 1945, at least, WG was not only not in favour of any change, but prepared to actively resist any attempt to make one. But the next five years saw a seismic shift in his personal circumstances – belatedly he achieved success and recognition both in the UK (on the back of the Poldark novels and *Take My Life*, the film he co-wrote with Valerie Taylor) and, following high sales of *Cordelia*, his transatlantic debut, in the US also. His American publisher, DD, followed that book up with *Night Without Stars* and then looked to publish *Ross Poldark*, which, in order to consolidate his reputation in the very lucrative American market, WG must have been keen for them to do. But what if, like WL before them, DD felt that the book would be improved by editing, and what if, in contrast to WL, they made it a condition of acceptance that an editor be allowed to rework the manuscript to yield a tighter, more cohesive, more *saleable* text? Would WG have accepted on those terms, or would he have dug in his heels, as previously, to keep his text pristine? The first two Poldark novels, after all, were particularly dear to his heart. He had worked on *Ross* intermittently all through the war years, redrafting some chapters nine times,³ and it was during the writing of *Demelza* that he'd first come, thrillingly, to realise that he'd finally become the novelist

(rather than "a craftsman with a story-telling ability") he'd so long aspired to be.⁴ What's more, this is the man who in 1983 would write:

*I would fight tooth and nail to prevent anyone altering a single comma in [my] books without explicit permission.*⁵

But in the scenario envisaged above it would not be "without ... permission" and it is quite conceivable that DD sought WG's blessing to shorten the texts of *Ross Poldark* and *Demelza* **and received it**. In fact, all four of the WL Poldark novels were republished by DD in revised form (*Ross Poldark* – retitled *The Renegade* – was shortened by twelve per cent, *Demelza* by fourteen per cent, *Jeremy Poldark* – as *Venture Once More* – by some seven and a half pages and *Warleggan* – as *The Last Gamble* – just minimally). But the question remains, revised by whom?

In *Memoirs*, WG does not even acknowledge that there ever was a revision, observing, rather, disingenuously, that "no one ever since has said that the beginning [of *Ross Poldark*] was drawn-out or slow."⁶ But then, in 1952, he inscribed a presentation copy of *The Renegade* like this:

My dear Eric,
This is the American version of
'Ross Poldark', and I send it as being
more decorative than the English
The story I suspect is the same.
With best wishes,
Winston

1952

If you take his words – *The story I suspect is the same* – at face value, the implication is that the revision was **not** done by him (otherwise he wouldn't need to *suspect* because he would *know*). But if someone else did the early

Poldark revisions, why have the revised texts been used in almost every new edition of the novels ever since ? (There is just one exception – more on this below.) If WG did not do the work himself, he must at the very least have come to approve of it, in order to prefer the revised texts over the originals whenever reprints – and, thanks to TV, there have been a great many – were planned and published. It seems more likely to me that WG had the best of reasons for preferring the revised texts – because he recast them himself. That he would entrust such a task into the hands of any other writer does not, to me, seem credible. What's more, although the overall effect was to shorten each book by the amount indicated above, the editing process involved not only cutting with some revision but also a small amount of addition. *Jeremy Poldark*, for example, had 282 lines removed *but also eighteen added*. Would WG have allowed anyone else to write lines published under his name? The diligence and conscientiousness he brought to his work would surely have vetoed any such notion.

And despite his initial rejection of WL's suggestion to cut *Ross Poldark*, there is much precedent for believing that WG would be willing to revise his own published work, for all through his career he did that very thing repeatedly. In 1967 he acknowledged that "he revises each of his novels when it comes to paperback re-issue" because

*there are always one or two passages that I think could be shortened, made a bit more stark ... Any novel can be read after ten years with a much more detached view and improved a little.*⁷

In this, with his "one or two passages", WG wilfully understates the case. The first of his novels to appear in a new UK edition was *Take My Life* in 1953 (having previously been published in 1947) and the text of the later edition was indeed tweaked in just a modest fifteen places; yet when the novel was republished a second time in 1965, a further *two hundred* textual amendments were made. The republished *Fortune is a Woman* shows more than a hundred and thirty revisions when compared to the original; *The Little Walls* circa fifty; *The Sleeping Partner* more than sixty; *The Tumbled House* circa one hundred; *After the Act* is shot through with a large number of mostly fussy and inconsequential revisions; in *Angell, Pearl and Little God* there are forty, including one substantial (half-page) one,

and so on. Even in *Memoirs* WG "reproduces" a magazine article first published in 1972 – but only after revising its text.⁸ In 1941 he published a novel called *Night Journey*; when in 1966 he chose to republish it, it reappeared in radically revised form, worked over more thoroughly than any Poldark. It seems that all through his career he felt a perfectionist's need to redraft, to buff, to tinker and improve, both before publication, as any author might, *but also after*. Did that habit start with 1953's *Take My Life*, or was it, rather, a couple of years before that with *Ross Poldark / The Renegade*?

As of 2019, more than one hundred further editions of *Ross Poldark* have appeared around the world since WL's 1945 original, but only one – from House of Stratus (HoS) in 2002 – has reprised the original uncut text. HoS is a print-on-demand publisher and their business model involves buying up the back-catalogues of popular authors and holding texts of their works on a server in digital format, with books then sold via mail-order and produced in physical paper-and-ink form only subject to demand. In theory this reduces overheads by eliminating the need to warehouse large quantities of unsold stock or maintain a hard-copy supply chain to retail outlets. But in practice it has proved sufficiently precarious that, of the twenty-four WG titles on which they took an option, only six – including *Ross Poldark* – were ever published, and those only briefly. The copy of *Ross* used to input text into their server must have been a WL original, which is the only way to explain why the HoS 2002 edition of the novel uniquely reproduces WG's original post-war script some fifty-seven years after it first appeared and fifty-one years after it was revised into its since-standard DD / *Renegade* format. But that WG would have known anything about this, much less have sanctioned it, is highly unlikely, for as late as 16 November 2002, having confirmed the twenty-four-book lease, he wrote: "but they [HoS] have been near bankruptcy once so I am waiting results."⁹ His caution was justified; that the company's visionary business model was unreliable (or, to be charitable, ahead of its time) would be proved by events and that they might muddle – surely without realising it – different editions of a particular novel should come as no surprise to anyone. Either way, in the context of the question asked here, it is ultimately an albeit bizarre irrelevance. Certainly it provides no pointer, much less a definitive answer. Finally, in the absence of any proof on either side, readers must decide for themselves.

SOURCES

¹ See poldark.activeboard.com / Ward Lock Book 1 – Ross Poldark

^{2, 3, 4, 6} *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003, Book One, Chapter Five

⁵ *Poldark's Cornwall*, Webb & Bower / The Bodley Head, 1983 / Television Poldark

⁷ To Arthur Pottersman in *Argosy*, Fleetway Publications, December 1967

⁸ *Memoirs*, 1.10

⁹ In a letter to this author

* * * * *