

Life is an illusion : a review of Decoding May 9, 1793

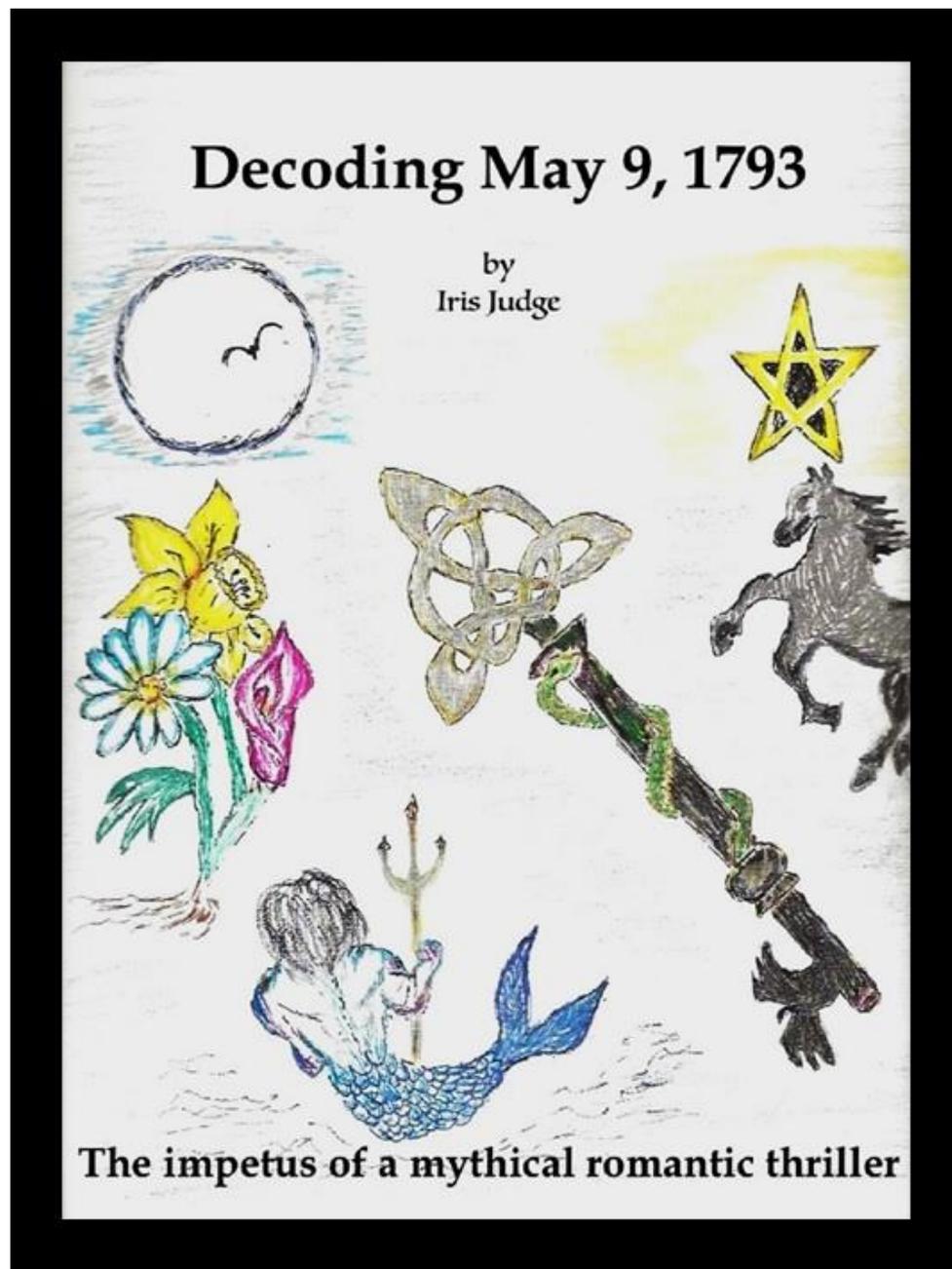
Winston Graham viewed his books as more than mere stories. Speaking in the late 1950s, he told Douglas Muggeridge:

Although ostensibly [Fortune is a Woman, 1952] was a novel about an insurance agent who got involved in a fraud and involved with a woman whom he thought was in the fraud, it was also to me an attempt to contrast two men, one who before the war had been a down-and-out and whom the war had made, given him self-respect, given him a position, given him something to live for, and one who before the war was one of the landed gentry and whom the war had broken physically, financially and, in the end, morally. Mind you, I disguised the thing so well that probably nobody notices what I'm about, but I like to have something to say. To me it makes the novel doubly worth writing.¹

He reveals, in other words, that his novels, by design, are about more than one thing – that there is more to them than meets the undiscerning eye. So far, so good. But to go from that position to one which claims that his twelve Poldark novels are not only "saturated ... with subliminal information" but also peopled by a mix of gods, fairies and mortals and drafted in a sometimes deliberately misleading code is a provocative extrapolation. Nonetheless, in *Decoding May 9, 1793* (independently published, 2020), Iris Judge pitches the Poldark saga as an encyclopaedic amalgam of fairy tale, mythological epic, thrilling conventional love story and romantic mystery in the main plot of which "most, if not all, Cornish tales coexist". This contention she attempts to justify over 400 pages.

The Poldark novels were conceived, written and published over a sixty-year span and certainly *not* planned from the outset as one long, coherent, unified saga, even though, in hindsight, that is what they seem. Graham's initial conception took his story no further than the end of *Warleggan* (book IV, published in 1953) and, once that point was reached, he believed his tale was told² – only eighteen years later, in 1971, did he begin to muse on how it might be taken further.³ Yet, in order to accept Judge's premise, you would need to believe that, during WWII, Graham – who was at that

time still a relatively inexperienced author and not, as Judge claims, "a seasoned thrill-writer"— not only worked out the complex plot of his saga at least through to the end of Book VII (which was not published until 1977) but also went to inordinate lengths to hide from readers its underlying Celtic/mythological/Biblical origins. This sounds, and is, incredible.



After a wearisome preamble of more than ninety pages, Judge finally offers her first example of the symbolism with which Graham's texts are allegedly replete. This concerns two rats in Nampara's parlour, fleetingly mentioned near the start of *Ross Poldark*. Representing the Paynters, we are told, they

are a "literary device conveying the fundamental character [trait] of Prudie and Jud", which is laziness. But the dissolute Paynters have already been introduced two pages earlier and will recur regularly, comprehensively described, in pages to come, so why on earth would Graham feel the need to tell his readers covertly what he tells them plainly and explicitly many times over? Why encode simple, readily accessible information? It's either atypically bizarre behaviour on the part of Graham or Judge disingenuously reaching.

To help you choose between those alternatives, consider this. Shortly after the rats example, the code also informs attentive readers, according to Judge, that the mangy grey feline Tabitha Bethia is actually Joshua's dead wife Grace "come back to life as a cat to protect Ross". Since Tabitha Bethia was already resident at Nampara when Ross left for America, she must have been playing a long game.

Readers will be surprised though possibly not enlightened to learn that Elizabeth can "shapeshift into being an owl"; also that, if only she'd worn Agatha's topaz ring, the ergot she took to induce labour would not have killed her.

Judge claims that Ross's horses are significantly named and cites four examples – but ignores four others (Ramoth, Squire, Sikh, Bayonne) which presumably accord with her hypothesis less readily.

Judge is repeatedly careless. Her book's second sentence contains an error of fact (*Ross Poldark* was not published "during the second world war"). Three times she declares Elizabeth to be a dean's daughter; in fact the Chynoweth dean's daughters are Morwenna and Rowella. Her delineation of the character of Hugh Armitage begins with her recollection that he "accompanied Ross [to France] and helped bring a near-to-death Dwight back home" – which would be fine, except that in *The Black Moon* that is *not* what happens (rather, Armitage was an internee in the prison camp along with Enys). She subjects the surname Adderley to exhaustive analysis without once managing to spell it correctly, Agatha's fondly remembered suitor, George Venables, is misnamed and the literal meaning of "Demelza" misquoted. Even book titles – *The Angry Tides* and *The Strangers from the Sea* – are wrongly rendered.

More disappointing still, Judge gives erroneous information concerning Graham's birth name and is plainly unaware of his mother's maiden name. She states incorrectly that James Mawdsley, Graham's "great uncle", was an MP; (he was actually unrelated to Graham and his one attempt to get into Parliament was unsuccessful). These are lamentable errors of readily ascertainable fact.

As with other characters, Judge makes extravagant assumptions about the hidden significance of Dwight Enys's name – for instance, since *Enys Vanow* is Cornish for *Isle of Man*, and since Ross is Lir, ruler of the Isle of Man, the surname serves to identify Dwight as a loyal subject on whom Ross relies. But nowhere does Judge acknowledge a simpler and arguably more persuasive reason for the choice of name, which is that the very real Enys family played a significant role in Cornwall's then-recent history. Graham incorporated many local names of real people and places – not least *Demelza* and *Warleggan* – into his texts not to further develop any notional code or frustrate, mislead or prank his readers, but merely (and very effectively) to add verisimilitude to his tale. This Judge ignores. She takes eight pages to muse on George's forename and character but pointedly eschews "Warleggan" altogether.

The number three is central to Celtic lore and, according to Judge, the first pointer to its seminal influence on Graham's work is the fact that "each Poldark book consists of three book-divisions: books one, two and three" which might be a telling observation, if it were true. But five of the twelve novels – three of the first four and the last two – are not so divided and what we see here is a plain case of not letting the truth get in the way of a good story. The same thing happens later in the book when Judge refers to the sycamore tree via which Ross enters Trenwith on May 9; she claims that to find a sycamore prospering anywhere in Cornish soil is "extraordinary" and that the presence of this one is thus further confirmation of the site's magical or fairytale qualities. But sycamores are very common in Cornwall, and grow well there.⁴

Graham himself said and wrote things apparently antagonistic to Judge's views, but that's readily explainable because, according to her, the Poldark novels are "without doubt ... postmodern" and a defining characteristic of such works is that their narrator is unreliable; with regard to Poldark, we

are assured, Graham, because postmodern, "remained an unreliable source of information regarding characters and the events in (his) story." What is more, she would have you believe, he repeatedly conceals his characters' true natures under "layers of pitfalls" intended to "confuse [his readers] purposely" and so prevent them from cracking a code virtually none will be aware of in the first place.⁵

Judge springs far too many simplistic conclusions on the reader in an effort to force her proofs: for example, that Demelza is dark is presented as indisputable evidence of "her symbolic connection to crows and ravens" – but why not rooks and jackdaws, or blackbirds and starlings? Why not ebony and jet, or coal? Though we are not told, perhaps she is connected to these things too and, were it convenient for the book's hypothesis, I'm sure she would be – but why *anything*? Why can't she be nothing more complicated than the dark-haired girl whom Ross grows to love that she seems? Under this tyranny of interpretation, where *everything* – a calf, a curlew, a turnip, a pilchard, a moth, a cord – is imbued with symbolism, the drafting of plain, unfreighted prose would seem to be impossible, which is not to categorise all of Graham's work that way, but I don't believe, as Judge does, that he intentionally concocted cryptography by another name. The love triangle is a universal trope, a staple of literature and lore through the ages, so to cite use of its form in the plotting of Poldark as evidence of a debt to *Tristan and Isolde* (a twelfth century legend) is soft; why not Austen, the Brontës or du Maurier? Why *anything*?

The book makes suspect unsubstantiated claims: that during the six years of WWII, Graham "did nothing but ponder [Poldark]"; that, whilst in Cornwall, he "went from town to town, village to village, helping himself to the archives of all written work in existence," and that he "dedicated years to studying ... Celtic mythology"⁶. The first, at least, is demonstrably false since, during the period in question, he wrote and/or published no fewer than four non-Poldark novels,⁷ which Judge ought surely to know.

If you think you will enjoy Poldark more after learning that Joshua and Charles Poldark are really Neptune and Jupiter; that Demelza is a fairy, a master shapeshifter and a crane (an anagram of her maiden name); that Garrick, her dog, "can traverse parallel worlds"; that Hugh Bodrugan is a gnome whose domicile, Werry House, is a fairy house (*Werry* rhymes with

fairy, so it must be so); that Agatha (named after Agatha Christie) is a banshee who, transformed into a cat, engineered the first meeting of Ross and Demelza at Redruth Fair (she, too, it was, using a spinning wheel, who cursed Elizabeth to marry Francis and guard Trenwith, the magic mound); that Clowance was protected by someone – possibly Demelza – from spells (plainly, otherwise the "good people" would have stolen her away); that a Celtic folk tale, *The Children of Lir*, is "concealed ... in the novel's soul"; that Valentine, an immortal unicorn, is Joshua reincarnated; that Poldarks VIII-XII are a deliberate expository reduplication of I-VII, or that the events of the night of May 9, 1793 (which occur in IV) are "the climax of the entire twelve volumes", then read this book. Otherwise ...

Judge plainly worked hard on her text, which is lucidly expressed though insufficiently referenced; typos are relatively few, though more frequent towards the end. She raises points of interest concerning Francis, Caroline and others and undoubtedly there *is* more to Poldark than meets the undiscerning eye. Judge makes a persuasive case that Celtic lore was one among very many influences acting on Graham when he first imagined his *magnum opus* and potential readers should be warned that, after finishing her book, the Poldark texts won't seem quite the same again. For example, as Ross is about to enter Trenwith on 9 May, he sees an owl on the wing. This, according to Judge, is the spirit of Agatha, abroad to watch over events; with that in mind, now recall, from *Ross Poldark*, 1.2, the first appearance of the species:

... The trickle and bubble of Mellingey stream had been lost, but now it came to his ears again like the mutterings of a thin, old woman. An owl hooted and swung silently before his face ...

Who does "muttering ... thin, old woman" conjure if not Agatha, whom Ross has just dined beside? Mere coincidence? Surely not. The very first conversation between the two goes like this:

*A: ... I thought you was gone to make one of the blest above.
R: I am glad to see ... that you're still one of the blest below.
A: Not so blest, maybe. But I wouldn't want to be changing just yet.*

Is this nothing more than the friendly banter between close relatives it seems, or is it an exchange between two, each of whom recognises in the other a "higher being" and, in addition, Agatha forewarning readers she is a metamorph? When at their pivotal meeting Ross tells Elizabeth, *Life is an illusion*, is this not also Graham speaking directly to his public about his work? Though I wouldn't claim these things are so, they *could* be, which is how Judge's ideas make you reappraise what you read. But, that conceded, I found her primary contention no more convincing on page 403 than it was on page one. Case overstated, the food for thought she offers comprises a scattering of crumbs amid a surfeit of chaff. *Decoding May 9, 1793* is remarkable, but flawed.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ From *The Art of Suspense*, broadcast on the BBC's Home Service on 25 May 1961.

² *Woman*, 10 December 1977 and elsewhere.

³ The Poldark World, *Poldark's Cornwall*, The Bodley Head, 1983.

⁴ Web pages of Cornwall Wildlife Trust *et al.*

⁵ To suggest that the conservative Graham was *ever* "post-modern" is nonsense. See [B&B](#) etc.

⁶ No independent verification of this assertion is offered. It is notable, however, that Dr Dexter, the previous occupant of Treberran, Graham's Perranporth home, seems to have been an authority on the subject (for more, see [ROWLAND](#), page six).

⁷ *Night Journey* (1941), *My Turn Next* (1942) and *The Forgotten Story* (February 1945) were all written during the war; *The Merciless Ladies* (started in the thirties but not published until 1944) was also worked on.

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