

Author's tribute to land he loves

GAZING from his hotel bedroom window across a flat calm St Austell Bay, Winston Graham spoke of his deep love of the land which he has introduced to millions of readers across the world.

In a rare interview, on the day the twelfth and final chapter in his tremendously popular Poldark series was published, he looked back over a career which is the envy of many writers.

Poldark, the story of a Cornish family set in the 18th century and early 19th century, is by far his most successful creation in terms of sales and popular acclaim, but it must not be forgotten that he is also the author of no less than 40 novels – including the magnificent *Marnie* – and two books of non-fiction.

Despite his advancing years – he will be 94 next month – Winston Graham seems the picture of health, ever witty, enjoying life, enthusiastic about his art, and keen to complete his autobiography.

Accompanied by his son and daughter, he was in Cornwall for a short series of engagements to promote the final piece of the saga – *Bella Poldark*. His itinerary has included book signings, a visit to Poldark Mine at Wendron, and an appearance at the Daphne du Maurier Festival.

Although he was initially reluctant to concede to his publisher's demands and travel from his home in Sussex, he said that the moment he saw the sea he was filled with emotion.

"I don't mind admitting it is an exhausting prospect these days," he said.

"I do visit Cornwall often, I was here twice last year, but that is for relaxation.

"I love the smell of the air, the sound of the real Cornish voices, the bleakness, the cliffs, and of course the beach. I used to sit on the beach endlessly at one time and I can think of few more enjoyable pastimes."

Although born in Manchester, Winston Graham spent his formative years at Perranporth, writing his first novel there at the age of 17. Much of his work has been filmed for television and cinema, he was awarded the OBE in 1983 and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Before moving to Sussex, he spent 30 years in Cornwall, where, at Flat Rocks, he wrote the first four Poldark books.

It is the north coast which still draws him back, and in particular places like Crantock and Treyarnon, an atmospheric photograph of which he chose for the cover of *Bella Poldark*.

"I chose the picture for the jacket because Treyarnon Bay is where my family and I used to go and bathe and surf at low tide – you can get a really good surf there."

A new novel of some 200,000 words, all written in longhand, is no mean achievement even for someone with Winston Graham's track record. So why, in his ninth decade, when he had already built such a huge reputation and announced the end of Poldark, did he feel the urge to start all over again?

"After *The Twisted Sword* I had no intention of ever writing another Poldark novel. The story was told. I wrote three

modern novels after *The Twisted Sword* and in the meantime I burned a lot of the notes I had made for Poldark.

"I hadn't any urge to embark on another Poldark because they really are very big books in every sense and need a lot of writing and research.

"After I finished the last of the modern novels, *The Ugly Sister*, I thought it was about time to stop writing altogether. Then one day I started to think about the Poldarks again. I had an idea and wrote a few lines, not intending to take it any further, and then I wrote another few lines and gradually got more and more involved, although, unlike the previous books, I didn't quite know where it was going.

"All the other books have fitted into sections – the first four, the middle three, and what I honestly believed would be the final four. So this, *Bella Poldark*, is a book on its own and for me it meant a lot of wondering and wandering.

"For the last 26 months I have lived and breathed Poldark again, so that at times it was more real to me than my own life. I began to think that I should never finish this book, it just seemed to go on and on and on."

So has it brought him great satisfaction and pleasure to have provided Poldark fans across the world with another piece to the jigsaw?

"It's something like I imagine a lunatic might feel banging his head against a wall – it's good when it stops. To be honest it is lovely to have done something, to create something more, and I did get real pleasure out of some of the writing."

The book was almost entitled *Valentine*, the name of the book's dominant male figure, and even went to the publishers under that name.

"But I woke at about four o'clock one morning and realised it was no longer a book about *Valentine*, but about *Bella*. I had become fascinated by her story."

Research, a feature of all the books, took him behind the scenes at the Vienna State Opera and the English National Opera, as well to Cornwall.

"The Nampara situation was clear in my mind so it was not necessary to renew that in any way. But even though I know Cornwall well and come back frequently for research and because I love it here, I still needed to return while writing *Bella* because I wanted to say something more.

"I don't know how much evidence there is in this book of my love of Cornwall, but I very much I hope it is clear, because that is the impression I hoped I would give. It was part of the book, but it was also something that I wanted to say."

In all of Winston Graham's creations, the characters really live, as do the plots, which are engaging yet believable. *Bella* is no exception.

"*Bella* is crafted with real love because I really fell for her."

This latest work does stand alone as a novel in its own right and can be read without reference to what went before, but for those who need to catch up on earlier episodes a short introductory section has been included at the beginning.

"Believe me, this book had better stand on its own because there aren't going to be any more," he added emphatically.

But then, he said that after *The Twisted Sword*. However, there is an intriguing photograph of the author in the back of the dust jacket, walking away from the camera towards West Pentire. So perhaps he really means it this time.

In 2015, Simon Parker recalled the above encounter:

At the time of our meeting, I was also about to unveil a new venture, a journal called Scryfa which intended to celebrate the best of contemporary Cornish writing. Scryfa eventually ran to twelve issues, but ahead of its launch I was looking for a high-profile idea to help promote that first issue.

Ever interested in what other writers were up to, Winston was fascinated to hear of a journal that promised to be a worthy successor to Denys Val Baker's Cornish Review of the 1960s and Sir Arthur Quiller Couch's Cornish Magazine of the 1890s.

Quick as a flash, he said: "I'll write you a story for Scryfa!"

Slightly taken aback by such a generous offer from this giant of Cornish literature, I nevertheless metaphorically bit his hand off.

The result was Meeting Demelza ...

(WMN, 9 October 2015)

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