

Cornish Life, January 1985 : The David Clarke Column

BETWEEN THE LINES

Winston Graham explains some of the working methods that lie behind the pages of his Poldark books.

The publication of a new Poldark book is always something of a media event in Cornwall with interviews on radio and television and reviews in the weekly papers. And then there are all those author's signing sessions in local bookshops. It was following one such hectic event that Winston Graham and his wife Jean called in at the *Cornish Life* office in Redruth for a welcome cup of Ty-Phoo¹.

Mr. Graham enjoys meeting his readers, but is not so taken with the actual process of scribbling his name over and over again. "There are pains and perils in authorship," he confided, "but meeting the public is one of the rewards."

No doubt *The Loving Cup*, the tenth Poldark book, was at the top of many lists of presents this Christmas, and after a two-year break since the publication of *The Miller's Dance*, it was a pleasure to meet the many members of the Poldark family again – rather like encountering old friends after spending two years away from home. After so many years they seem to have a real life of their own and I wasn't surprised when the author said he sometimes felt he was living their lives more fully than he was living his own.

It is 40 years since the opening words of *Ross Poldark* were penned. Born in Manchester, Winston Graham moved to Cornwall with his mother shortly after he left school. Following the death of his father, Winston's mother offered to stake her son as a writer for a while and he set to work at his home near Perranporth. He quickly began to feel a great empathy for the Cornish people and their history, particularly the 18th century, a period when Cornwall was so industrially important that it returned 44 Members of Parliament. It is probably this central core of

dynamic local history interwoven with the fortunes of his fictitious family that have made the books so popular – not just the broad history, but the realistic pictures of the lives of ordinary people, their houses, dress and way of life.

Although Winston Graham's knowledge of Cornwall is by now encyclopaedic, he still spends much of the two years taken to write a Poldark book in research.

"Newspapers are a useful source of information, but when I was writing the early books the only contemporary newspaper was the *Sherborne Mercury*. It was printed in Dorset and the man who delivered it to Cornwall was known as a 'Sherborner'. He used to bring the post as well. But now that the story has reached 1810 I've caught up with the *West Briton* and the *Royal Cornwall Gazette*.

"I spend a lot of time at the Royal Institution of Cornwall in Truro and in the London Library. I also have a very good research girl in London. Researchers never do the job quite as well as you would do it yourself, but they can point you in the right direction."

Of particular interest in the latest book is a remarkably compelling portrait of Goldsworthy Gurney, the Cornish inventor of the steam car. The fictitious Jeremy Poldark is preoccupied with steam power and, being a contemporary of Gurney, Winston Graham cleverly brings the two together, much as he let the Poldarks' eldest son meet Henry Harvey and Richard Trevithick in the previous book.

"Gurney had a strange, eccentric, brilliant mind which could never stop exploring ideas. In reading about him I discovered some amazing things that I had never considered before. For instance, he noticed that if you remove sand from a beach, it is immediately replaced, but if you don't take it away, it remains at the same level.

"Gurney was also a chemist and a good musician: he had wonderful plans to build an organ. I based much of my portrait on a small biography of him, but there are references to Gurney all over the place. I found one in a parliamentary commission which was instituted in 1830 in which he applied for permission to use the roads for his steam car."

One way in which the great Gurney appears to have been backward was his conviction that a car would require some form of stilts to gain a grip on the road and set it moving.

"As Jeremy Poldark had seen Trevithick's machines, I allowed him to realise this wasn't necessary. But in reality, Gurney got the stilt idea into his head and continued with it for years."



Recalling how many of Winston Graham's fictitious characters were composites of real people, I wondered if he ever felt limited by their true lives.

"Not really. For example, George Warleggan is a composite picture, partly based on the powerful Lemon family, but I haven't had to cut my coat according to any particular cloth so far as his life or marriage are concerned. But I would shy away from making him do something that the real people on whom he is based wouldn't do."

Where historical fact was concerned, however, Winston Graham admitted to sometimes being bound by real events. "... but I also find myself stimulated by them. Suddenly I discovered that something happened. I didn't know anything about Gurney until Jeremy Poldark became interested in steam power. I was stimulated by Gurney's life, but

I'm also bound by the facts. I would never distort any real people in order to fit them into the book, and I wouldn't distort Jeremy's discoveries to anticipate anything that really happened in Cornwall.

"There is a certain historical blockage I will come up against if I ever write another Poldark book," and he added enigmatically, "there's something I would like to make happen that I can't make happen for historical reasons!"

Just as the characters and events in the Poldark books are a mixture of the real and the fictitious, so the houses, great and small, are sometimes easy to pin down and sometimes impossible. It is no secret that the family house of Trenwith is based on Trerice Manor. I was interested to learn the substance (or lack of it) of Place House, home of the Pope family in the latest book.

"It's very much an imagined house, but I suppose it is in the region of Trevaunance Cove, near St. Agnes. When I first started the series, I tended to allow my imagination to run much more and invent houses and places. For instance, I called the Warleggan home Cardew and people have to guess that it's Carclew. But nowadays I generally try to be much more factual if I can."

Winston Graham writes in longhand for three hours a day in the early evening. He wouldn't be drawn on the subject of his present work, a modern novel, except to say he's on the third draft.

"I find the process of writing the first draft the worst – sheer agony. You are faced with a blank sheet of paper and it's all there to be made or unmade."

The Loving Cup opens shortly after the birth of the Poldarks' fifth child. Named Henry and known as Harry, he successfully pre-empted (at the time the book was written) the new-born child of that other well known family.² With so many Cornish-born children being named after characters in the Poldark books, I asked Winston Graham if any of his own children or grandchildren were similarly named.

"None at all. They're mainly named after some of my own family surnames – Mawdsley and Griffiths. James Mawdsley, my great great

uncle, was a leading trade unionist and a Conservative in politics. He joined a young sprig of the nobility called Winston Churchill to contest the Oldham seat against two Liberals. In the event the Liberals were elected, and as my relative was getting on in years he did not contest another election. But he remained a friend of Churchill until his death and when I was born my mother decided I ought to be called after her hero."

As we sipped our tea, the conversation turned to Dr. William Pryce for we were sitting in the drawing room of the house where he was born in 1735. The son of a doctor, William practised medicine in Belmont House and was one of the prime movers in the scheme to develop the harbour at Portreath. He organised the postal service from Truro to Redruth and in 1778 published *Mineralogia Cornubiensis*.

"It was of immense importance to those involved in the mining industry," Winston Graham explained, "and it is read as much today, mainly for its errors!"

After admiring the moulded ceilings, the graceful staircase and the high curved window overlooking the garden, it was time for Winston and Jean Graham³ to head for Falmouth and the Greenbank Hotel, prior to a further signing session in Penzance the following day.

The question I spared him was the one he must have been asked many times since the publication of *The Loving Cup* – "Is this the end of the Poldark saga?"

Short of all three generations of the family being wiped out in one cataclysmic accident, the Poldark family will no doubt continue to exist – if only in the imagination – for by now they are part of the Cornish consciousness. The only question is whether Winston Graham will continue to chronicle the events. And the only clue to that can be found in the first pages of the book:

"*The Loving Cup* concludes – for a time – the Poldark saga." Read into that what you will.

DAVID CLARKE

NOTES

¹ A brand of tea sold in the UK; usually *Typhoo*.

² Prince Henry, known as Harry, was born to Charles and Diana, Prince and Princess of Wales, on 15 September 1984. *The Loving Cup*, though published six weeks later, was clearly conceived and written well in advance of that happy event.

³ The photograph of Winston and Jean on page three above is one of three in the original article. That this reproduction is both cropped and blurred is regretted.

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