

WG'S TREATMENT OF "RAPE"

Some readers have suggested that rape is committed by Ross in Warleggan and by Tom in The Forgotten Story – but are they right?

(i) THE "RAPE" OF ELIZABETH BY ROSS

Winston Graham, author of the Poldark novels, makes it quite clear that Ross did not "rape" Elizabeth. Here's what we are told:

(1) Despite the fact that her first love was Ross, and that Ross had recently returned from America, on 1 November 1783, Elizabeth married Ross's cousin Francis. (*Ross Poldark*, Book 1, Chapter 3)

(2) Eight and a half years later, on 24 May 1792, while dining at the Trevaunances, Elizabeth tells Ross that she'd been mistaken in thinking she loved Francis better than him. Ross asks when had she discovered her mistake. "Quite soon," [after her marriage] she replies. She tells him, in other words, that she's been (back) in love with him for the past eight years. (*Warleggan* 1.3)

(3) On 9 May 1793, having learned from her hand of her intention to marry George, and having carried for a year her admission in his heart, Ross breaks into Trenwith to confront Elizabeth. Though their meeting results ultimately in the conception of Valentine, no "rape" is described by the author. It is worth noting here that, when one of his characters (Osborne Whitworth) *does* commit rape, Mr Graham has no scruple in saying so. (*The Black Moon* 3.11)

The scene as written (*Warleggan* 3.5) ends with Ross carrying Elizabeth towards the bed and what happens after that is left to the reader's imagination. Plainly, one of the possible outcomes would be for him to force himself on her despite strenuous and persistent vocal and physical resistance on her part – in other words, to rape her. Such an action would fly in the face of Ross's character as drawn: yes, he is hot-blooded and impetuous, but also scrupulous and principled, virtues alongside which rape sits very incongruously. Though his father Joshua was a libertine from

whom no wife or daughter was safe (*Ross Poldark* 1.15), Ross was cut from finer cloth. Yet, while the author does not assert that rape happened, it remains an unspoken if implausible possibility.

Equally possible, of course, is that, once on the bed with him, the vacillating Elizabeth gave in to her long and barely suppressed love of Ross to participate willingly and perhaps eagerly in their congress. But are there any grounds, other than guesswork, for believing so?

(4) The next meeting of Ross and Elizabeth takes place on 24 December 1793, again at Trenwith, this time in the presence of her new husband George. She is very cold towards Ross. Why? Because she recalled his rape of her seven months earlier? No – this time the author is very clear:

*The bitterness of Elizabeth's tones and looks had only surprised Ross in their degree. He had expected her enmity. But he did not suppose all of it derived from the ninth of May. He was not proud of his adventure then ... but after the initial resistance that night there had been no particular indication that she hated him. Her attitude towards him during a number of years, and particularly the last two, was more than anything else responsible for what had happened, and she must have known it. **Her behaviour that night had shown that she knew it.***

But there had been other sins on his part. Over and over again during those first weeks following, he had known he should go and see her and thrash the whole thing out in the light of day. It was unthinkable to leave the thing as he had left it; but that was precisely what he had done. He had behaved abominably first in going, then in not going ... If the history of the last ten years had been the tragedy of a woman unable to make up her mind, the last six months was the history of a man in a similar case. (Warleggan 4.7)

Elizabeth's anger, then, derives from being driven by Ross's passion to acknowledge wholly, unequivocally, carnally and spiritually, her love for him – and this at a time when she was a single and thus marriageable

woman – only to have him respond thereafter with nothing. Spurned in favour of his "scullery maid"! More than pride can bear!!

(5) Meeting in Sawle churchyard in the summer of 1795 (*The Four Swans* 1.11), Ross and Elizabeth recall the events of May 1793. Ross is

*aware of the indefensibility of his actions then **and the probably greater indefensibility of his non-action in the month following.***

Thus, the author tells us, Ross's boorish behaviour in manhandling Elizabeth is outweighed by his failure to contact her in the days and weeks that followed. Had rape been part of this scenario, such a statement on WG's part could not stand. But the author makes plain once more that there was no "rape":

Ross shook his head. "... I came through no door – as you know."

"Like the devil," said Elizabeth. "With the face and look of the devil."

"Yet you did not treat me so after the first shock."

These words from Ross, which she does not deny, constitute a second confirmation that Elizabeth quickly became a willing participant in their lovemaking. Whether he would have proceeded to rape her had she not done so is beside the point, because the question did not arise.

Mr Graham gives attentive readers all the information they need to grasp his meaning fully. To talk of "rape" is, carelessly or consciously, to misconstrue his text.

Postscript

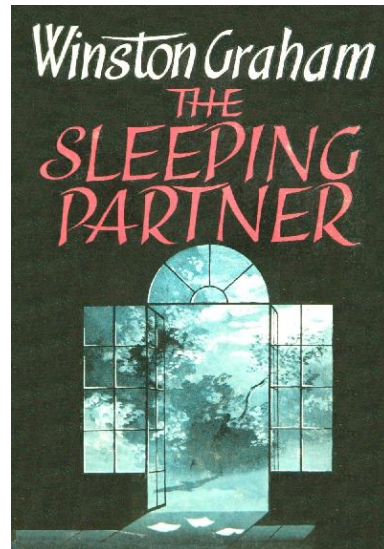
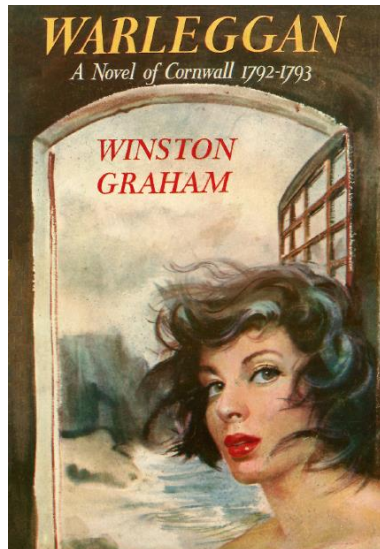
(1) On 23 August 2016, *Digital Spy* reporter Morgan Jeffery attributed this quote to WG's son Andrew Graham:

In the novel Warleggan, the point of departure for the relevant scene is indeed consistent with the potential for

rape. But what then actually happens is not described, but is left entirely to one's imagination.

The only way to judge what my father intended is to read the novels as a whole. Doing so, it becomes clear from earlier scenes, as well as from Elizabeth's immediate reactions and later mixed emotions, that what finally happened was consensual sex, borne of long-term love and longing.

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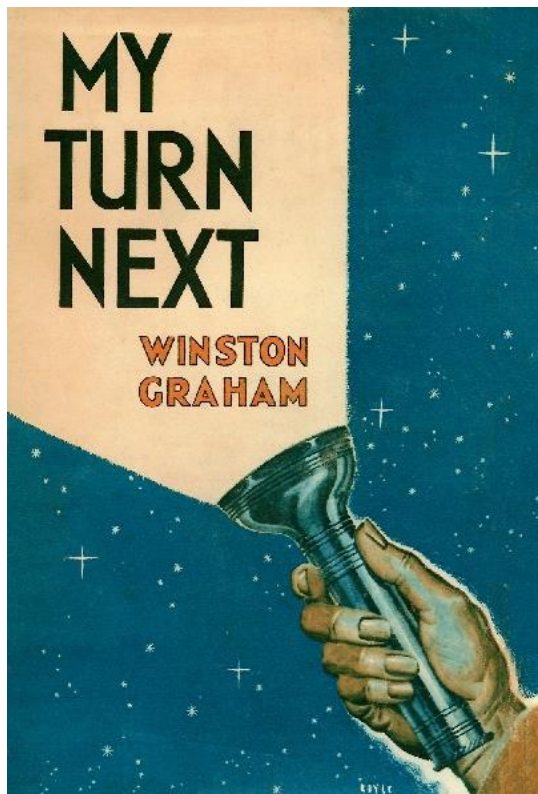


(2) In his 1956 novel *The Sleeping Partner*, WG writes a scene which results in the seduction by Mike Granville of his assistant, Stella Curtis, in a disused railway hut on a remote Welsh hillside. Both are married; his wife has recently left him; she cares devotedly for her terminally ill husband. She, though "a trifle lit up with the wine she had drunk", is ambivalent; reluctant; her body language expresses a wish not to engage – but he, like Ross, is determined, and has his way. As in Elizabeth's room on 9 May, WG writes his characters to the brink of seduction but then stops short of describing it, whilst making clear that it does take place. Reflecting next day on events, Granville recalls:

Mike, Mike, Mike, she'd said my name over and over again ... in different tones and shades of meaning. Protest, affection, passion, detachment.

Note the four stages of the encounter which WG records and in particular the first: *protest*. She protests but he takes no notice. Why? Because what follows is not violent coercion; is not brutality or abuse, but rather, as both surely sensed from the off, the inevitable physical expression of their mutual desire ("passion"), **preceded by "affection" (denoting consent)**. It is possible to see mirrored in the evolution of this union the one, also undescribed, of Ross and Elizabeth. An ardent man is thrown together with a woman who struggles to repress her love for that man. WG's take on what happens next may be androcentric; non-PC – nonetheless, once again he makes plain that what might conceivably, in other circumstances, have developed into rape, in the scenario he writes does not do so.

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(3) In *My Turn Next* (1942) adverse circumstances strand Squadron Leader Andrew Halford and pretty *ingénue* Jennifer Ward in adjoining single rooms in a Midlands hotel. Though newly acquainted, there is mutual attraction. After she has gone up to bed (she has a bad knee), he takes her some aspirin then, after a little talk, kisses her good night. She responds to his kiss; one thing leads to another; he tells her he loves her; makes it plain he would like to sleep with her, but she demurs and asks him to leave, which reluctantly he does. Back in his own room

It was a very long time before he slept. He could not decide whether he was a fool, an angel, a prig, or merely a gentleman.

Next morning he expresses his regret by quoting A. E. Housman.

When WG rewrote this novel as *Cameo* (1988) this scene plays out in the same way, except that Halford is now less of a "gentleman" – this time he

doesn't "love her" but merely "wants her very badly" and at breakfast the next day, there is no Housman. Rather, he

looked at the girl opposite and found it quite hard to believe that he had been fool enough to take no for an answer. Yes she might have fought and kicked. There was no telling with Miss Ward.

That sounds regrettably close to a description of rape – which, while it did not occur on this occasion, seems to comprise a legitimate outcome for the character to imagine and the author to write. Maybe WG was not always quite such an "instinctive feminist" (*Memoirs*, 1.9) after all.

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(ii) THE "RAPE" OF PATRICIA BY TOM

In Chapter 11 of *The Forgotten Story*, after fleeing with her from Smoky Joe's, where a fight is in progress and "there are knives about", Tom Harris carries his estranged wife Patricia, who has a twisted ankle, to a deserted boathouse. Although initially he shows only concern for her welfare, she tries when his back is turned to escape. But he catches her at the door and, with passions roused (though for different reasons) on both sides, their encounter swiftly escalates from verbal / physical to sexual. She resists him. He overpowers her. So the stage is set for a callous marital rape. And, the author tells us,

(had) Tom Harris been more of a brute, the encounter might have gone further than it did.

What does this mean? Either that, while inclined to rape her, he (because not enough of "a brute") stopped short of doing so, or that, having raped her, he stopped short of murdering her. Patricia, we are told,

did not misread his intention [to rape her], for (love) can so change that it becomes a fusion of hatred and desire. That was what Tom Harris found.

And then comes a very large BUT. The author goes on:

But unless the change is absolute, it can injure but it cannot wilfully destroy. That and something in the fundamental relationship between civilized man and woman finally stood in his way.

In his way to what? Quite plainly, the "wilful" rape of a defenceless woman, whether married to him or not. While flawed, like Ross, Tom is no cad. In Graham's world, only the irredeemably bad (Whitworth above) or misguided (*Marnie's* Mark Rutland) are rapists – which, in his kind of fiction, at least, is how it should be.

This conclusion in respect of Tom is reinforced by lines concerning their boathouse liaison written by him to Patricia and quoted towards the end of Chapter 18:

*... unfortunately I still love you, and love, I found, is not satisfied with the fruits of conquest – rich though they may be. **So even conquest was not for me.***

So, he gained the opportunity of "conquest", we are told, *but then declined to exploit it*. No saint, perhaps – to what pallid, lifeless fiction their sort tend – but no rapist either.

5 January 2022

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From www.radiotimes.com

The Poldark rape scene: the book and TV adaptations compared

by Ben Dowell, Sunday 23 October 2016

We look back at the controversial scene in both the source text and the 1970s BBC dramatisation and hear from writer Debbie Horsfield and star Aidan Turner about their current version.

This week's episode of *Poldark* contained a scene that was controversial even before it had aired. It sees Aidan Turner's Ross arrive at former lover Elizabeth's house, Trenwith, in the middle of the night, furious at the news that she has agreed to marry his arch enemy George Warleggan. An impassioned conversation ensues during which Ross lays hands on Elizabeth (Heida Reed) and forces her to kiss him before they eventually end up in bed together.

The original passage from *Poldark* creator Winston Graham's book, *Warleggan*, on which the current series is based, is often referred to as "the rape scene" as is the same moment in the 1970s BBC TV adaptation.

Does it deserve that reputation? And does the way it was handled this time around suggest a more consensual encounter? We look back at how the scene was depicted in both the book and the 1976 television episode and hear from Debbie Horsfield – writer of the new series – Aidan Turner, the star of *Poldark*, and Andrew Graham, son of the author, about their approach to it and how it turned out.

The source text: Winston Graham's 1953 novel *Warleggan*

The scene occurs in Book 3, Chapter 5 of the Winston Graham novel *Warleggan*, the third (*sic*) in his twelve-novel series. It opens with Poldark breaking into Trenwith through a casement window at night (not dramatically kicking the door open as Aidan Turner's Ross does). He and Elizabeth meet in the hall and he follows her into her bedroom while she is getting a candle (pretty much what happens in the latest TV version). Then they argue. The key part comes at the end of the chapter:

He kissed her. She turned her face away but could not get it far enough around to avoid him.

Her eyes were lit with anger. He'd never seen her like it and he found pleasure in it.

"This is contemptible! I shouldn't have believed it of you! To force yourself. To insult me."

"I don't like this marriage to George, Elizabeth. I should be glad of your assurance that you'll not go through with it."

"I love George to distraction and shall marry him next week."

He caught her again, and this time began to kiss her with intense passion.

She smacked his face so he pinioned her arm.

"You treat me – like a slut."

"It's time you were so treated."

"Let me go Ross! You're hateful, horrible!"

"Shall you marry him?"

"Don't! I'll scream! Oh, God, Ross. Please. Tomorrow..."

...

"Ross, you can't intend. Stop! Stop, I tell you."

But he took no further notice. He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

What happens next is not described but later in the books Elizabeth remembers the encounter in terms of the "caresses" she receives from Ross that evening. It is clear that there are rapes at other moments in Graham's *Poldark* novels and then he calls them rape. He doesn't use that word this time.

The 1970s TV adaptation



The controversial instalment of the original series is often called the "rape" episode. It aired on Sunday 11th January 1976 at 7:25pm on BBC1, episode 15 [of 16] of series one.

This is the *Radio Times* billing for the episode which hints at what was to come, calling Ross's reaction to the news of Elizabeth's betrothal *unreasonable and obsessive*.

BBC1

7.25 pm
Poldark
A romantic serial in 16 parts set in Cornwall of the 1780s based on the novels by WINSTON GRAHAM
Part 15 by JACK RUSSELL
Elizabeth accepts an offer of marriage, although she knows it will appal Ross. When tragedy strikes at Wheal Grace the double blow creates in him an unreasoning and obsessive reaction.

Ross Poldark.....ROBIN ELLIS
Demelza.....ANGHARAD REES
Zacky Martin.....FORBES COLLINS
Henshawe.....JOHN RINGHAM
Elizabeth.....JILL TOWNSEND
George Warleggan.....RALPH BATES
Mrs Tabb.....SHEELAH WILCOCKS
Sir Hugh Bodrugan
CHRISTOPHER BENJAMIN
Lady Constance Bodrugan
CYNTHIA GRENVILLE
Captain McNeil.....DONALD DOUGLAS
Verity Blamey.....NORMA STREADER
Prudie.....MARY WIMBUSH
Jud.....PAUL CURRAN
Squire Wentworth
MISCHA DE LA MOTTE
Mrs Wentworth...IRENE SUTCLIFFE
Osborne Wentworth
KEITH ASHTON
Mrs Halse.....CHERRY MORRIS
Dr Halse.....PETER BALDWIN
Dorothea Halse..VICTORIA SHELLARD

Script editor SIMON MESTERS
Make-up MAGDALEN GAFFNEY
Designer OLIVER RAYLON
Producer MORRIS BARRY
Director PAUL ANNETT

10.0 That's Life
with Esther Rantzen
Reporters KIERAN FRENCHVILLE
GLYN WORSNIP
CYRIL FLETCHER
with Oddities of the Week
A collection of the jokes, dramas and problems that happen in real life.
Editor JOHN MORRELL
Director PETER MORPERGO

10.40 Read All About It
The second of 12 programmes
Introduced and edited by
Melvyn Bragg
Paperbacks of the Week chosen
by Angela Huth, Frank Muir



and Billy Connolly
with them in the studio
Authors of the Week
William Donaldson - producer of
Beyond the Fringe, whose book

The following week there is no mention of the incident, beyond reference to *the strained relationship between Ross and Demelza*.



The BBC would not make clips available of the moment that Elizabeth and Ross have sex but here is a scene of another row between the two characters to give you a flavour of their stormy relationship.

[\[Poldark S1 clip featuring Robin Ellis and Jill Townsend\]](#)

The relevant scene did not appear to cause a huge stir at the time – perhaps reflecting different attitudes in the 1970s. In fact there were no letters about it in *Radio Times* afterwards, only one correspondence from a reader saying how much he was enjoying the drama.

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The 2016 *Poldark*

If you have seen it you can make up your own mind, but this is what the *Poldark* creative team say ...

Screenwriter Debbie Horsfield, speaking to [RadioTimes.com](#):

One of the first things you learn when you're adapting a novel is that no two readers imagine a scene the same way! This is even more acute when a scene ends abruptly, as is the case in Book 3 Chapter 5 of Warleggan, when the action cuts out and the rest is left entirely to the reader's imagin-

ation. However, as programme makers, we needed to decide what the audience would actually see! And, as far as possible, to bring to life what the original author intended the scene to depict. We were fortunate to have Winston Graham's son Andrew as our consultant on the series so we were able to clarify with him what his father's intentions for this scene were. What you saw on screen is consistent with what we believe those intentions to have been.

Aidan Turner (below), who plays Ross:

It seems consensual, and it just seems right. He goes to talk. He doesn't go to commit a crime. They talk and it seems like there is still this spark between them, this unfinished business emotionally. Certainly, that's how Ross feels. He doesn't force himself upon her. He is emotionally quite inarticulate. I don't think he quite understands himself. With Elizabeth, he idealised her for so long. He'd have thought about her every day on the battlefields. To come home and not have her, not hold her, not marry her. It was very difficult. He's absolutely in love with Demelza. Question is, is it possible to be in love with more than one person?



Ross is heavily flawed. He isn't just this legend who rides in on a horse and feeds the poor. He seems quite real, very proud. We'd almost call him a control freak. He can be quite mean and callous and single-minded and selfish. It would be boring to play a character who's just a do-gooder. He makes mistakes and realises them.

Perhaps the final word should go to the Graham Estate. Winston Graham died in 2003, however his son Andrew Graham stands by the BBC's interpretation.

Andrew Graham:

There is no 'shock rape' storyline in the novels. To say so is to misconstrue my father's text. The BBC has cut nothing and [Poldark production company] Mammoth Screen's portrayal of these scenes is entirely true to my father's writing.

To be more precise – in the novel Warleggan the point of departure for the relevant scene is indeed consistent with the potential for rape. But what then actually happens is not described but is left entirely to one's imagination. The only way to judge what my father intended is to read the novels as a whole. Doing so it becomes clear, from earlier scenes as well as from Elizabeth's immediate reactions and later mixed emotions that what finally happened was consensual sex born of long-term love and longing. It was, as Aidan Turner has put it, "unfinished business emotionally".

You've now read about the different ways in which the controversial scene has been treated – in the original novel, the 1976 TV adaptation and the current BBC series. So what are your thoughts on what was intended by author Winston Graham and how the Aidan Turner drama handled it? What did they get right or wrong? And does the scene deserve its controversial reputation? Let us know in the comments box below.

Poldark continues on Sunday nights at 9pm