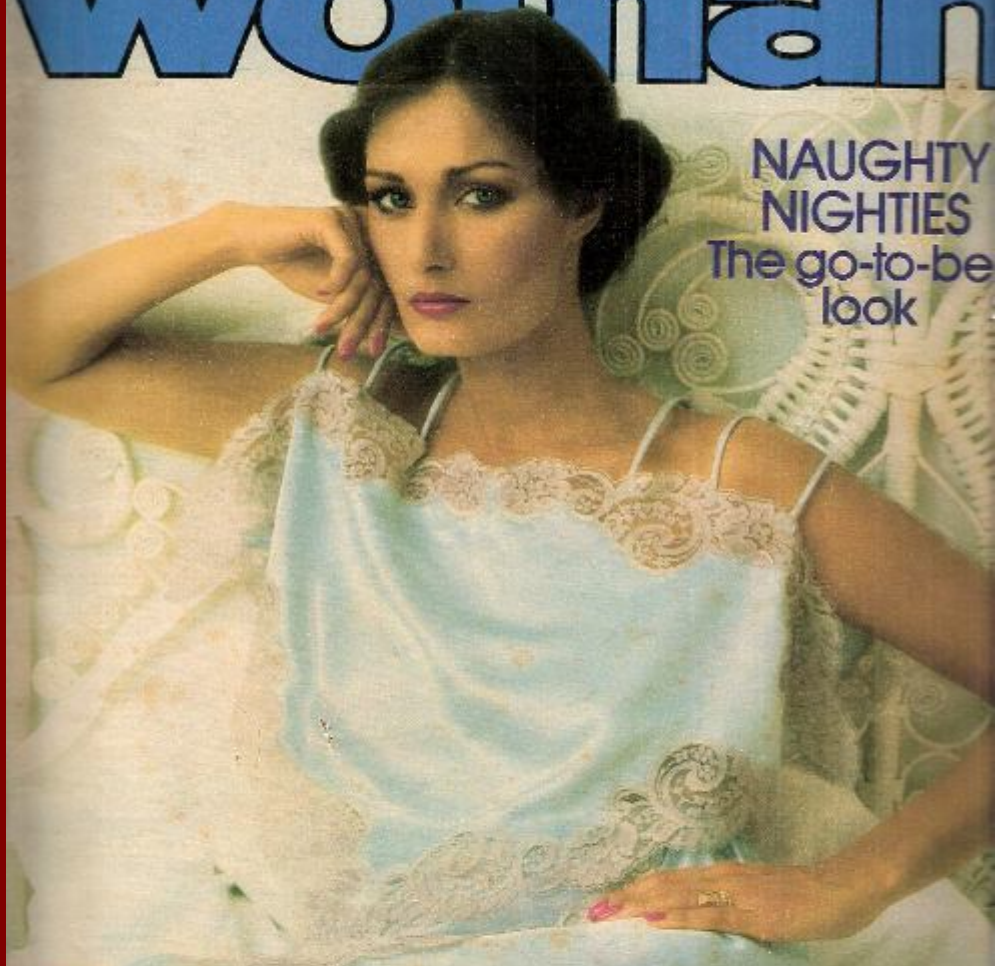


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# woman



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**Behind the scenes with author Winston Graham**

## EXCLUSIVE By Winston Graham

*The man who created Ross and Demelza tells us how a new Cornish legend was founded. Beginning in a remote wooden bungalow on a cliff edge, where he wrote the first novels, he takes us through the years until, with his own camera, he recorded the making of the latest series for BBC television*

### **POLDARK - how it all happened**

When I was in my late teens I read a short story - hardly more than an anecdote - by the German writer, Herman Sudermann, about a beautiful woman who made a wrong decision in her youth, which ruined the lives of the two men who loved her.

This remained in my mind and would not be banished; years later that seed came to life in the story of Ross Poldark, his cousin, and Elizabeth Chynoweth, whom they both wished to marry.

My family had moved to Cornwall when I was 17 and my first novel was published when I was 23; but it was quite a while after this that Poldark began. By then, to the inevitable attraction of the county had been added an interest in its history, particularly its history during the period when it loomed far more importantly in the scheme of things than it does today. In the eighteenth century, Cornwall returned 44 Members to Parliament; there was also the productivity of its tin and copper mines and its strategic position in times of war. Society, too, in the county was much more self-contained and active.

I had no intention of writing anything like a saga. But there was the theme I wanted to express, dealing with the Ross-Elizabeth-Francis triangle, which it was clear I had not even begun to complete by the end of the first novel. Into it also had come the engaging and vital character of Demelza, who by now was intent on altering the shape of the story. (Her name, incidentally, comes from the name of a tiny hamlet on the Cornish moors: there have been many girls christened Demelza since.)

Two of the books I wrote in a small wooden bungalow I had hired, remote on a cliff edge, and I would walk to it daily with haversack containing a sandwich lunch.

When the tide was in I would have to scramble along the edge of the beach to reach the place dry-footed, and would find when I got there all the books, papers, histories spread out as I had left them yesterday, and there for about six hours I would write and dream and write again.

So the first four books were not, as is generally supposed, sequels of one another but one very long novel which broke off at convenient points. The end of the fourth book, *Warleggan*, was the end of the tale. The results of Elizabeth's mistaken choice had by now worked itself out, not only in the lives of Ross and Francis but in her own. The fact that in the writing the Ross-Demelza relationship had become far more important than any other, did not affect the original theme.

\* \* \*

Of course I did not "finish off" the characters, for by then they seemed as much alive as I was, but any further development of them would indeed rank as a sequel, with all the dangers of repetition and staleness that that word holds. So for 20 years, during which there was a constant procession of letters asking me to continue, I answered with explanations and polite refusal.

It was not until 1971 that, having written a succession of modern novels, I seriously considered writing just one more Poldark. It was in its own way as much of a challenge as starting something quite new.

So *The Black Moon* was begun, and after initial difficulties, gradually began to flow, just as the others had. And as I wrote it a new theme appeared, growing entirely out of the circumstances of the old. And this theme - which involves the parentage of Elizabeth's son, Valentine Warleggan - has taken three novels to develop and complete.

Although these books are novels, I have wherever possible involved history in them. In the book *Demelza* the death of Ross's servant, Jim Carter, from inexpert blood-letting while he is serving a prison sentence, is taken from an incident in Wesley's journals; the horrifying description of Launceston prison comes from a contemporary account.

In *Jeremy Poldark* the rich heiress Caroline Penvenen is taken with what is suspected too be a morbid sore throat, which young Dr. Enys discovers to be no more than a fishbone; this happened in reality to Sir William Fordyce and is related in his book *Fevers*, published in 1773.

In the new books *The Memoirs of William Carnsew* were invaluable for their insight into eighteenth century Cornish Methodism; in *The Four Swans*, the rivalry between the Falmouths and the Bassets for the Truro parliamentary borough and the elections which took place, is taken from contemporary letters; the raid on Quiberon in *The Black Moon*, when an Anglo-French force landed in Brittany to raise the Standard of the King, is from the account of a French officer who took part.

When I was near completion of *The Four Swans*, the BBC announced their intention of making a serial of the first four *Poldark* novels. It was pointed out that I should be the first living writer to have a family saga done on television.

I went to Cornwall with a BBC team in February 1975 to help them pick out locations. It proved difficult, for Cornwall has suffered rapid development since the last war, and it is hard to find a cottage without a TV aerial, or a lane without road signs. Happily, the National Trust has secured large areas of the cliff coast, and here and there the neglected cove still exists.

People are always asking me what my reactions are when I see my characters portrayed by living actors: do I feel pleasure, disappointment, surprise? The answer is, of course, all three. But I have been singularly lucky in both Poldark productions to have actors and actresses who are close to the original conception.

Even those who have not been absolutely right in appearance have nevertheless got into the characters in such a way as to overcome this difficulty. In one or two cases





### Photo captions

(1) Ross Poldark, owner of 100 acres of rather barren farmland - or, if you prefer, Robin Ellis, who got bowled in a cricket match by an American-born actress called Jill Townsend ... (2) Elizabeth Warleggan who, in spite of two husbands and a brief affair with Ross, still manages to look virginal. On location, Jill Townsend alters the effect with that cigarette - and that look. (3) In this picture of Judy Geeson, everything's in period except for the chairs. But the trailing gowns and feathered hats of Caroline Penvenen just don't make comfortable rainwear. (4) Ross's wife, who had never been a raving beauty but whose charm and exuberance of spirit always drew men's attention. Angharad Rees sits on the cliffs of Pentireglaze, waiting to be Demelza. (5) Sawle Cove, which in real life is Portquin, National Trust territory, and so deserted that it could still be part of the eighteenth century. There wasn't an ice cream kiosk in sight. (6) The Rev. and Mrs. Ossie Whitworth, who was Morwenna Chynoweth, visit the Warleggans. The two characters lurking in the background are not minions of the house, but television crew. (7) Julie Dawn Cole as Roscarrack, combining a 1970's sprawl with a 1790's costume. And looking altogether too nice to be the really rather outrageous Rowella Chynoweth. (8) Demelza with her brothers, Drake the blacksmith (left) and Sam the Methodist preacher. Cornwall is still dotted with eighteenth century chapels from when Methodism swept the West Country. (9) A French fishing village on the coast of Cornwall. Well, it's Portholland really. And it can take the best part of a day to recreate the eighteenth-century scene.

they have even created characters not quite at one with the characters in the book but equally interesting.

In the second serial the filming of the outdoor scenes, chiefly in Cornwall, was done in seven weeks in the autumn. Again, I went with the BBC to pick out locations. Whereas last time the film unit had moved about, this time we looked for a central base and locations within reasonable distance of it.

Eventually it was decided to focus our attention on the little town of Lost-withiel. The farm which I had originally recommended for Nampara, but which had not been available for the first series, was only half an hour away; so was the desolate little inlet of Portquin and the magnificent cliffs of Pentireglaze. The farthest afield we had to go was St. Mawes, where the castle was used for the French Fort Baton; Porthluney Beach, Caerhays, was used for Hendrawna beach of the books; some harbour scenes were shot at Charlestown.

Moving a unit for a day's shooting is quite a major enterprise. A 40-seater coach is needed to convey the artists, extras and technicians. Then there are props wagons and a make-up caravan, electric vans for generating and lighting, a "grips" van with cameras and equipment, a catering van and miscellaneous cars.

Sometimes, if a location is difficult to access, this lumbering caravanserai has to be left in a nearby flat field or farmyard, and from there everything is ferried to and fro by Land-Rovers and jeeps.

Organisation of a month's filming on location is planned to the last detail before it begins: what shall be shot and when, what actors are needed, what extras, what props (three donkeys, or a stage coach, or two pistols), and technicians go ahead to prepare a site by weaving branches around a new fence or disguising a telegraph pole, or in some cases by the complete recreation of an eighteenth century scene.

\* \* \*

Six films have been made for the big screen from my books - including of course *Marnie* directed by Alfred Hitchcock - and I have been variously involved in the production of them. But only with the first of these, *Take My Life*, have I been so involved as I was with the second Poldark serial.

I was enormously impressed by the thorough-going professionalism, and the goodwill that pervaded the whole team. Among the actors, the greatest enemies on the screen are the greatest friends off, and to be a part of this camaraderie has been a really splendid experience.

Instead of avoiding each other in their leisure time, as might well happen to people working together, often in trying conditions, they stayed together all day and talked, ate and joked into the evening. One new member of the cast said to me: "I've never been on a unit like this, we're always having parties."

And conditions *can* be trying. During our first three weeks in Cornwall the weather was perpetually foul. In one scene Morwenna Chynoweth (Jane Wymark) takes her

charge Geoffrey Charles (Stefan Gates) paddling on Hend-rawna beach and meets Drake Carne (Kevin McNally). This, which was meant to be a lovely day in hot sunshine, was rehearsed with mackintoshes and umbrellas in driving rain and a force six wind, the actors shivering with cold. Then it was shot in brief intervals when the rain relented. In such circumstances it is not easy to be cheerful and philosophical.

On hot days it can be equally trying to stand about in heavy eighteenth century clothes. This is specially true for the girls who, slim enough in all conscience, have to compress their waists into the tight-fitting bodices of another age. And so many things can go awry.

A scene may go through splendidly but the cameraman is not satisfied; a second time something in the background has gone wrong; a third time and an actor, who has done it perfectly twice, fluffs a line. Or a motor bike goes by, a threshing machine starts up, and it all has to be done again.

On one particularly bad day when cold squally showers were beating across the countryside I made a remark about the rain to a technician, Chris Hastie, and he replied: "I'm alive, I'm well, and I'm working. What does the weather matter?" This seems to sum up the attitude of the whole unit, and one wishes it were an attitude more prevalent throughout England today.

Sometimes, of course, there is fun "off scene". Judy Geeson has a delightful small dog called Tara which featured in the first serial and which will sing a duet with her if she pitches the right note. A private competition one afternoon among the other actors to produce the same result was won jointly by Christopher Biggins (Rev. Ossie Whitworth) and Ralph Bates (George Warleggan). My own efforts only elicited a suspicious stare from Tara.

Towards the end of the first period of filming, Captain Fortescue, who owns the great estate of Boconnoc, arranged with Robin Ellis and Ralph Bates that a charity cricket match, *Poldarks v. Warleggans*, should take place on his ground.

A few hundred spectators were expected and about four thousand turned up. Most of them seemed more interested in getting autographs than in watching the cricket, but the cricket proceeded nevertheless, with some of the technicians in "long johns" and other in denims and tricorne hats.

Highlight was when Ross Poldark was scoring all around the wicket and George Warleggan had exhausted all his regular bowlers. He called Mrs. Warleggan up from the boundary and asked her to bowl. Jill Townsend, who is American, knew nothing whatever about cricket and had to be told where to stand and what to aim at. Whereupon she bowled Ross Poldark first ball.

There was something curiously significant about this, as if it were symbolic of a major theme of the story. Nevertheless, Poldarks won by a narrow margin. Which is no doubt how it should be.

[\[Article ends\]](#)





This is the old wooden bungalow - Lech Carrygy (Cornish for Flat Rocks) - that a young WG hired from Mr. Tremewan and in which, as he describes in *Memoirs*, he finally made the transition from "craftsman with a story-telling ability" to "novelist":

*What I was writing was not a planned thing, it was organic, with the characters working out their own destiny. Sitting there in the grey old empty bungalow, I felt like a man driving a coach and four, roughly knowing the direction in which the coach would travel, but being pulled along by forces only just under his control. It was physically and mentally both exhausting and exhilarating ... I have had a lot of happiness in my life, but those ... few months [in the bungalow, writing Demelza] rank high among the high spots.*

The town across the beach is Perranporth, where WG and his wife lived at the time. The bungalow burned down in the 1960s. A granite memorial seat (pic. below) now marks the spot.



*With thanks to [poldark.activeboard.com](http://poldark.activeboard.com)*