

WG at Trerice – a transcript

On 27 March 1974 Winston Graham gave a filmed interview, lasting a little over twelve minutes, at Newquay's Trerice Manor. The author talks directly to camera throughout; the interviewer is unseen and unnamed. Since the opening question was not recorded, I have inserted an approximation of what it must have been. The interviewer's words are in blue and WG's in black.

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[Do you think of yourself as an honorary Cornishman?]

Oh, I do. I think my spiritual bones will always rest here. But for a time after I came I didn't really take to the Cornish very much. I found them quite difficult to know. And it was only after quite a number of years that I really began to know them and then became terribly fond of them and I think that apart from my liking for the Cornish scene I also have this interest in Cornish character. For instance, the character who is the drunken servant, Jud Paynter, I used to see a man walking ... cycling to the pub every night and as his cottage was

only a hundred yards from the pub I could never understand why he bothered to cycle until I saw him coming home one night and realised he used the bicycle to lean on. And I had an experience – oh, after I'd written the first two or three, a young man came to my house and wanted to buy an old tin stamp which was on a piece of my land and we got talking about various things and I said to him: "Don't you like us people coming from up country?" from what he'd said, so he said: "I don't mind on the whole – I don't like these authors much." So I said: "Which particular authors?" "Well, this fellow Winston Graham." [assumes Cornish accent] "'E talk about Mongoose 'Ouse. I d'live at Mongoose – ain't no Mongoose 'Ouse! Folk d'come round thur, Saturday mornin', Sunday mornin', pokin' around, 'tis a proper nuisance!" So after I'd broken this news to him who I was he sort of accepted me and eventually invited me to go down his one-man mine, which I did, in Mongoose, which is rather perilous because most of the ladder was broken, then he took me back to his cottage and played music to me on the organ he'd built himself. Well, I never used that man¹ but that's the sort of character one finds in Cornwall which is so full of juice and life and interest.

[But you apparently find eighteenth century Cornwall particularly fascinating.](#)

Yes, well, it was quite a time before I discovered how fascinating eighteenth century Cornwall is or was, for instance Truro was then a sort of little Bath at which the county families had their townhouses and came for Assembly balls in the winter and this sort of thing and the mines of course were undergoing a period of depression but they were just before the enormous boom of the early nineteenth century and all this was very interesting to me.

[You never felt like going into the enormous boom of the nineteenth century?](#)

Not yet because unfortunately, I don't know, I'm getting older faster than my characters, because I only seem to cover about two years for a book. But I'm rather allergic to the type of family novel in which one has half a book for one lot of people and then you jump thirty years to the next lot and so on – you cover about one hundred years in a single book. I'm all for exploring the people who are alive and enjoying them, you know, while they're there.

When did you want to be a writer? When did it enter your head for the first time?

Oh, from as long as I can remember. When I was five I remember dictating a short story to my mother – at least, I dictated a few words which went: "'Oh, look,' said Tom to his sister, 'here is a dead man on the doorstep.'" And that was the end of the story. I never got any further.

What about your education? You went to a private school ...

I went to a private school and I was mainly ill. I was one of these young men who was always ill which I think was an enormous advantage to a writer because instead of having too much formal education I could educate myself by reading what I wanted to read. It's no good for discipline but it was very good for a future writer.

I was thinking of the parallel of A. L. Rowse, the Cornish historian, because of the Cornish history in your novels. You seem to me to have a great deal in common with him in some ways. How would you have taken to perhaps going to a university and writing history and living in this way, cut off from the rest of the world?

Well, I think it is marvellous for Rowse and it would be marvellous for me if I were primarily a historian but I'm primarily a novelist and I think it would be death for a novelist – at least, it would be death for me – not to be constantly renewing my impressions by going out and meeting people and seeing things and living a normal life and living at times perhaps a slightly abnormal life in order to find out how people work and live and tick.

That's the way you work, is it, mixing with a great many people?

No, but there are occasions, not so much obviously with the Cornish books, but with my suspense novels, where for some obscure reason some character has a particular profession, such as boxing, and I know nothing about boxing and then I find it necessary to go into the boxing world to discover all about it.

In other words, rather doing as Balzac did, deliberately going out and gathering an enormous pile of information.

Yes. I don't actually go into brothels, as Balzac did, but otherwise I go and meet people, certainly, and discover how they work – even thieves.

How did you find out about thieves?

Well, when I was writing *The Walking Stick*, there was a robbery in an art gallery and the breaking in of a safe and I wanted to know exactly how this should work so through a friend I got an introduction to the wife of one of the Train Robbers and she had as a chauffeur one of the best-known petermen – if they are well-known – in England and I entertained him to lunch and asked him all about breaking into a safe. I then went along to the best safe-makers in England and tried out his knowledge of how to break into a safe with the way they would prevent it and then I took it all back to him again and told him: "Ah, but they say this," and he said: "Oh, but I would do that," and then I eventually wrote it and it was then finally vetted by the safe people to make sure that it was right.

Your novels, of course, are all over Cornwall and Devon; throughout the summer all of the bookshops are full of them. You must, I imagine, be one of the best-selling writers in England and yet you're something of a mystery man – for example, I've never seen a photograph of you. Why is this?

Well, I'm not particularly keen on getting my face better known or my personal life better known. I refused newspaper interviews for a good many years. I think I've written a great many novels and if people want to know about me, let them read my novels. That's the part of me that I have for publication and the rest is my own private life.

Have you got any reason for that? Did you have any unpleasant experiences with publicity and so on?

Well, I did have quite a lot at the time when Hitchcock bought *Marnie* and

wanted to put Grace Kelly in it. There was an enormous amount of publicity which perhaps the less said about the better, I think.

I suppose everybody is fascinated by a writer's early struggles and all this kind of thing. Did you have a great deal of early struggles?

Well, I suppose one of the worst chips on my shoulder – the *only* chip on my shoulder – is that I haven't any reason to have one, because my family life was always very peaceful and peaceable when I lived in Manchester and when I came to Cornwall my father died and my mother, very rashly, knowing I wanted to write, decided to stake me for a few years –

She did?

Yes, so, like Bernard Shaw, I lived on my mother until I could live on myself.

And how long was that? When, for example, did you publish your first novel?

When I was twenty-three² and then ... Of course, I had very little difficulty in getting my first novel published –

No? Why was that?

I don't know. The great difficulty was to get the public to read them, which went on for several years.

So the first novel in fact didn't make you enough money to be able to support yourself?

Well, twenty-nine pounds? No, not quite enough to support myself. Nor the second, nor the third.

These early novels were not the novels you're now associated with in Cornwall, historical novels or period novels. They were suspense novels? Thrillers?

Yes, but they're not the novels that are associated with me anywhere now because I refuse publication for them because I think they were like a carpenter learning his trade – I was using my tools for the first time and luckily I was getting them published and getting reactions, but they're not books I would want to see on the market today.

How long did it in fact take you before you could support yourself by writing?

Oh, about seven years.

You were thirty?³

Yes.

And what happened? How did that happen?

Oh, well, I think there were a variety of reasons. The first thing was that the war had produced a scarcity of newsprint and everybody was reading and this I think coincided with a growth in my maturity which enabled me to write books which were better worth reading. I think these two things came together. And then of course I wrote a film script with Valerie Taylor, the actress, and that was taken up and made –

Which was that?

That was called *Take My Life*, but before that, of course, I'd written the first two Poldark novels which had been a very considerable success.

They sold well, did they?

Yes, they did, yes.

Would you call them bestsellers by modern standards?

No, no – I suppose the first sold about eighteen thousand or something of that sort, which was a fair sale. It was on the edge of a bestseller but not really there.

When was your first bestseller?

Well, I suppose after the whole business of *Take My Life*, when I was hauled up to London and looked upon as the film industry's golden boy for a short time and given a flat in London and a secretary and a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce to take me to and from the studios and things. We parted in mutual disillusion after about four months and I came home determined to write a book that nobody would ever film because I thought: "My God, if I go on looking on this sort of world I should be writing film scripts alone." So I wrote a book called *Cordelia* which in fact nobody ever has filmed, or even tried to. But that was my first publication in America and that sold about five hundred and forty-six thousand.

So you were in effect a rich man, I suppose, from this point?

Well, I was comfortable.

And then you supported your mother, I presume?

Well, happily, she didn't need it. I supported her with affection, I hope.

And did you never think of writing about your original background; your Lancashire background?

Well, *Cordelia* was in fact about Lancashire and it was a book which was based quite a lot on my mother's reminiscences – she had an amazing memory – but apart from that I haven't. I've never written about the sort of dark side of Manchester, perhaps because as a young boy I didn't see a great deal of the dark side. I was sort of rather middle class and was halfway between.

How many more Poldark novels are coming?

Oh, I don't know if any more are.⁴ I suspect one more eventually will come, but whether they'll run into a number or not I've no idea at this moment.

Winston Graham, thank you very much indeed.

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NOTES

¹ Though true at the time of speaking, this man later became the model for the adult Ben Carter, first introduced in 1981's *The Stranger from the Sea* (ref: *Poldark's Cornwall*, Webb & Bower Ltd., 1983)

² Graham's first novel was published (and *not* without some initial difficulty) in October 1934, when its author was twenty-six.

³ It took eleven years (i.e. to 1945), by which time he was thirty-seven.

⁴ A disingenuous reply. This interview took place five months after the publication in October 1973 of *The Black Moon*, which WG knew full well told the start *but not the end* of Elizabeth's story. Incidentally, *why* this interview took place is not at all clear.

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