

WG 1945-49 : the making of a writer

From his early twenties to his late thirties, WG seems to have had something of an identity crisis: was he Winston Grime, or Winston Graham, and who were these two mutually antagonistic entities anyway? Winston Grime was a diligent son and brother, from 1939 a dutiful husband, from 1940 a coast-guard, from 1942 a doting father; he was a man whose positive contribution to the social life of his local community – he was active in Toc H, amateur dramatics, WEA classes and the tennis club – won him the respect of some and the friendship of others. But he had no job. WG had always wanted to be a writer – "right from the beginning," he told Roy Plomley¹ – and from 1929 set with resolution about the task of becoming one. But what does it mean, to "be a writer", for can't almost anyone sit down with pen and paper and write a book? Indeed, but far fewer can write a book that others would want to publish, or to read. So, having written his book, the first test was to find a publisher willing to produce and market it, which, after some trouble, he did. What is more, having published his first novel, they (Ward, Lock) were keen to take and market a second, third and fourth – in short, progress. But then come the thorny questions of critical reception and sales, two yardsticks by which the *degree* of one's progress along the writer's rocky road may be assessed. WG's work did attract some favourable critical comment – talk is cheap, of course – but sales were never more than modest. Sales may suggest the gradual cultivation of a devoted public – or not; more prosaically, the income they bring may prove enough to keep the wolf from the door; to sustain a life of narrow means if not privation – or not. In fact, WG continued for more than a decade to write a novel a year despite having calculated that to live on their meagre royalties would take *six* a year, an output quite beyond him (though others – John Creasey, Erle Stanley Gardner, Georges Simenon, Edgar Wallace – managed happily enough). So, although the writer, Winston Graham, struggled gamely on, he remained – if "success" is the criterion judged by – no more than the stubbornly and tantalisingly unrealisable *alter ego* of Winston Grime. Hindsight, of course, allows us to know how this story turns out; to know which persona falls and which prevails – but what factor or factors contributed most to the perhaps surprising outcome?

(1) *Ross Poldark and Demelza*

In the period 1934-1944, Ward, Lock published all twelve of the novels that WG sent them – it seems, as the end of the war approached, then, that they were content to regard him as one of their stable of trusted writers whose work they'd be happy to put out for as long as he cared to submit it – and yet, remarkably, not one of those dozen books satisfied their aspiring writer's own rigorous artistic ambition. This is confirmed by the fact that, as soon as he did succeed in his own estimation, he chose to allow all of them to fall and remain out of print; to use his own preferred, more robust term, to *suppress* them because (he believed) sub-par.

In February 1945, *The Forgotten Story* appeared and, to his surprise (since he had a poor opinion of this book too) it proved popular in the West Country particularly (which is where he lived and its late-Victorian-era plot was set). This was propitious since his next book was another set locally, albeit in an even more distant past. WG had started drafting *Ross Poldark* five years earlier, having first conceived of the Poldarks and their world "before the war". Some of the book's chapters he "wrote nine times"², which suggests that, all along, he must have sensed the narrative's particular importance to his career. When it was published in December 1945, *Ross Poldark* may not immediately have been widely recognised as his first major work (its "terrific success in Cornwall" notwithstanding), but so it was. What's more, crucially, its author himself soon came to see and feel it; to realise that, after a gestation of sixteen wearisome years, through its singular medium his true self was born at last. Yes, his involvement with the Poldark novels was not only "deep, almost passionate" but revelatory too: as he continued *RP's* story in a second pulsating novel (*Demelza*, 1946), and despite previous moments of self-doubt in which he saw himself as no more than "just a craftsman with a story-telling ability", now, for the first time,

I knew myself with conviction to be a novelist

he wrote. Thus the previously preeminent Winston Grime sustained a body blow from which, whilst not immediately fatal, he would not recover.

(2) Valerie Taylor and *Take My Life*

In the midst of this exciting time, as nascent Graham began to gain ascendancy over hapless Grime, enter, stage left, Valerie Taylor.

A stage and screen actress with a formidable CV, London-born Valerie Taylor (1902-1988) is perhaps best remembered now for her six-year association with John Balderston's play *Berkeley Square*, in which she starred as Kate Pettigrew both in the West End and on Broadway and eventually, opposite Leslie Howard's Peter Standish, on film (1933). She first rose to prominence in 1925 playing Nina to John Gielgud's Konstantin in Chekhov's *The Seagull* at London's Little Theatre. Other notable successes include her screen Nora in 1942 Graham Greene adaptation *Went The Day Well?*, her appearance a year later in Emyln Williams' stage adaptation of Turgenev's novel *A Month in the Country* at the St. James Theatre, London with Michael Redgrave in the cast and her residency at Stratford-on-Avon's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre during the spring of 1946 when she appeared as the Princess of France in *Love's Labour's Lost*, as Imogen in *Cymbeline* and as Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* with (among others) Paul Scofield and Donald Sinden.

In 1930 Taylor married fellow London-born actor Hugh Sinclair (1903-1962), a debonair leading man whose portrayal of the title character in *The Saint's Vacation* (1941) and *The Saint Meets The Tiger* (1943) was neither the first screen Simon Templar nor the last. After the birth of a son in New York in May 1935, the couple appeared together on Broadway in *Love of Women* in 1937, in *Dear Octopus* as it toured the UK in 1940, at the Opera House, Manchester in *I'll See You Again* in 1944 and elsewhere, Perranporth W. I. included. WG recounts how, each pre-war late-thirties summer, a talented young actor named Peter Bull and a company of friends would take over Perranporth Women's Institute for about ten weeks and put on a remarkable repertory of plays, professionally acted, directed and produced.³ These proved sufficiently popular to draw holidaymakers from all over the county, in part because Bull was a keen judge of talent and in part because, in addition to the regulars who accompanied him to Cornwall, occasional guest appearances would be made by such luminaries as Robert Morley, Hugh Sinclair and Valerie Taylor.⁴

But Sinclair and Taylor not only acted in Perranporth but also owned a bungalow there and WG reports that between intervals of work they and he would visit each other's houses and have supper together. He describes Taylor at this time as "a highly strung, highly articulate, highly intelligent, beautiful but rather overpowering young woman [she was 43, six years older than him] ... full of ideas", one of which, one evening – a "brilliant opening for a film" – she pitched him. After thinking it over for a month, he discussed with her how it might be developed, at which "she immediately lit up and hence-forward rang me up persistently, full of suggestions and wanting to know if I was making progress."



Taylor and Sinclair on their wedding day, 5 January 1930

So, though with much else on his plate – finishing *Ross Poldark*, starting *Demelza*, concerns about the health of his mother, his mother-in-law and his pregnant wife, his approaching demobilisation from the Coastguard Service, the winding up of his B&B business, not to mention the care of three-year-old

Andrew – that's how WG came to find himself making his screenwriting debut. (Up to that point, he says, he'd only ever *seen* one script, which Taylor had given him to show how they were usually formatted.)



Leslie Howard and Valerie Taylor in *Berkeley Square*

Though officially the script of *Take My Life* is co-credited to WG and Taylor, it sounds from what he says in *Memoirs* as though most if not all of the writing was done by him (certainly IMDb shows no other writing credit to her name). One wonders, too, whether her interest might have come in part from the thought that, if realised, the resultant film's meatiest role (that of Philippa Shelley, the female lead) might prove an ideal vehicle for her talents. Perhaps it never crossed her mind;⁵ what's more, though he wrote the script, it was she who touted it around the industry and she who, through contacts, hooked him up with Christopher Mann Ltd, "the most powerful [film] agents in London". They sold the property to the prestigious Rank Organisation, who passed it on to Cineguild, one of its subsidiaries, who not only put it into

production, but also seduced WG away from finishing *Demelza* with the irresistible offer of a Hallam Street, London flat, a chauffeur-driven Rolls, a secretary and a rolling, open-ended £80 a week irrespective of whatever results he, a screenwriting novice, may or may not achieve. Hard, surely, for anyone, much less this relative unknown, to resist.



WG with Valerie Taylor circa 1946. Village gossip linked them romantically – even her husband suggested their collaboration might better have been titled *Take My Wife* – but WG claims that, at this time, she was conducting an affair with another man (William Saunders) whom she eventually married.

Wind back, now, to the relatively tranquil days before Cyclone Valerie swept him away. We left him – Graham, the novelist – busy being born. What should he make now, then, added to the belated realisation of that long-cherished dream, of being fawned on by a film industry about to put his name up in lights on silver screens on both sides of the Atlantic whilst paying him handsomely for the privilege? "I knew nothing of the opulent vistas of the film world," he says – but that was then and this is now. Could this be anything other than success in spades; of further cast-iron affirmation (if such be needed) that he was indeed Winston Graham at last?

Whatever his thinking, this much is true: after living the first thirty-nine years of his life and the first thirteen years of his professional life as Winston Grime, in May 1947, WG changed his name formally, legally and irrevocably from Winston Grime to Winston Mawdsley Graham. In *Memoirs*, he not only didn't vouchsafe why he did so; he chose, rather, reticence, mentioning not one word about it. But surely it was because in the "physically and mentally both exhausting and exhilarating ... nerve-straining, exacting, stimulating" period of 1945/6 that writer Winston Graham was born – so what more natural, a year on, than his christening?

(3) *Cordelia*

Though those film johnnies were keen to suck up WG and wring out of him whatever juice they could, in truth his hit screenplay was little more than serendipity and his presence in their midst never anything but a temporary, blind-alley diversion. Though he scripted three more of his novels for the screen, only one – *Night Without Stars* – was produced and that proved, following directorial rewrites, "a disaster". It shouldn't be a surprise, then, hard on *Take My Life's* left-field success, that the newborn author was keen to return to his forte, which was *not* the collaborative process, antipathetic to his nature, of screenwriting but, rather, the solo, high-wire, no-safety-net novelist's act. As, disillusioned, he jumped before being pushed out of Cine-guild's door, he vowed to go back to Cornwall to write a book that nobody would even want to film, and did. Based largely on his mother's reminiscences of her early life in Victorian Manchester, that book was 1949's *Cordelia*.

Having made significant inroads into the UK book market with *RP* and *Dem-elza*, which both continued to sell steadily, and having scored an unexpected though nonetheless welcomed success with *Take My Life* (the 1947 film, subsequently novelised), the next sage career-move was the conquest of America. More easily said than done, of course – indeed, there must be many across myriad artistic disciplines who will have tried in vain. But still WG's guardian angel smiled upon him. *Cordelia* – a novel which, in retrospect, few would even place in his top ten – was picked up by Doubleday and published by both them and the Literary Guild in 1950, giving him his first entrée into that potentially huge market. It quickly sold more than half a million copies, so ensuring that Doubleday would be back for more of his work (Poldarks and other) in the sure knowledge that readers would be there to buy it.

In 1949, WG also signed with a second UK publisher, Hodder and Stoughton, after agreeing to give his modern novels to them whilst allowing Ward, Lock to continue publishing his period romances, in which Hodder, presumably with a jaundiced eye on the bottom line, showed no interest. The first novel H&S received under this deal was *Night Without Stars* (1950), which was subsequently filmed; the second, *Fortune is a Woman* (1952), was also filmed; the third, *The Little Walls* (1955), won the Crime Writers' Association's first Crime Novel of the Year Award (then called the Crossed Red Herrings Award, later the Gold Dagger) and the fourth, *The Sleeping Partner* (1956), was eventually filmed for cinema release, dramatised for television and taken by Reader's Digest (meaning yet more invaluable overseas profile-building). Meanwhile WG finished up his benign twenty-year liaison with Ward, Lock by completing his magnificent Poldark quartet with *Jeremy Poldark* (1950) and *Warleggan* (1953).

How quickly his fortunes changed. How swiftly he metamorphosed from a writer who, despite unrelenting application over years, it seemed could do little right to one who – novels, screenplays, foreign sales – could do no wrong. True talent will out ... eventually. If ever anyone's was a case in point, it's surely WG's, be it Grime or Graham.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes, data and biographical information derive from WG's *Memoirs of a Private Man* (Macmillan, 2003)

¹ During his *Poldark*-promoting guest appearance on *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio Four, 26 November 1977.

² And more, for after so much labour to prepare the book for UK publication in 1945, he decided before its American release six years later to substantially revise it further still. *In toto*, and despite several difficult births, surely no other book WG wrote through the course of a long life was worked on so assiduously to get it right.

³ Peter Bull (1912-1984) was a stage, cinema and television character actor, theatrical manager and author. He trod the boards with John Gielgud, Richard Burton, Alec Guinness, John Mills, Paul Scofield, Claire Bloom, Dame Edith Evans *et al.* and between 1936 and 1983 chalked up well over a hundred IMDb screen acting credits, starting, after two uncredited bit parts, with *As You Like It* (1936) featuring a young Laurence Olivier and including *Oliver Twist* (1948), *The African Queen* (1951), *Tom Jones* (1963), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *Doctor Dolittle* (1967) *etc.* As described by WG above, Bull ran four summer seasons in Perranporth from 1936 to 1939 inclusive. In his memoir *I Know The Face, But ...* (Peter Davies, 1959) he wrote of them:

Except for a carpenter there were no salaried personnel, and there was a general dish-out of profits at the end of the season. As the hall held only two hundred seats, the margin was narrow. But I took a house for the season, and provided board, lodging, hairdressing, haircuts, Cornish cream and indeed the highest teas ever served in the Western Hemisphere. The whole thing worked out pretty miraculously due to the

talents and dispositions of those – Robert Morley, Roger and Judith Furse, Frith Banbury and others – with whom I was associated ... The work involved was tremendous, because at one time we were doing four plays a week, but later in the season we kept on repeating the programme to fit in with the influx of fresh visitors. We did three new plays, one of which, Goodness, How Sad! was written for the company by Robert Morley and played in London subsequently for eight months.



Peters Bull and Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove*

⁴ Morley was involved in all four seasons. In January 1938, he was also responsible for a brief flurry of excitement in the trade and regional press where it was reported as "a definite possibility that Miss Joan Crawford, her husband Franchot

Tone and other Hollywood film artistes may appear at Perranporth Summer Theatre this year." (*Western Morning News*, 28 January.) Sadly not. Though detailed information concerning Perranporth appearances by Sinclair and Taylor is hard to come by, the pair did confirm to a Leeds-based reporter in 1940 that they had "played as members of that ... company." (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, 24 February)

⁵ During the spring of 1946, whilst the film was in production, she had acting commitments in Stratford (see page three). That might have been a fallback engagement, or perhaps the thought really *did* never cross her mind. WG's preference for the role was another Valerie – Ms Hobson, a friend he "admired very much" who had just played Estella in *Great Expectations* for David Lean – but the studio went with the equally dependable Greta Gynt.

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