

Winston Graham *in his own words ...*

I have never done creative work on a typewriter. There is to me a lack of empathy ... I find that a sentence, a page, a book, assumes a different nature when it is first in manuscript, second in typescript, and third in page proofs. There is a separate, a welcome change, and each time one is able to see it in a new light. (*Memoirs*, 2.10)

[On the temptation to overwrite]: An author is naturally reluctant, once he has discovered something at great trouble to himself, not to make the most of it. But the temptation should be resisted ... What is not relevant is irrelevant. (*Poldark's Cornwall*)

My efforts at writing began at an early age, so the actual desire to write is not traceable back to any special date. At six I dictated a story: "*Oh look,*" said Tom to his sister, "*here is a dead man on the doorstep.*" And there were *footsteps in the snow ...* I am struck by the force of the writing, for all its crudeness ... At six, it comes straight from the heart. (WG speaking on "The Novelist at Work," 1937)

The committed writer will write whatever happens. Nothing will stop him. Without that kind of commitment, he will fall by the wayside. (*Sussex Express*, 28 October 1977)

I had six novels made into films. Three of them were quite close to the originals, three varied enormously – I mean, some were so distant that one could hardly recognise the novels ... But [though it made me angry] I felt that a professional writer writes a novel and any attempt to alter that novel by one comma is something that he must resent and refuse to accept with all his might, but once a novel is sold to a film company, a novelist cannot then break his heart over something that is happening in another medium. It's part of the professional hazard, as it were. (To Ted Harrison, 22 December 1977)

It is very fine to talk of drawing your characters from life – but although it's an essential part, by itself it is simply not enough. When you describe an acquaintance – or draw a sympathetic portrait of a friend, or the unsymp-

athetic portrait of an enemy, you are merely doing a good job of reportage. And a novelist's job is not to report, it is to create. When you take a character entirely from life that character remains objective when it should be at least largely subjective. A good writer should never just feel *with* a character, he should feel *in*. He mustn't merely describe, he must beget. Sympathy, though desirable, is not enough; there must be empathy. One can see this well in *The Forsyte Saga* – Galsworthy's great success with the Forsytes themselves and his relative failure with his working class characters. (*The Craft of the Historical Novelist*, 1976)

I find the process of writing the first draft [of a novel] the worst – sheer agony. You are faced with a blank sheet of paper and it's all there to be made or unmade. (To David Clarke, *Cornish Life*, January 1985)

I [have] never [enjoyed writing]. It's like the lunatic banging his head against the wall. Nice when it stops.

– What do you enjoy? The working it out ahead?

I enjoy having done it. (To Susan Hill, *Bookshelf*, 26 February 1987)

[In 1918, WG's brother Cecil] was sent to France ... One day my mother got a telegram from the War Office. With terrified fingers she fumbled it open to see that her lance corporal son had been "wounded but remained on duty". In fact a shell splinter had cut his face just below the eye. Had it been an inch higher it probably would have killed him and so altered not only his destiny but mine and that of scores of other people, since without his pressure we might not have moved to Cornwall. So all one's destiny is controlled and decided by the direction of a flying splinter. (*Memoirs*, 1.2)

The man who spoke of 2% inspiration and 98% perspiration wasn't far wrong so far as novel writing is concerned. (*The Novelist at Work*, 1937)

[On returning to the Poldark saga after an eighteen-year gap]: One day I remembered something ... 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. (*The Times*, 25 April 1975)

I am fascinated by weeping trees – they are always more beautiful than their erect counterparts, and they seldom grow as tall, an advantage for someone loving sun and light. (*Homes and Gardens*, October 1965)

I like change [when writing]. I always find the impulse to write again if I write something different.

– You can go anywhere you like from this point.

Yes, that's true. But what I don't want to do is go nowhere. (To Victoria Kingston, *Sussex Life*, February 1999)

I'm not very enthusiastic about doing [my memoirs]. It requires no imagination. (*Western Morning News*, 3 August 1999)

I remember coming into the ballroom and seeing Jean Williamson sitting with some friends at a table across the floor. She had changed greatly from our first meeting. I looked at her carefully and then said to myself: "She's the girl I'm going to marry." (*Memoirs*, 1.4)

I have never been able to look after myself very well. I've got hands which I use all the time for writing, because I write in longhand, but they're not much use, I would have thought, for building a boat or constructing a house or a shed and I've never cooked much for myself all my life. (*Desert Island Discs*, 26 November 1977)

The printed word is on the defensive against the insidious influence of more easily assimilated media – but the stronger influence is the urge of man to write, to give and leave proof of his existence. (*Cornish Guardian*, 25 July 1957)

I had official word from Carol [Brandt] the other day about the four Poldarks; and it was not until she named them individually that I realised that they were still being called by the awful titles which were chosen for them in the U.S. I do hope that Berkley will reissue under the English titles

of ROSS POLDARK, DEMELZA, JEREMY POLDARK and WARLEGGAN. I cannot imagine anybody buying a book called VENTURE ONCE MORE. (Letter to Ken McCormick, 6 April 1970)

I don't really like sagas which go on and on, from one generation whistling through to another and so on [but] four or five years later, with [the BBC's] words whispering in my ears and a lot of letters flooding in and my own *addiction* to Poldark, as it had become by then, I thought, "Well, there's no harm in going on one generation more ..." (To John Dunn, *The John Dunn Show*, 27 June 1991)

I have lived a marvellous life and would not have had it any other way. (*Sussex Express*, 28 October 1977)

The more I write, the more I become aware that successful novel writing depends not on the quantity of your experience but on the quality of your imagination. (*The Novelist at Work*, 1937)

[On needing to describe an iridotomy]: I talked over details ... with [an eye] specialist and wrote the passage. Then a week or so later he rang me up and asked if I'd like to see the operation performed. I said, "God, thanks, no!" But after twelve hours of indecision – if I was a writer, what was I thinking of, turning that down? – I got dressed up in a surgeon's coat and mask and went along and saw it all at close quarters. Afterwards, the surgeon's wife laughed to see the colour of my face. (*Argosy*, December 1967)

I draw on bits of myself with every character. No man can write about a humorist unless he possesses a sense of humour himself, or about a miser unless he has walked bad-temperedly through the rain a few times to avoid a four-and-sixpenny taxi fare. (*Argosy*, December 1967)

Please don't refer to [the Poldark novels] as "bodice-rippers". It's a term I dislike. I've always said I'll give £100 to anyone who can find any bodice-ripping in the books. (To Jennifer Selway, *Observer*, 22 September 1996)

I think the more one reads history – and also the longer one lives – the more one realises that a theory only has to be sufficiently improbable, with

of course a touch of originality and romance about it, to attract legions of crackpots who henceforward will defy the Holy Ghost in its defence. (Letter to A L Rowse, 21 August 1971)

I have struggled all my life to keep in existence a view of a benign element in the universe: as I grow older, this is more constantly attacked, not so much by the larger disasters as by the relatively small personal tragedies which are major in their effect on loving hearts. (Letter to Richard Church, 1965, undated)

I am not the deeply religious person you are, but what religion I have seems to exist at a deeper level than the dogmas one hears so endlessly and unimaginatively repeated. (Letter to Victor Gollancz, 17 August 1958)

I've never done an honest day's work in my life. (To Valerie Grove, *The Times*, 7 May 2002)

Self-consciousness is good in an author in some degree but, if overdone, is liable to prove a serious check on the fluidity of his work. (*The Novelist at Work*, 1937)

I'm always embarrassed on the publication day [of one of my novels] – the fact that strangers are reading my innermost thoughts, whether they are thoughts of love or thoughts of murder. It's something that comes out of me and, in a way, I would prefer to keep those thoughts private. (*Woman's Weekly*, 30 July 1983)

Karen Rye once said to me that I would never be a best-seller because I wrote too well ... It may be that I write too well to appeal to the mass of people who want pulp and I'm not sufficiently fashionable to appeal to the intellectuals. Who knows? (Letter to Ken McCormick, 6 April 1970)

I was depressed by [your article] supporting – on some strange egalitarian grounds – the move to make subfusc [i.e. a gown over dull clothes] no longer compulsory at Oxford on a few formal occasions, when already for 99% of the time undergraduates may dress like refugees, and often do ... One does not have to dislike change to prefer the maintenance of a few of the older standards. (Letter in *The Times*, 13 November 1991)

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 ... 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. (Trerice, Newquay, 27 March 1974)

If I had my time again, I would wish for little different, except to be a better writer. (Letter to Jim Dring, 2 August 1999)

[During the drafting of my first novel] I never once read over what I had written, which, as a principle, proved so satisfactory that it is one – almost the only one related to writing – from which I have not since seriously departed. [It is important] that one's dreaded critical faculty should not get to work too soon and choke the life out of one's text. (*The Novelist at Work*, 1937)

All the presenters on Classic FM keep telling me to relax. Why do I want to relax? Surely not everyone is biting their nails and waiting for the next Prozac? (*Brighton Evening Argus Weekend*, 20/21 January 2001)

[On the campaign for authors' Public Lending Right]: I have been in it ever since A. P. Herbert launched it with a cocktail party at the English Speaking Union long years ago; and I have come up against such obstinacy, such misapprehension, such stupidity and such a cynical disregard for elementary justice that I had begun to despair of any advance at all. Now there is a hope, and although it may look to some like an advance in the wrong direction, I see it as a foot in the door. (Letter to Francis Henry King, 1 August 1973) [PLR was finally introduced in 1982.]

A good novelist is never altogether a free man and never quite a whole one. (*Memoirs*, 2.4)

Writing is in your head all the time. (*The Times*, 7 May 2002)

It is a relief to hear of someone else who lives and continues to be creative in the midst of minor chaos: most of my friends seem to have such tidy habits. (Letter to Frank Swinnerton, 14 December 1961)

[On writing across genres]: I don't like to go on repeating myself. I know that it's an advantage in some ways to keep on writing the same sort of book but I feel that one grows more by having a shot at something else. (*Books and Bookmen*, October 1959)

I started writing purely suspense books in which character was nowhere to be seen, as if I, the author, wasn't interested. Now it is different: it is in the character where the whole story of any book lies. (*El Eco de Canarias*, 3 November 1970)

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. (*Woman*, 10 December 1977)

Q: Would your publisher like you to do more publicity?

A: "Oh, yes. My first publisher often said "If you don't like publicity, you've chosen the wrong profession." (*Woman's Weekly*, 30 July 1983)

[As a young man] I was looked upon as being a bit shiftless. If I'd said ... I wanted to be a novelist everybody would have hooted with laughter. Novelists who made a living out of writing just weren't heard of in the extreme south-west of England. (*Woman's Weekly*, 30 July 1983)

I am anxious about the future of the novel which as an Art Form may be flourishing but which as a means of mass communication is steadily and efficiently suffocating itself in intellectual obscurantism and technical expertise. Few of the great novelists of the past had the slightest difficulty in recognising that first and foremost they must entertain, and secondly, that they must make the reader want to know what happened next. (*Books and Bookmen*, October 1959)

Men – and women – have treated me well. I have never been betrayed or let down by anyone important to me. I have never in my life had to ask a favour of anyone, and therefore have never known the bitterness of being refused or – so I'm told – the resentment of being granted it. This does not mean I have not known sadness and disappointment, ill-health or the chagrins of failure. Nor does it mean that I am full of the milk of human

kindness or that I believe human beings to be more admirable than they really are; but it may just explain why the characters in *Poldark* are, if one balances the coin, a little more in the sun than in the shadow. As far as critical acceptance goes, this has been of great detriment. (*Poldark's Cornwall*)

In the second [*Poldark*] series there was a great sort of pressure by various people on the set ... that I should ... do a Hitchcock on it, you see, so they put me in as a yeoman farmer greeting a clergyman as he came into church ... and what I had to say was "Mornin', Zur!" and I did it very well, I thought. Not even Olivier could have done better with the shortness of the script. But when it came out, I wasn't in it. (*Wogan*, 1 February 1988)

Do authors take characters wholesale from life in the manner they are widely supposed to? I should say in respect of minor characters, yes, but in respect of major ones, no ... I seldom take major characters straight from life to insert into a story for the simple reason that they will seldom fit ... What I do do a great deal is observe characteristics of people around me, which then frequently attach themselves, either spontaneously or by design, to some character on whom I am working. (*The Novelist at Work*, 1937)

Though I only drink wine, I always dread any form of hepatitis for fear of being put on the wagon. (Letter to Denys Val Baker, 3 July 1982)

[On Cornwall]: 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. (*Western Morning News*, 14 May 2002)

I don't think [Cornwall] is ruined ... If one compares it for instance to some of the places on the Costa Brava or in Greece, Cornwall is marvellously unruined. But I naturally grieve for the extreme growth of ... bungalows – what Quiller-Couch called "bungalow eczema" – and I grieve for caravan parks which ... after being there fifteen years don't even have a tamarisk tree to mask them from the rest of the countryside, and I'm sorry for some of the commercial development. (To TSW reporter Mike Whitmarsh, 5 August 1983)

[On his decision to leave]: A writer is an odd bird, and often does not reason like other people. As I became more and more successful it seemed to me that I was becoming too comfortable too young. Everything slotted into place so easily ... No doubt that ugly word Ambition nudged at my elbow. If one doesn't have ambition to write better at that age it is a poor look-out. Whatever the cause, I became convinced that to move would broaden my outlook ... A friend of mine, a well-known writer ... decided, possibly for similar reasons, to make such a change. In the course of six months he changed his place of residence, his club, his publisher, his agent and his wife. I only changed my place of residence. (*Poldark's Cornwall*)

[On the eve of the family's departure from Cornwall]: Now that we have burned our boats, the rational gets infused with the emotional, and I fear in my case the psychological, so that a mere uprooting operation takes on altogether too much importance. (Letter to Frank Swinnerton, 25 December 1959)

I have always been more interested in other people than myself. (*Memoirs*, 1.10)

[Whilst writing my first novel] the nebulous characters which had been just puppets moving shadow-like against the back-curtain of my mind gradually assumed individuality ... They even *changed* their individuality against my will ... I was like a man driving an unwieldy team of horses who suddenly finds his passengers one by one standing beside him and helping with the reins. (*The Novelist at Work*, 1937)

I have a dry sense of humour, but so did Jean. She could reply in a flash – and yes – certain things about Jean went into Demelza's character, particularly her gamine sense of humour and ability to find happiness in small things. We both swore that if one lived longer than the other, as one obviously would, that the one left would live life to the utmost and I've been doing so. (*Daily Express*, 18 November 1995)

When one's wife is ill, there's not much in life that's worth living. (Letter to C. P. Snow, 3 October 1976)

It is not good to be alone. (Letter to Richard Church, 18 December 1967)

... and others

I feel fortunate to have known another side of Winston Graham to "the most successful unknown novelist in England". The Winston I knew loved a party – he gave many in connection with *Poldark*. He enjoyed being at the centre of an event – often approached by admiring fans, especially women.

The popularity of the television version of *Poldark* gave him a different kind of celebrity, perhaps a just reward for all those hours spent alone in his study. He had an enviable talent for public speaking, able to keep an audience enthralled with his word-spinning and story-telling, his soft Manxunian tones tinged with a comic or ironic edge.

We didn't meet him and Jean, his wife, until the filming of the second series of *Poldark*. They were immediately adopted as family members. I have a photo of him at a makeshift lunch table outside the stables of a grand Cornish house – trilby rakishly pushed back on his head, surrounded by members of the cast and crew. It was because of him that we were all there and because of him that so many millions of people were going to enjoy the work in progress. I shall miss him and I'm eternally grateful to him. ([Robin Ellis, *The Times*, 14 July 2003](#))

[MacLean] wouldn't comment in public about fellow writers [but] did of course hold opinions about who was who. In 1967, for example, he let slip in a letter to [Ian Chapman] that he regarded Winston Graham as the best writer in Britain at the time. The Le Carrés, Deightons, even MacLeans, weren't in his class and "in a few short years – without descending into our murky market-place – he will be the best-selling author in Britain." ([From Jack Webster's *Alistair MacLean – A Life*, Chapman's, 1992](#))

To read [WG's] memoir is to meet a charming, decent, old-fashioned sort of character with an enormous capacity for friendship and a wonderful interest in other people. He fears that an autobiography in which "I have not committed any of the fashionable sins such as murder, burglary, sodomy, child abuse, gang rape ... may be too conventional to appeal to today's gossip-hungry readers." On the contrary. Every gentle page offers us a shining example of prolific creativity and a good life well lived. Graham ends his book with the moving disclosure that: "I have had one wife, and I

loved her and she loved me. I did not terrorise, browbeat or woefully neglect my children. I do not get drunk and disorderly. All very dull." Not true. Modest to the end, this much-loved author ... has brought pleasure to millions and if snooty critics consider him lowbrow, so what? It's the book sales that count and, on that score, Graham is still on top. ([Val Hennessy, Daily Mail, 17 October 2003](#))

All his publishers had nothing but affection for him. Ian and Marjory Chapman, at Collins when the Poldark series was televised, said: "He was the perfect companion. He was like family."

His last publisher, David North of Macmillan, agrees: "He was the most charming man you'd ever meet. He knew I liked Dover sole and we would have that if we met in London and he'd have it prepared if I visited him in Sussex."

When Graham came up to London, he used to stop off at Claridges and have his hair done by Ken in Gentleman's Hairdressing there. Recently Ken travelled down to Sussex to do his hair and have lunch. "I started doing Mr Graham's hair in 1975. When he'd been staying at the Savile, I took an hour off in the morning to go and play snooker with him," he recalled.

Graham wrote a final Poldark novel in 2002. When I reviewed it for the *Express*, I got a charming handwritten letter thanking me. He said he had embarked on it with trepidation because "I was aware that time's winged chariot was hurrying near and I would have been very annoyed to leave the novel half finished." However, it was not to be his last book. His autobiography, *Memoirs of a Private Man*, will be published in September. ([Maggie Pringle, The Daily Express, 15 July 2003](#))

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.

... ..

When he died in 2003, *The Times* said, "Though he enjoyed the celebrity the *Poldark* television series conferred on him, Graham ... never aspired to du Maurier's grand status." Nevertheless the fact he was never given a knighthood rankled many. Winston's death at the age of ninety-five was

not only the end of a distinguished literary career; those of us who knew him felt a bright light had gone out. ([Michael Williams, *Writers in Cornwall*, Tor Mark, 2010](#))



[WG in his beloved garden in 1985](#)

As a novelist and the wife of a novelist, I would like to pay tribute to my dear friend Winston Graham. Compelling his style certainly is; simple it is not. He wrote with supreme elegance and compassion and the finest insight into women's minds I have ever encountered; his dialogue is script-like and eminently readable; he heard the nuances and the silences, the inflections and the dialects, and recorded them with a master's ear. He had the rare gift of knowing when to end a scene, abruptly or with a brush-stroke. At the height of his fame he was called by a perspicacious reviewer "the incomparable Winston Graham". It is an accolade he richly deserves. ([Kimberley Jordan Reeman, *The Times*, 18 July 2003](#))

* * * * *