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Winston Graham

Winston Graham may have been a Lancastrian but he was as Cornish in character as Port Quin or Boconnoc. He lived in Perranporth from 1925, when he was seventeen, until 1959 (*sic*), a love affair with Cornwall that never ended.

It was a wise book reviewer who wrote of an early novel: "... keep an eye on young Mr Graham, for he has come to stay..."

And stay he did: the author of forty novels and a shoal of short stories, his work has been widely translated and his famous *Poldark* saga was turned into two spectacular television series, so riveting some Cornish vicars changed the times of their Sunday evening services. The stories unfold the adventure of the Poldark family and the bitter feud with Sir George Warleggan, banker and landowner – the books selling in millions around the world.

I first met Winston at a private dinner at Carlyon Bay hosted by Dr Denis Hocking, Cornwall's 'doctor of crime,' and his wife Kate. There was something of Inspector Maigret about him. A brilliant researcher, he once took a convicted safe-breaker to lunch and when writing about the boxing business he visited seedy boxing clubs in the East End, disguised in an old crumpled raincoat.

I last saw him at the Du Maurier Festival in 2002, promoting his final novel *Bella Poldark*. Sitting in his wheelchair, he said "This is the end of *Poldark*, but I'm still writing, working on my memoirs. Do you think people will want to read them? I'm not so sure. A lady friend has read the first half and said 'They're interesting enough, Winston, but you've not done a lot of sinning.'" He smiled. "I'm working on that."

Winston greatly admired Angharad Rees, who played Demelza, in the *Poldark* series and told me "Whenever I invited her to lunch at my club, my popularity leapt. Men would think up excuses to come over and speak to me."

The most modest of characters, Winston called his autobiography *Memoirs of a Private Man*, admitting "... this is always what I wanted to be." There are some evocative photographs including one of the author with Angharad Rees at his ninetieth birthday dinner at Balliol College, Oxford, Winston looking at his Poldark heroine.

Any portrait of Winston must embrace his long and happy marriage to Jean Williamson. In his memoirs he recalled a dance with her when he said “I can’t afford to marry yet, but when I can will you marry me?” Her smiling eyes met his: “I think I just might.” In due course they married and honeymooned on the rim of Mount’s Bay at the Old Coastguard’s Hotel, Mousehole and the Godolphin Arms in Marazion.

It is one of those coincidences that while writing this profile, I discovered his novel *Stephanie*. Published by Chapmans in 1992, it is vintage Winston Graham, Stephanie discovering her lover has a double life, the plot unfolding, the master craftsman conveying tension and conflict. So much so it disrupted my work for a few days: a book you simply could not put down, a reminder he is one of our finest British novelists – in the same league as Graham Greene.

As many as six of his books have been filmed for the cinema, notably *Marnie*, directed by the legendary Alfred Hitchcock. Speaking at the Du Maurier Festival, Winston explained how Hitch had a fixation ‘on ice-cool blondes’ and during the filming of *Marnie* he followed the actress Tippi Hedren into her caravan and made advances. But Tippi rejected them and for the rest of the film Hitch, when he was on set, would say to his assistant: “Tell that woman to do this or do that ...”

One of the most handsome books ever published about Cornwall has to be *Poldark’s Cornwall*. Launched by Webb & Bower back in 1983, it is dedicated to the author’s son and daughter Andrew and Rosamund. No other volume has quite captured the grandeur, words and pictures taking us to the very heart and soul of Cornwall: “It was not so much a gale as a sudden storm, as if the forces of a gathering anger had been bottled up for a month and must be spent in an hour.”

The value of his books? Ann Willmore of Bookends, Fowey, says “First editions of his first two Poldark novels are hard to find. *Ross Poldark* and *Demelza* would probably cost £150 to £200 depending on condition and a signed copy would be about £500. *Jeremy Poldark* and *Warleggan*, slightly later ones, would be a bit less say £100 and signed about £300.”

When he died in 2003 *The Times* said “Though he enjoyed the celebrity the *Poldark* television series conferred on him, Graham who used to describe himself as ‘the most successful unknown novelist in England,’ never aspired to du Maurier’s grand status.” Nevertheless the fact he was never given a knighthood rankled many. As it was, he was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and awarded the OBE.

Winston's death, at the age of ninety-three (*sic*), was not only the end of a distinguished literary career; those of us, who knew him, felt a bright light had gone out.



Winston Graham, second from right, and his wife Jean chatting during a break in the tv making of his *Poldark* series, at St Winnow Church.

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