

## WG and Christmas

Christmas is a special time for many, irrespective of age, status or religion, thus that Winston Graham might have so regarded it is no surprise. Falling at year's end, it is a natural waymark, a time to take stock; and, just past the shortest day, a time, too, of drawing together and renewal. Whether in celebration, reflection, retrospection or otherwise, it is a time of heightened experience, perhaps of pleasure, joy, amity, love or – depending on circumstances – melancholy, loss and grief.

In his personal life WG used the occasion to maintain or renew friendships: for a few years after he and Jean met Gregory and Veronique Peck on Cap Ferrat in 1960, the couples saw each other regularly, after which, perhaps inevitably, their association lapsed into an "exchange ... of Christmas cards".<sup>1</sup> Similarly, his correspondence with Frank Swinnerton, initiated in 1943, had become by 1960 an "exchange of Christmas letters".<sup>2</sup> Through the late seventies and 1980s, Winston and Jean made and distributed personalised Christmas cards (see several examples below) featuring shots of family or Abbotswood's house and grounds or stills from TV adaptations of his work.



Above and below: a selection of WG's personalised Christmas cards





There, too, Christmas features prominently, and nowhere more notably than in the sprawling, thirty-seven-year Poldark saga, in which the author repeatedly uses the occasion to present significant developments of and conclude successive instalments of his turbulent serial story. But before unpacking that, here from Book One, Chapter Seven of 1963's *The Grove of Eagles* is another memorable Christmas, spent with the Killigrews of Arwenack in 1592:

*From St Thomas's [i.e. 21 December] until Christmas Eve the children and a half-dozen servants had been decorating the great hall and the principal chambers. Holly and ivy had been brought in from the woods near the river and the apple trees stripped of their mistletoe. The window sills were bowered with bay leaves, and rosettes made of dyed rags were strung across the hall. Belemus ... painted some of the window panes crimson and ochre and vivid green, so that in the day coloured light fell in, and in the night coloured light shone out. Oranges and lemons were tied together in bunches and some crimson cloth found to hang upon the walls hiding the duller arras.*

On Christmas Eve, a Yule log was laid across the hearth, where it was expected to burn for four days. After supper, madrigals and carols were sung, until, at midnight

*the Lord of Misrule came in in a gaudy yellow robe followed by twelve attendants in all the colours they could find ... He was crowned ... amid much cheering and laughter. Henceforward he was to command the merry-making and to keep his throne for twelve days.*

On Christmas morning, after a procession across the fields to communicate, a boar's head, pigeon pie, mincemeat, plum-porridge and saddles of mutton were served for dinner. In the evening, gifts were exchanged, followed by dancing until ten o'clock. On St Stephen's Day, the 26<sup>th</sup>, most of the men went hawking whilst others, after prayers and a quick breakfast of brawn and mustard and malmsey, set about preparing the hall for the evening's mummers' play.

*The nature of the play was such that, although we all knew who was taking part in it, each player should be so disguised that the watchers could not easily name him, and work had been in hand for two weeks making new and remaking old masks. Some looked like unicorns, some like bears; others wore deer's hides and antlers, and a few with no other disguise [blacked] their faces.*

The play – based on the legend of St George – was followed by dancing in which mummers and audience mixed. After a pavane and a coranto, "courtly airs" were set aside in favour of "a country dance", after which Mr Killigrew insisted that everyone should try a new leaping dance, the lavolta. He would later dice through the night with a succession of guests, both male and female.

The next evening there was another procession headed by the Lord of Misrule, after which practical jokes abounded: the back legs were sawn off a stool, pitching its occupant into the fireplace; a young girl terrified of spiders had three hairy ones dropped on her plate just as she was about to eat; six servants were served with cow's urine, thinking it small beer; a guest was given a meat pie containing a live mouse; another's chair was smeared with wet paint; another set off a firework under the table between himself and Lady Jael ...

28 December – Holy Innocent's Night – brought more dancing, this time mostly kissing dances (four are named: Kiss in the Ring, The Spanish Lady, Lumps of Pudding and Up Tails All). On into the New Year, festivities proceed until

*as Twelfth Night drew near, preparations were set afoot for a special evening to bring ... Christmas to a close. If the weather favoured there was to be a bonfire out of doors with ... fireworks ... The Lord of Misrule was to be dethroned, with lots of horse-play, and an effigy of him ... burned on the bonfire.*

This earliest of WG's fictional Christmases is unlike any other. But let us jump forward now some 200 years to those in the Poldark novels.

## 1787 (in *Ross Poldark*, WL 1945, Book Three, Chapters 7-11)

BACKDROP: at a time when all strata of society tacitly understood and accepted that any gentlemen might tumble any servant who caught his eye without consequence to himself, Ross has scandalised the district not by bedding his young kitchen wench, but by marrying her. She – Demelza – is unlettered but learning fast, having quickly established a firm friendship with Ross's cousin Verity, their Trenwith neighbour. But after only six months of marriage, and already three months forward with their first child, this first introduction into the Poldarks' ancestral home and its stuffy ways will test her as nothing before.

WG regarded Poldarks I-IV not as four standalone novels or as one novel and three sequels but as "one very long novel which broke off at convenient points" with book IV, *Warleggan*, "the end of the tale".<sup>3</sup> He uses his first chosen break-point, Christmas 1787, to introduce Demelza as the elemental Force of Nature she will triumphantly become not only to the reader but to Francis, Elizabeth and Agatha, to John and Ruth Treneglos and to George Warleggan. Demelza is aware at this point that Elizabeth was Ross's first love though probably not that Ruth Treneglos (formerly Teague) also once hoped, however vainly, to snare him.

Having won the aged Agatha's approval and emboldened by five glasses of port, the new-found taste for which she will never lose, Demelza meets each of the evening's challenges head-on, and prevails. After Elizabeth – patrician, sophisticated, elegant, porcelain to her earthenware – plays Handel, Krumpholz, Mozart and Haydn on the harp, Demelza responds with two unaccompanied songs, the first sentimental, the second saucy, both perfectly pitched to the spirit of the room. She joshes amiably with John Treneglos and returns his sour wife's catty remarks with interest. On retiring for the night with Ross, even the forty-six ancestors lining the stairs, formerly darkly forbidding, have lost their power to oppress. And not only the relatives' and neighbours' eyes were opened this Christmas Eve; her husband too

*tonight ... had seen her with a new eye ... He felt pleased and stimulated and proud of the developing character of his young wife ... Their relationship at that moment had no flaw.*



The bill of fare is again reported in detail:

*Dinner ... was a meal worthy of the age, the house and the season. Pea soup to begin, followed by a roasted swan with sweet sauce; giblets, mutton steaks, a partridge pie and four snipe. The second course was a plum-pudding with brandy sauce, tarts, mince-pies, apple-pies, custards and cakes; all washed down with port wine and claret and madeira and home-brewed ale.*



Neither of the principal screen Demelzas – Angharad Rees (1975-1977, above) and Eleanor Tomlinson (2015-2019, below) – bear a

close physical resemblance to WG's long-legged, tousle-headed, dark-haired heroine, although Rees comes closer to catching her clean, earthy charm and indomitable optimism.



**1789 (*Demelza*, WL 1946, Book Four)**

BACKDROP: after Demelza has secretly and single-handedly orchestrated Verity's elopement, Francis, believing Ross to blame, betrays the Carnmore Copper Company investors to George. When Ross (not yet aware of this) and Francis next meet, "a fantastic quarrel ... in good measure" causes a rift. When Demelza walks over to Trenwith to try and set matters right, Francis turns on her with equal ferocity; neither she nor Ross, he declares, must enter the house ever again. No sooner has Ross worked out that it must have been Francis who betrayed both him and Carnmore than Demelza's admission of her "disloyal" scheming, which she feels obliged to

disclose, shifts the blame for *everything* onto her. Five uneasy months later, on Christmas Eve, and with Carnmore now about to founder, a long, newsy letter from Falmouth arrives.

Verity is happy – *so your experiment prospers more than mine*, observes Ross – but the Nampara Poldarks are not, for "the first real shadow on their relationship" still hangs over both, although Demelza, disliking anything not clear and downright, suffers more, and more than Ross knows. At nine o'clock Sawle Church choir arrives. Ill-clad, undernourished and reduced by sickness to little more than half-strength, its eight voices struggle through "Remember, O thou Man" and another unnamed carol before all step in, blinking and uncertain, for cakes, canary and a little silver. Christmas then passes quietly, with only a Boxing Day visit to Werry House (plus guided tour of its menagerie) by way of entertainment – but this merely "the calm before the storm".

And high as the last (1787) Christmas soared, this one plunges low. On 28 December, on his way to Truro, Ross learns of the putrid sore throat (i.e. diphtheria) at Trenwith; at the ticketing Zacky (representing Carnmore) is comprehensively outbid once more, after which Ross and George, meeting in the street, can't suppress their mutual antipathy. When Demelza, at home, hears of Trenwith's troubles, with only Agatha well and Geoffrey Charles reported close to death, her sense of obligation sends her hurrying to help.

Late on 29 December Ross and Demelza meet in a combe as each returns to Nampara. He has wound up Carnmore and, in order not to have to sell his Wheal Leisure shares, arranged a short-term £1000 loan through Notary Pierce at exorbitant interest. She, meanwhile, has spent most of the last twenty-four hours at Trenwith, where, thanks mainly to her selfless devotion, the outlook is decidedly less bleak.

On New Year's morning, as storm rages outside, Demelza finds that both she and baby Julia are ill. Dwight is sent for and diagnoses the malignant sore throat, with the mother's case more advanced. After four days of delirium she recovers, but the child does not. More than three hundred and fifty come from field, farm and mine to attend Julia's funeral, which unmans the exhausted Ross as nothing else could. It is in this disturbed



state of mind that he tells a remorseful Dwight: "Demelza saved Geoffrey Charles and gave Julia in his place."

In subsequent days, two ships – the first the Warleggans' *Queen Charlotte* with card-cheat Matthew Sanson on board – are driven onto Hendrawna Beach. Both wrecks are picked clean by a ravening, thousand-strong maelstrom of hungry miners, some roused initially by Ross. Blood is split and some lives lost, though others are saved. Ross provides sanctuary for a disconsolate band of *Pride of Madras* passengers and crew and warns latecoming troopers, for their own safety, not to attempt engaging with the drunken mob before daybreak. Later he will face trial, accused of riot, wrecking and assault upon an officer of the Crown.

Life for these Poldarks will not be the same again. WG puts them – and us – through the mill in order to grind out more substrate for his story. But with suffering comes not only pain but also perspective:

*"When something happens," she said, "like what has just happened to us, it makes all our quarrels seem small and mean as if we were quarreling when we hadn't the right. Didn't we ought to find all the friendship we can?"*

*"If friendship is to be found."*

*"Yes. But didn't we ought to seek it? Can't all our quarrels be buried and forgot, so that Verity can come and visit us and we go to Trenwith and we can ... live in friendship and not hatred while there's time?"*

*Ross was silent. "I believe yours is the only wisdom, Demelza," he said at length.*

### **1790 (Jeremy Poldark, WL 1950, Book Two, Chapters 2-4)**

BACKDROP: whilst at Bodmin to bear witness at Ross's trial, Dwight is summoned to a young lady's room to attend her dog. Tall, slender, strikingly handsome, just eighteen, Caroline Penvenen is higher born than he and apparently promised to Unwin Trevaunance – furthermore, the doctor's last romantic interlude (with Keren Daniel) ended disastrously for her and discredibly for him. But, reason as one might, hearts will have their way. The cash-strapped households of Trenwith and Nampara remain

estranged, with Ross still suspecting Francis of having helped George engineer his downfall.

WG uses his first significant mid-book Yuletide to mend fences and advance Dwight's suit, but not without inserting a little more grit in the oyster too. When Elizabeth invites the Nampara Poldarks and Enys to spend Christmas at Trenwith, Ross is inclined to refuse. "Tell them that we will come when Verity and Blamey are invited and not before," he snaps. But Verity, Demelza and Elizabeth all want reconciliation; Ross, too, is forced to acknowledge his own repressed desire – almost need – to see Elizabeth again; that his attachment to her is "something fundamental". So they go. Once more, unbeknown to Ross, Demelza carries (this time four months forward) their unborn child.

This year's bill of fare – ham and fowls and a leg of mutton, boiled, with caper sauce, and ... batter pudding and currant jelly and damson tarts, and black caps in custard, and blancmange – indicates a household determined to live well despite more straitened circumstances. Elizabeth seems to set her cap at Ross – already, in sending her invitation via Enys, she asked him bluntly whether he thought the Poldarks were happy together – and Ross appears to respond. She greets her guests in a frock of startling crimson velvet with cascades of fine lace such that "rich crimson flared about the unsubdued whiteness of her arms and throat (and) her eyes had new lights in them". Clearing up after the meal, and finding herself alone with Ross, she draws compliments from him, initiates brief physical contact, then, when their joint task is done, tells him with a catch in her voice that she no longer needs him "that way". The conclusion we are invited to draw is that Ross's "something fundamental" is felt by two, not one, and recognised by three, for Demelza sees or senses all.

Meanwhile, late on Christmas Eve, Myners arrives from Killewarren to summon Enys to a patient. Francis is dismissive – *tell 'em to be ill on a more convenient night* – but Dwight learns first that the patient is Caroline Penvenen and second that she is "mortal sick" with throat trouble of three days duration, which quietens all. He attends and removes a fish-bone (the bumbling Choake having diagnosed a "quinzy"). Before Twelfth Night, this couple will have drawn much closer together, tentatively setting out on the path which will lead ultimately to their marriage.

### **1792 (*Warleggan*, WL 1953, Book Two, Chapter 6)**

BACKDROP: Francis is dead, leaving Elizabeth widowed. Ray Penvenen has barred the landless, penniless Dwight from Killewarren and forbidden any further contact with his niece. She has anonymously taken over Ross's debt to the Warleggans, so saving him from debtor's prison.

In this first of two *Warleggan* Christmases, readers drop in on four homes in succession as WG manoeuvres his characters through a gavotte of association and separation, of pleasure and pain, in anticipation of a momentous year to come. At Falmouth, the Blameys entertain Ross and Demelza; at Killewarren, Ray and Caroline dine quietly on roast beef and plum pudding, he believing he has stamped on her unfortunate attachment to Enys in the nick of time while she demurely keeps her own counsel; at the Gatehouse, surrounded by gifts from grateful patients – a finely woven scarf, eggs, bacon, two loaves, a cake, six tallow candles, a mat – whilst fretting over the re-emergence in the district of smallpox, Dwight dines alone; and at Cardew, porticoed, lavish, making Trenwith look like a country cottage, George has insisted Elizabeth join him, eventually overcoming her reluctance by fetching her himself, with poor Geoffrey Charles left in the care of her aged parents. He then devotes the whole of his attention to her, ignoring the two dozen other guests invited by Nicholas, who silently wishes it was she who had fallen down a mine and not her husband. Thus do allegiances shift and stormclouds gather.

### **1793 (*Warleggan*, WL 1953, Book Four, Chapters 6 and 7)**

BACKDROP: George's pursuit of Elizabeth prospers so well that by May she has agreed to be his wife. On hearing this, Ross breaks into Trenwith and confronts her – their ensuing liaison results in the conception of Valentine, who will be born the following February, and also, unsurprisingly, in the withering of Demelza's love for her husband. After Dwight's plans to elope with Caroline go awry, she withdraws, chastened, to London then refuses, when he follows, to see him. He later hears she is engaged to Lord Coniston and opts, disenchanted, to quit Cornwall to become a naval surgeon. After his marriage, George moves with Elizabeth into Trenwith, so becoming Ross's neighbour. Footpaths are closed; Garrick is shot and wounded by a gamekeeper. Ross decides that a clear-the-air visit is required.

After a celebratory first Christmas, a tragic second and two less dramatic others, WG closes his four-volume opus with a future-defining fifth in which little attention is paid to the table. (When Ross tells Demelza that three extra guests are invited and she frets about how to feed them, he responds: "Don't worry, I bought a goose in Truro and some ribs of beef and a fillet of veal.") Likewise, though the carol singers call again – this time at full strength and in good form – little is made of their visit. The author's focus, rather, is on *sundered hearts*. Though Ross's attempt to make peace with cranky George is rebuffed, perhaps even there a seed of hope is planted. But, thanks to his intervention, Caroline and Dwight are reconciled – and what of he and Demelza? For the past seven months they have slept in separate rooms and he is determined that things must change. She wants only to forget the past, but certain unresolved issues, he knows, must be addressed before they can hope to move on. He tells her that something good came out of his union with Elizabeth – the death of his idealised love of her, which, though of long standing, was killed at a stroke because, no sooner was the relationship made "ordinary" than

*the one sure feeling that stood out was that my true and real love was not for her but for you ... I was seeking the equal of what I'd found in you, and it was not there.*

When Demelza feels obliged to admit her retaliatory dalliance with McNeil, Ross predictably flares up and harsh words are spoken. Seeing no future for them together, Demelza tearfully runs upstairs to pack a valise then, hat pinned on, goes back down to saddle Darkie and away. But noting she is too distraught to manage the girth, Ross steps in to help. Cooler now, he encourages her to acknowledge that what upsets her most is her feeling of shame at the cheapness of her behaviour at Werry House. It is not him she cannot forgive, but herself. He persuades her back into the kitchen, where there is spilt beer to be mopped up. This, companionably, they do. In his pocket are two presents, a gold filigree brooch and a necklace of garnets he bought for her in London. With warm words, these are given and accepted. This Nampara Christmas – and the tale – we surmise, will end happily after all.

After the publication of *Warleggan* in November 1953, WG stepped away from Poldark for eighteen years. But in 1971, having roughed out another



six years of his story, he set to work on the first of three more instalments to carry it seamlessly on to the end of the century.

### **1794 (*The Black Moon*, Book Two, Chapters 2 and 3)**

BACKDROP: the revitalising of the Poldarks' love for one another "brought them closer in some ways than they had ever been before"; indeed, when Ross expresses doubt that his wife might be pregnant once more, she remarks: "Well, it would be a small matter surprising if I [wasn't]. Since Christmas it's been nothing else, has it?" Clowance, their third child, is born on 20 November. Wheal Grace now yields so well that all Ross's debts are redeemed. Demelza's brothers Sam and Drake both work there. Drake is much taken with Morwenna Chynoweth. Less happily, Dwight languishes in a French prison and Ray Penvenen has died. George is planning a New Year's Eve reception and ball to be held at Cardew.

Christmas at Nampara 1794 will be quiet, with only Caroline invited to stay. But it will be notable, too, for the christening of baby Clowance on Christmas Day – Caroline, the absent Verity and Sam her godparents – and also for the weather: "a great frost" on Christmas Eve, followed over the next two days by six inches of snow, which prevents the choir from paying its annual visit. Writing about the natural world always brings out the best in WG, and so here:

*It was a curious sunshine, with something aged and sinister about it, as if it belonged to a world which was slipping away ... As the day waned the light lost its last warmth and the sun became a disc of brass, contaminating the sea with its base metal light and flinging shadows of cobalt grey among the cliffs and sandhills. The ceaseless wind had dropped: bough and twig and every blade of grass were still.*

Once more Ross is drawn inexorably to Trenwith, this time, with George away, and accompanied by Caroline, to see how Agatha is. He finds her in the less than diligent "care" of diminutive drudge Lucy Pipe. Ross warns her and five other servants that, unless they attend more conscientiously to their duties, he'll see them turned out and possibly horse-whipped too. His quite genuine ferocity wins Caroline's admiration.

Later, by the fire, the ever-intuitive Demelza suggests to Ross that Caroline is more than half in love with him, which leads to another heart-to-heart. Demelza is unsure of herself, not through any personal failing but because she sees the role of a wife as too demanding:

*...In every good marriage a woman has to be three things, don't she? She's got to be a wife and look after a man's comforts ... Then she's got to bear his children and get all swelled up like a summer pumpkin and then oftentimes feed them after and smell of babies ... But then, third, she has also to try and be his mistress; someone he is still "interested" in; someone he wants ... It's impossible.*

Over at Cardew, George's ball proves "disastrous", with only thirty-two of one hundred and twenty guests braving the weather to attend, and those, vexingly, the youngest, palest, noisiest and least influential. But the newly bereaved Rev. Ossie Whitworth is there; so too slim, shy, short-sighted Morwenna Chynoweth, then wholly unaware that within months she will be sold by George into marriage with the odious cleric for £3000.

#### **1796 (*The Four Swans*, Book Two, Chapter 4)**

BACKDROP: Another worm in the Poldark bud: Demelza has learned from Jud that Ross met with Elizabeth in Sawle churchyard – an encounter which, though innocent, he chose not to mention. Fearing if not quite suspecting the worst, she in turn elects not to reject outright the amatory advances of sailor / poet Hugh Armitage, who reads in her reticence tacit approval. Since September, Ross has noted a slight withdrawing of his wife's frank companionship without being sure of the cause.

Perhaps that is why this Christmas is just fleetingly reported. Falling in a "beautiful" winter during which the primroses never cease to bloom, on 21 December the Poldark parents and children bathe in the sea:

*The water was icy to get in but the air delicious to come out into, and while they rubbed themselves with towels the low sun peered over the sea, casting long cadaverous shadows of themselves across the silent beach. Then indoors, giggling*

*and still damp, to stand before the fire and sup bowls of steaming soup and sip toddy. It was Jeremy's first taste of spirituous liquor and it went to his head and he lay on the settle shrieking with laughter while Clowance gazed gravely at her brother thinking he had gone off his head.*

On Christmas Day snowflakes and a howling easterly gale come to naught; the days, weeks and months roll on towards the rocks ahead.

### **1798 (*The Angry Tide*, Book Two, Chapter 2)**

BACKDROP: two years further on. With Caroline having left Cornwall after the death of her baby daughter, Dwight is at Nampara alone. The Blameys arrive from Flushing with five-year-old Andrew and Verity's ebullient stepson James. Though Hugh Armitage is dead, Ross's awareness of having been cuckolded has filled him with a rage he struggles to suppress.

A busy Christmas over which Demelza presides while, beneath the surface, powerful currents swirl. Commanded by their sister to attend Christmas dinner, Sam and Drake obey, their presence helping to make the occasion a cordial success. Next day, Jeremy, now seven, and twenty-odd friends – three Trenegloses plus local miners' and farmers' children – enjoy a party in the old parlour at which James is "worth his weight in gold". Out with Blamey, Ross pulls down a Warleggan boundary fence and throws the debris into the sea.

*Blamey looked at him and perceived where ... precisely the good will began and ended. Sometimes {Ross} was not a comfortable man to be with; and just now the pent-up rebelliousness in him was very near the surface. It came near but never quite went over the edge of unreason.*

On returning home, Ross regrets not having been there to help entertain the children. He promises Clowance he will take her and Jeremy out "somewhere" tomorrow:

*"Even if it rains?"*

*"It won't rain if I tell it not to."*

*"Ooh, that's a fib." ...*

*"True enough. You're just like your mother; you see right through me."*

*"Ross, that's not true either," said Demelza.*

*"Well, half way."*

*Verity said: "I agree: she sees through the dark part to the nice part."*

Verity knows her cousin well. Before leaving, she presses him to confess that "thoughts and feelings surge up ... like an angry tide ... it is hard, sometimes ... to control." At its flood, before the next year is out, it will cost one man his life and it will take another's death to provide the healing balm as Ross is driven finally to recognise just what he has in his wife and what her loss would mean to him – the thought "intolerable, unthinkable, beyond bearing". Neither without flaw, the couple must learn to live together with compromise and acceptance, and do. Thus, happily, finally, the pendulum swings again.

And so for a second time WG thought he was done with Poldark,<sup>4</sup> and for a second time he was wrong. The story had become for him, as he would later acknowledge, "an addiction".<sup>5</sup> After a sabbatical this time of just four years he returned to his Cornish idyll with three more carefully-plotted volumes planned – this transition, however, *not* seamless, for after ending *The Angry Tide* in mid-December 1799, the narrative resumes in June 1810. What's more, Ross and Demelza no longer occupy centre stage – rather, it is the younger generation who now step to the fore.

### **1810 (*The Stranger from the Sea*, Book One, Chapter 6)**

BACKDROP: with Ross still off in Portugal on government business, Stephen Carrington, the eponymous stranger, spends Christmas quietly at Nampara "to rest and refit" – though neither broken ribs nor a shaken mind keep him from parties thrown by the Trenegloses, Popes and Kellows. To a fourth, on New Year's Eve, hosted by Caroline (now a mother of two), Demelza is persuaded too, to

*"...celebrate Saturnalia. Or eat oaten cake, if you prefer it."*

*In fact they did a little of both. Although Killewarren had*



*no very large room, the company dispersed itself about four or five. In one they played dice, in another they jiggled to Myners' violin, in a third they helped themselves to goose and capon and pheasant, or syllabubs and chocolate cake, in a fourth they sprawled around a big fire and told stories. When midnight came a groom tolled the stable bell and the candles were blown out and everyone foregathered and ... dug for raisins in the great flat bowl of lighted brandy.*

*When the fun was over and she had kissed Dwight and Demelza, Caroline said: "Why does (Ross) still go a-hunting? I love him dearly but he does try us hard."*

Elsewhere, with the New Year just minutes old, Stephen and Clowance link little fingers (for which, read *destinies*).

### **1812 (*The Miller's Dance*, Book Three, Chapter 5)**

BACKDROP: the love lives of the Poldark children run ill: after Clowance's engagement to Stephen is broken off, she meets and is courted by Tom Guildford, a nephew of Lord Devoran. Meanwhile, Jeremy, smitten with Cuby, learns from Conan that she is to marry Valentine Warleggan. Nonetheless, the birth in mid-December of Ross and Demelza's fifth child and second son presages another celebratory Christmas, albeit cursorily reported.

When Henry Vennor Poldark was christened on Christmas Eve

*... the church and churchyard were crowded. Everyone, it seemed, in the district of Sawle and Grambler and Mellin and Marasanvose had heard of the birth of a second son to the Poldarks and everyone wished to be there for the christening. There was simply no room for all who wanted to get into the church...*

Fortuitously, during the ceremony, a grand piano ordered by Ross earlier in the month arrives at Nampara; on it that evening, Demelza plays a dozen pieces while most of her family try to put her off by singing out of tune. On Christmas Day the Enyses come to dinner with their two little girls; Sam

and Rosina are there too. On St Stephen's Day it is the turn of the Trene-gloses and Paul and Daisy Kellow:

*It was a time for dancing again on tables ... The piano, like a new and handsome toy, came in for much use, with ever more singing. Demelza played any number of old Cornish songs as well as all the favourite carols ... ..*

*On the 27<sup>th</sup> ... Tom Guildford appeared ... and gratefully accepted an invitation to stay. It seemed that he had much of a taking for their elder daughter, and made no secret of the fact.*

*"That's better," said Ross in an aside to Demelza ...*

Jeremy's "explosive" high spirits – sometimes ... more like rage than laughter – were rightly seen by his sister as an attempt to mask his hurt, although even she was unaware of its excoriating depth. After disappearing on the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup> only to return very late smelling of cheap scent, she "was certain he had had a woman".

Meanwhile, of Stephen, nothing is seen.

### **1814 (*The Loving Cup*, Book Three, Chapters 6 and 7)**

BACKDROP: in London, the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, offers Ross both a baronetcy and a temporary posting to the British Embassy in Paris to serve as his special envoy. Ross declines the first but agrees to consider the second. Jeremy has been in the army for more than a year. Clowance and Stephen are married; so too, in defiance of his father's wishes, Valentine and Selina (formerly Pope).

Another Christmas but sketchily reported, most notable this year for *home-comings* – first Ross's, by sea to Par then on by post horse, to be welcomed not by Jeremy, Clowance and Garrick as of old, but by Isabella-Rose, Henry and Farquhar; but also Demelza, the one constant, apparently unchanging. Soon after, the county – indeed, the country – was beset by a terrible nine-day storm, leading to a rash of small wrecks around the coast and disrupted travel plans. But the Blameys and Clowance make it safely through to Nampara (with Stephen detained by work) and Valentine and Selina pay

neighbourly visits to the Poldarks and Enyses. Demelza greets Ross's news with interest regarding Paris and mixed feelings regarding the baronetcy – breaking out in a sweat at the thought of becoming a Lady, but regretful that Jeremy and those after him will miss out on an inherited title which, if nothing else, would have been an ongoing tribute to the man on whom it was first bestowed.

The second homecoming, on New Year's Eve, was Jeremy's – and "with the best possible news" – leading to warm reunions with his father (clasping cheek to cheek) then Demelza and Caroline (hugs; squeaks of delight). The news – peace with America – was sufficient excuse for a party "to celebrate the peace and to let in the New Year" – and so, that evening in Nampara's library, it came to be:

*with Bella singing her songs and Demelza playing her piano, leading them all in communal singing. All the indoor staff were invited to join in ... The evening did not break up until 3 a.m. when Dwight ... pleading an early rise, dragged Caroline and his sleepy daughters away. Even then, talk and jollity went on in the family until the crisp, half frosty dawn of January the first, 1815 was not far away.*

Though he had no inkling of it at the time, within seventeen days Jeremy would be married and, five months later, dead.

#### **1815 (*The Twisted Sword*, Book Four, Chapter 4)**

BACKDROP: though Jeremy's death at Waterloo casts a heavy shadow, lives go on – his parents' and siblings', of course, but also that of Cuby, his widow, who, expecting their child, has come to Nampara for the lying-in. Clowance, also newly bereaved (though having learned before Stephen's death that her marriage to him was bigamous), elects to spend Christmas in Flushing with the Blameys.

*It was Christmas Eve; outside a mild grey day, inside more fires than were strictly necessary, to enliven the house ... The library was decorated with holly and ivy and ferns and a few early primroses, as was the parlour.*

In *The Twisted Sword*, WG delivers another emotion-charged, book-closing Christmas, the first since 1793's in *Warleggan*. Readers are also treated to the first mention since then of the choir, this year fourteen-strong, who perform The Dilly Song, Noël and Joseph was an Old Man before trooping into the parlour for mince tarts and ginger wine.

On Christmas morning all go to church where the Reverend Odgers, in his best plum purple cassock, reads from Psalm 22:

*Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help ... Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog.* [The latter, verse 20, being the novel's epigraph.]

On, then, to Killewarren where, after exchanging gifts, the company dine early (on a boar's head), drink good wine and make merry, "though there was ice underneath, ice that clung round the heart ... This was an evil year ... [but] life was to be lived – it had to go on." Just as the party return to Nampara, Cuby's pains begin and at five a.m. on St Stephen's Day her daughter Noelle is born – a Christmas baby, a Christ child, the Poldarks' first grandchild. All that was left of their soldier son.

### **1820 (CHRISTMAS AT NAMPARA, 1820, unpublished)<sup>6</sup>**

BACKDROP: in *Bella Poldark*, the final novel of the saga, the Christmases of 1818 and 1819 are lightly touched on; regarding the first, brief reference is made to a Cardew house party arranged by Harriet; four days before the second, Major Geoffrey Charles Poldark and his Papist wife Amadora host a pre-Christmas gathering at Trenwith, at which Ross flirts outrageously with Harriet to the vexation of both their spouses, and, on the day after, Demelza and Clowance drop off presents for Jud and Prudie. In respect of 1820, the closing pages of the novel lay the groundwork for a grand Nampara family celebration, with Demelza telling Mrs Pelham:

*I am planning this Christmas party ... Ross and I and Bella are leaving for home next Thursday. Christopher will come down with Edward and Clowance on Saturday. Dwight and Caroline will certainly join in with their children. Then my*



*daughter-in-law Cuby – who I think you have never met – with my granddaughter, will certainly be there ... For me this will be a very important party. It will be quite small, but I did want all my friends, and you, dear Mrs Pelham, I count as one of the dearest.*

The book ends before the party takes place – WG elects, rather, to close his narrative when the Poldarks, returning from London, cross the Tamar back into Cornwall – but it takes place nonetheless, described in a 24-page unpublished coda which reads like an alternative, ultimately rejected ending for *Bella* but which might equally be nothing more than a poignant, personal adieu from one who, first and last, loved writing about the Poldarks. In any event, the reader is treated to one final Cornish idyll, a 6250-word reverie in which Nampara exhibits Tardis-like properties, with fifteen forgathered to celebrate Christmas together, of whom eleven (plus domestics) spend the night. When the visiting church choir – with its bass viols, cornets, portable organ and Pally Rogers in a wheelchair – is ushered into the library, the head-count rises to thirty-one! Later, two bereft souls grope tentatively towards redemption:

*"... Are you a patient man?"*

*"It depends. With the right incentive, yes."*

*Her eyes smiled, though her face remained sombre.*

*"It might be long," she said. "A year. Or it might be longer."*

*"If you are offering me what I think you are offering me, I will wait all my life."*

*She touched his hand with two fingers.*

*"So be it."*

Out on the beach, a communal dip in the winter sea is enjoyed by twelve but spurned by one, which leads Demelza to divine that she and Ross will soon become grandparents for a second time. We leave the couple in bed together on St Stephen's Day morning. The final words are hers:

*"But most of all, Ross, I was thinking of you and me – through all our ups and downs – you and me, how we have stuck together through all those years."*

*"Like clams."*

*"But not as sticky. Most of all, maybe, I was thinking that we had two more days of Christmas left – this Christmas, and the sun was going to shine today."*

*"Two more days," said Ross.*

*She curled up against him.*

*"Two more days," she said.*

\* \* \* \* \*

So, what conclusions may be drawn from these fourteen descriptions? To what verities does the author allude? By repeatedly carefully recording its passage, he recognises the festival's enduring importance, not merely from a religious or spiritual standpoint (which he does not stress) but popularly, secularly, simply because venerated by tradition. Not merely for the Christian but for all, it is a time of renewal (the *Grove of Eagles* chapter is particularly illuminating in this regard). Most pointedly, perhaps, he shows the centrality to human happiness of children – one baby dies but a second is born, two more are christened and a pregnancy is announced during these celebrations of the birth of Christ. Allied to that, the importance of reaffirmation of ties of family and friendship; particularly of love, without which life has no meaning. And though this lesson might need to be learned and relearned over again, so be it – it is the payment one makes, the risk one takes to cling to existence worth a damn. As Demelza tells Ross: "You don't live to be *safe* ... You live to be alive, to take a deep breath of the air and to know your heart is beating!"<sup>7</sup>

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## NOTES AND SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of a Private Man*, (Macmillan, 2003) Book One, Chapter Eight

<sup>2</sup> Letters from WG to FS dated 18 December 1960 and 16 December 1963 both confirm this. The originals are held by the Special Collections Library of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, AR, USA.

<sup>3</sup> *Woman*, 10 December 1977

<sup>4</sup> Ted Harrison interview, 22 December 1977

<sup>5</sup> John Dunn interview, *The John Dunn Show*, BBC Radio 2, 27 June 1991

<sup>6</sup> The manuscript is preserved in the Graham Archive of the Royal Cornwall Museum's Courtney Library, 25 River Street, Truro, TR1 2SJ and may be read on-site, subject to prior notice being given of any intended visit (to allow retrieval from storage).

<sup>7</sup> *The Millers Dance*, Book Three, Chapter 5

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