

(1) By Philippa Toomey, published on 25 April 1975

Odd haunts of a writer

Looking and listening are vital to a writer's search for material says Winston Graham who recently shared a television studio with a man whose forte was the length of time he could keep a set of ferrets down his trousers.

Winston Graham was there to be interviewed – although this is something he dislikes – because the BBC is making a 16-part series of his Poldark historical novels. Fifth and latest in the saga is *The Black Moon* (Collins and Fontana). He went to Cornwall to watch them film it.

"My family moved to Cornwall when I was about 17. I had always wanted to write, and I started writing soon after I arrived there, and got my novels published at a ridiculously early age. There were quite a lot of the old Cornish miners still existing, and I talked to them – sat and listened to them, which is one of the most important things in the life of a writer. I got interested in dialect, and studied that, and in local history – scratch a Cornishman and you find a historian."

The first, *Ross Poldark*, came out in 1945, and there were three more in the following eight years. "I always had the feeling that I would like to do another sometime, but as the years went on, it became less and less likely. One moves on in mood and technique, and it began to look like breaking the sound barrier. One day I remembered something I had read a great many years before that Galsworthy said – to the effect that "I get up in the morning and go down and sit at my desk, and I don't think of anything in particular, and I pick up my pen and begin to write, and what I write comes from a remembered past and a not yet realised future." So one day I went and sat down and began to write *Elizabeth Warleggan was delivered of the first child of her new marriage at Trenwith House in the middle of February 1794* – and let it come from there. I have since written another Poldark novel, but I now feel it is time I went back to the modern scene."

Winston Graham has always been a writer. "It is about the only thing in which I can claim uniqueness – I have never done anything else but write. I

wrote my first book when I was 21, and I went on writing them, they didn't make me any money, but the *News Chronicle* said "Keep an eye on young Mr Graham, for he has come to stay" and it has been proved so! My mother had a tiny private income after my father died when I was 19, and she said, well, if you want to do this, I will stake you. It was the most marvellous opportunity. I think one of the most important things about a writer is his longevity – by the time he's 80 he's revered, and by the time he's 90 he might even get an OBE ..."

The big successes began to come at the end of the war. "I wrote *The Forgotten Story*, my first book about Cornwall, and it got good reviews. I think that the public were reading more at that time, my first books always coincided with the latest Hitler *putsch*." *Ross Poldark* came out soon afterwards, and the film industry discovered him, and thought he would be a great script writer. "They took me up to London, gave me a flat and a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce and I stuck it for about five months. We ended in mutual disillusion. I think I left them about a month before they were deciding they couldn't keep me any longer. *Take My Life* was a very successful film but I came to the conclusion that if I stayed as a script-writer I should write novels like potential scripts. I went home to Cornwall and decided I would write a novel that nobody would ever want to film, and *Cordelia* was the first one to sell in America – 546,000 copies, mainly through a book club. It made my life a lot easier, and I felt suddenly much more secure. I suppose one wants to succeed in every way, but I have always wanted to succeed as a novelist, not as anything else.

Six of his books have been made into films.

"The only other unique thing about me is that, apart from one or two scripts, about 14 short stories and one or two articles, I have never reviewed, never written for the stage, radio or television – just one novel after another, about every eighteen months or two years.¹

"I revise enormously, and I write everything by hand, as well. My book *Angell, Pearl and Little God* (which doesn't look particularly difficult) confronted me with a series of problems of technique, in that I had written a third of it in the first person of the fat solicitor Wilfred Angell, and then I found it wouldn't do, and started it in the first person of Pearl, the girl, and that

wouldn't do either. It took me about three years before it came out in its final form. It's been bought for a film. I believe they are on their fourth script.

"Little God – Godfrey, was originally a rather cheap little man existing on the edge of things. For reasons I can't explain he seemed to have blossomed into a boxer. I have never boxed in my life, never been to a boxing match, so I began going to boxing matches in places like Shoreditch Town Hall and Lambeth Baths, and to the Thomas a'Beckett² pub in the Old Kent Road. I stood watching and listening to people and then by great good fortune I met Mike Barrett, who runs the Albert Hall things, and he opened all sorts of doors to me, and by the end I really felt I knew a lot about boxing. The curious thing is that having in this way discovered what you find interesting, once the book is over, the interest remains. I still go to boxing matches, and still have quite a number of friends in that world.

"Never having done anything, my actual personal experience of things is basically slight. I think I have developed a kind of ability – I discover something that's new to me, and then I get pleasure out of conveying it to other people – as in *The Walking Stick*, when I had to get to know safebreakers – and safe-makers – and policemen. I don't go easily into new worlds – I find it very difficult to make the first entrance, or to find the right people, there's always the barrier I have to jump, but once I am in, I am fascinated."

From this fascination comes historical novels, novels of suspense, each with a hint of strangeness, those insights into human behaviour, a wry humour, trademarks by which his novels may be recognized. The next novel may come, like *The Tumbled House*, from the memory of a famous court case. Some of the characters in his books may be drawn from life, or from the lives they lead, from a field of expertise, such as insurance claims adjusting, in *Fortune is a Woman*. And as Machiavelli also said: "Fortune is the mistress of one half of our actions, and yet leaves the control of the other half, or a little less, to ourselves." Winston Graham will be listening and watching – "one of the most important things in life for a writer."

¹ In respect of the stage, not quite true.

² This profile and the next disagree on the spelling; though there is no online consensus, the commonest renderings are "Thomas A Becket" and "Thomas a Becket".

(2) By Valerie Grove, published on 7 May 2002

Poldark's romantic climax

Winston Graham is a rarity among writers: he has never earned his living from anything but writing his 30-odd novels – "never done an honest day's work in my life" – and is still writing every day.

Now aged 92,³ the high point of his fame was the televised dramatisation of his Poldark novels, set in 18th-century Cornwall, which had 14 million viewers glued to their sets in the 1970s and 1980s. And he has returned to the Poldark family – about which he first wrote in 1946⁴ – in his new novel *Bella Poldark*, to be launched this week at the defunct tin mine near Helston, once named Wendren⁵ but renamed Poldark in the author's honour. ("The owner said he doubled his visitors after he renamed the mine," Graham says.) His photograph on the dust jacket shows the rear view of a tall, lean figure striding uphill. It reflects the valedictory nature of this final Poldark novel, and Graham's lifelong preference for quiet anonymity – "the most successful unknown novelist in England".

He once said that any author who reaches 80 becomes revered and, at 90, gets an OBE. Graham got his OBE years ago, but he has a more unusual distinction: his son Andrew is Master of Balliol College, Oxford. "I can brag about that," Graham says, "because my heart specialist says that being Master of Balliol is next door to being God." He sent his son to Charterhouse, and was later horrified to read the late Simon Raven's account of life at "that depraved school".

Graham is not a public school man himself. He was destined for Manchester Grammar, but he had pneumonia and the doctor said he would not be long for this world, and should travel no farther than the local school. When he decided to become a writer, his mother supported him financially for several years. "It suited her to keep me at home after my father had died and my older brother had left. I should have been turned out into the world to sink or swim." It was "inestimable good fortune" never to have had to be a nine-to-five wage slave, or to worry that his first novels made no money.

The family had 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?" His parents bought a plot of land and his brother opened a men's outfitters in Perranporth, though the family wholesale business, Mawdsley and Co, had been groceries.

Winston's great-uncle, James Mawdsley, stood for Oldham as a Conservative alongside the young Winston Churchill. Both lost to the Liberals, but then Churchill changed sides, and Mrs Graham, a passionate Liberal, insisted on naming her second son Winston.

It has been something of a burden: "For a long time when someone said 'Winston' people would expect to see a pet monkey or a fat man with a cigar."

He keeps curious working hours: after lunch he has a snooze and at 5pm he starts writing – for three hours. "In the mornings I think about things, write cheques, talk to the gardener." His garden, with imaginative topiary and rhododendrons at their best, is his pride.

"But writing is in your head all the time." He still writes in a firm longhand – "yes, 'always scribble scribble scribble, eh, Mr Gibbon'"⁶ – and the result is a twisted little finger, "the same as the one Baroness Thatcher had operated on. It is known as Dupuytren's nodes – General Dupuytren was one of Napoleon's surgeons. It is hereditary, but nobody in my family except me has lived long enough to develop it." That is the flavour of his conversation – anecdote, erudition, self-mocking wit.

He hesitated to return to the Poldarks, but the *dramatis personae* with their strange Cornish names and Cornish talk began to invade his mind.

Clowance is named after a Cornish village. So is Demelza: "I was looking for a name for a thin dark waif when I saw the signpost. Twenty years later I went on a pilgrimage there, and found one neglected farm, two brothers who said they had farmed there since 1705 and a tiny medieval chapel."

Poldark himself was originally Polgreen, a chap he knew. "But it sounded a bit too arboreal; so I changed green to dark." In his latest novel, *Bella Poldark*, the eponymous heroine, is an opera singer. There is a vivid scene in which Bella, playing Rosina in *The Barber of Seville*, sings *lo sono docile*, a brilliant bravura performance culminating in a crescendo of applause.

Graham loves opera. When his wife Jean was alive they would go to Vienna for the opera every year. "But my knowledge is all surface. I have no bricks and mortar," he says.

So, while researching the book, he persuaded the English National Opera to allow him to watch the company rehearse the opera which he had chosen for the novel's narrative.

This is typical of him. He researches like a detective: he once took a convicted safebreaker out to lunch at a smart restaurant. He wanted to set his novel *Angell, Pearl and Little God* in the boxing world but he had never boxed, never even been to a fight. So he put on an old trilby and grubby raincoat and hung round the Thomas à Becket pub in the Old Kent Road with a fag in the corner of his mouth.

He met Henry Cooper and the boxing promoter Mike Barrett, who took him to a weigh-in. "I heard the managers discussing purses, and then I sat in the front row at an Albert Hall fight. It was so exciting I found myself shouting, and got blood spattered on my cuff." He gave Barrett, now a good friend, dinner at the Savile Club.

When first taken to the Savile to dine in 1950⁷, as "an unsophisticated, gangling young man", Graham found H. G. Wells sitting opposite. He was not the clubbable type ("I was always rather a loner") but was impressed by the company: Compton Mackenzie, Eric Linklater, Gilbert Harding.

But only when J Arthur Rank commissioned the film script for *Take My Life*, and gave him a flat, a secretary, £150 a week and a chauffeured Rolls-Royce did he feel he could join the club.

He was briefly tempted to be a tax exile. "I was making a lot of money, associated with the transience of success, so I thought I would live in France and be taxed in Switzerland. It didn't work. I did not last a year in Provence. The children loved it, but I decided I would rather be taxed to death than bored to death. Somerset Maugham managed to live in the sun and still work, but I couldn't.

Among his art collection there is a harem of a picture gallery in one room – photographs of the women who have starred in his films: Valerie Hobson, Samantha Eggar, Nadia Gray, Arlene Dahl, Angharad Rees, Tippi Hedren (who starred with Sean Connery in Hitchcock's Oscar-winning film of *Marnie*).⁸

He loves hosting gatherings at his long table, mixing local friends with actors. As we drove to lunch along lanes with bluebells, he told me that he

still drives a Jaguar and never, in 74 years of motoring on four continents, has he had any kind of misdemeanour. Not even a parking fine.

When asked how he is, he replies: "To say that I am OK would be the wildest exaggeration. But I am mobile, conscious, breathing, and ready to eat and drink" and to go back to Cornwall, where the Poldark Appreciation Society will be out in force.

³ WG was always oddly secretive about his age. When this profile was published, he was 93, soon to be 94.

⁴ *Ross Poldark* was first published in 1945.

⁵ Wendron Mine (note spelling) was renamed Poldark Mine in 1977.

⁶ Quote attributed to Prince William Henry, Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh (1743-1805), upon receiving from Edward Gibbon in 1781 the then latest volume of the author's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

⁷ This date is incorrect. Though WG *joined* the Savile Club in July 1950, he first dined there, as a guest of Peter Latham, in 1945, which is when he met Wells, who died a year later.

⁸ Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964) not only failed to win any Oscar but was not even nominated in any category.

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