

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

Yet such permissions *were* given. In 1958, reflecting on the serialisation of novels, he wrote:

*... Abridgement is the big snag. For all sorts of reasons the novel is more or less at the mercy of the sub-editor, who himself must conform to the top-level policy of the magazine. Sex may be toned down or eliminated, horrors smoothed over, this or that taboo observed. A readership-research committee may just have reached the conclusion that X is the maximum number of instalments [desired], therefore all novels must be tailored to that size. Even then ... the fierce competition of commercial TV may cause late changes in the advertising space, and last-minute cuts may be imposed ...*⁶

How many of his own novels had WG committed to "the mercy of the sub-editor" when he wrote those lines? No fewer than seven (within the UK, and more abroad), so, while he may not have liked the licence that went with sale for serialisation, it plainly didn't put him off the practice. He accepted, rather, that changes to his texts would be made to meet the specific needs of the market into which they would be fed. Similarly, in the DD / *Ross Poldark* scenario envisaged above, revision would not have been undertaken "without ... permission"; WG may have done the work himself, on request; equally conceivable is that the publisher sought WG's blessing to shorten the text of *Ross* **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, by whom?

In *Memoirs*, WG does not even acknowledge that there *was* a revision, observing only that "no one ever since has said that the beginning [of *Ross*

Poldark] was drawn-out or slow."⁷ Could he really have been unaware that *Ross Poldark* and *The Renegade* were so very different? If someone else did the edit, possibly so. After all, a presentation copy of *The Renegade* he sent to WL chairman Eric Shipton in 1952 was inscribed thus:

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

The clear implication of his words – *The story I suspect is the same* – is that he was neither responsible for the revision (otherwise he wouldn't need to *suspect* because he would *know*) nor familiar with the result.

Yet if someone else did the early *Poldark* revisions, why have the revised texts been used in almost every new edition of the novels since? (There is just one exception – more on this below.) If WG did not do the work himself, he must surely 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 himself recast them. 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.*⁸

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.⁹ 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*?

The first UK republication of *Ross Poldark* was by The Bodley Head – then recently acquired by WG's friend Max Reinhardt – in 1960. WG describes in *Memoirs* 2.4 how, whilst on a visit to Perranporth, Max asked him if he

had any out-of-print early novels he would like to see republished. WG states that, with the rights of the Poldark quartet having lately reverted to him, he "invited [Max] to have a look at them" and that Reinhardt, having read them, "said he would be happy to publish". Though this account is suspect in a number of respects – the rights didn't revert all at once,¹⁰ WG appears to have given Reinhardt not all four books but only the first two, and Reinhardt appears not to have read them himself but to have passed them on to a company reader – the key point is that the two books that WG handed over were not *Ross Poldark* and *Demelza* but ***The Renegade*** and *Demelza*.¹¹

Why did WG give his friend a copy of Doubleday's *The Renegade* rather than Ward, Lock's *Ross Poldark*? There seem to be three possibilities:

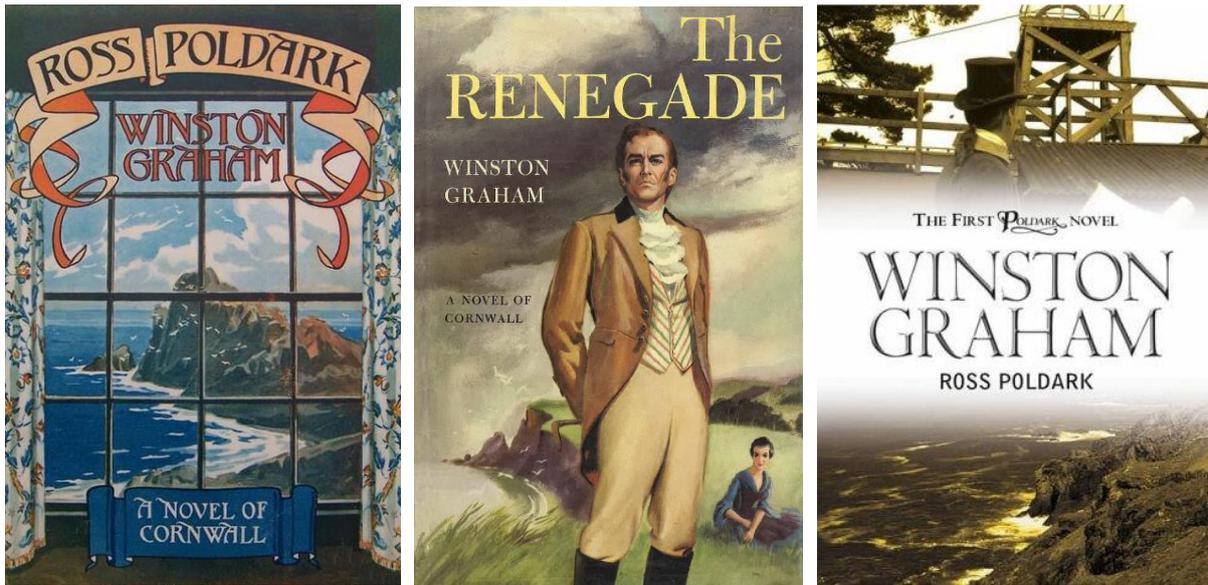
(1) Because he'd done the revision himself and the shortened version was his preferred text,

(2) Because, although he hadn't done the revision himself, the shortened version was nonetheless his preferred text, or

(3) Because he happened to have a copy handy and, being unaware of the substantial difference between the two texts, didn't realise the import of his action. (This would mean that for the last six decades millions of readers around the world have been offered the DD *Renegade* rather than the WL *Ross Poldark* text as a result of happenstance.)

In support of (1) is the fact that he felt passionately about protecting the integrity of his texts (see the quote at the top of page two) and also his known tendency to revise other texts both before publication *and after*; it's also hard to imagine why anyone other than the author himself would make some of the very minor or arbitrary changes – *bouquet of sea campion* to *posy of sea pinks* / *Spanish onion* to *French onion* etc – that were made. In support of (2) is his philosophical acceptance of the inclination of "sub-editors" to work his text over when preparing it for a new market, and in support of (3) is the *Memoirs* observation that people

don't complain about the "drawn-out" start of *Ross Poldark* (made in seeming unawareness of the fact that that's because the original "slow" version is so little read, and then only by bibliophiles); also the "My dear Eric" inscription on page three. It should be noted, however, that all four of the Bodley Head Poldark reprints used the DD revised rather than the WL original texts, which suggests their choice was a matter not of chance but intention.



Ross Poldark (WL, 1945) / *The Renegade* (DD, 1951) / *Ross Poldark* (HoS, 2002). The text of the second differs markedly from the other two – but who did the revision?¹²

As of 2019, more than one hundred further editions of *Ross Poldark* have appeared worldwide 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."¹³ 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 clear-cut answer.

So, what is the answer? In the absence of any definitive proof one way or the other, readers must decide for themselves.

* * * * *

ADDENDUM

Since writing the lines above, I have had a chance to look through the Winston Graham section of the Doubleday and Company records held by the Library of Congress in Washington. Nothing in the records pertains directly to the question under consideration, since none of the circa 450 documents pre-date 1966. However, two letters are of particular interest. Both were written by WG to his long-serving Doubleday editor Ken McCormick and both concern the fifth Poldark novel *The Black Moon*. The first, dated 8 June 1973, was received after McCormick had read a typescript copy of the book, but before its publication in either the UK or the US, and WG gives a warning:

Please don't set [i.e. make up printing plates] from [the typescript you received]. The bound book should be ready by September and contains a number of alterations I have made in the light of one more reading. I have also made a number of cuts in the beginning; small in substance, perhaps 1,000 words or so, but I think it may help to tighten up the opening.

Both McCormick and WG's American agent Carol Brandt admired the book, whilst deprecating its "slow start".¹⁴ WG heard and clearly thought about this; as a result, on 6 January 1974, he wrote again:

... bearing in mind your comment to Carol that you thought the beginning of the book a bit slow, it has occurred to me this week-end that it might be perfectly possible to do some cutting in the early stages of the book to remove certain references to the older books and so make it more easy to get into.

I don't know if you are already on with your type setting, in which case it might be too late. Make no mistake; I don't want the labour of this; but I'm perfectly willing to have a shot if you thought it a good idea. I have a typescript here and would send you a somewhat revised first 100 pages ... Let me know if you think there is anything in this.

"Unhappily," McCormick replied, it was too late – Doubleday's American edition had already been set from a bound Collins (UK) copy, and so it duly appeared.

The relevance of this exchange is that:

(i) although McCormick considered that cuts would improve the book, he was prepared to publish it as received

(ii) when the possibility of further revision was eventually mooted, the suggestion came not from editor but author, and

(iii) WG offered, if McCormick wished, **to revise the text himself**, with no suggestion or question that anyone other than the author should revise anything at all.

I don't imagine it crossed WG's mind that anyone else should be considered fit to undertake such a task, either in 1974 or in 1950.

* * * * *

NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ See poldark.activeboard.com/WL Book 1 – Ross Poldark
^{2, 3, 4, 7} *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003, Book One, Chapter Five

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

⁶ *The Author*, Volume LXIX, No. 1, Spring 1958

⁸ To Arthur Pottersman in *Argosy*, Fleetway Publications, December 1967

⁹ *Memoirs*, 1.10

¹⁰ Letters in the Meli WL archive confirm that the *RP* and *Demelza* contracts reverted from WL to WG on 1 June 1959 (which means that the meeting between WG and Max must have taken place in the summer or autumn of that year) whilst *JP* and *Warleggan*, contracted for together in a single document, remained with WL until 24 August 1960. The Bodley Head republished the first two titles in 1960 and the second two in 1961.

¹¹ Brian L. Glanville's *Renegade* and *Demelza* reader reports are held in the University of Reading's Bodley Head archive. Unfortunately, which edition of *Demelza* he appraised is not specified.

¹² You might think the author's working notebooks would tell the tale – sadly, however, whilst a fairly full set from the Buxted years exists (most but not all in Truro), everything from the Perranporth days (i.e. up to and including *Marnie*) is lost, presumably jettisoned during the 1960-62 relocation upheaval.

¹³ In a letter to this author.

¹⁴ McCormick used that phrase in a letter to Brandt dated 16 May 1973 and she, writing to WG's UK agent Mark Hamilton on 16 July 1973 clearly agreed: "Both [Ken and I] feel that [*The Black Moon*] would do better ... if it were considerably cut." (Library of Congress Doubleday & Co. records, 1882-1992).

* * * * *