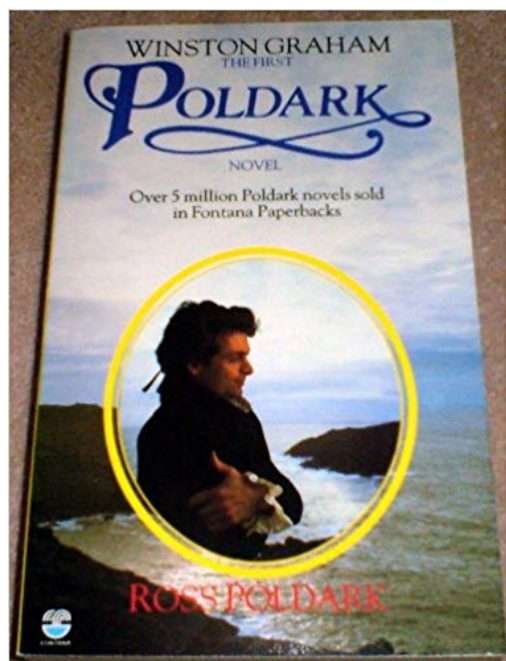


## Ross Poldark - A Novel Of Cornwall 1783 - 1787 by Winston Graham



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Reviews of the **Ross Poldark - A Novel Of Cornwall 1783 - 1787** by Winston Graham

Gold Crown

At first glance, it is easy to see why some modern readers might overlook ROSS POLDARK, the primogenial novel in Winston Graham's THE NOVELS OF CORNWALL family saga. Originally published in 1945, most seventy-year-old books are now long forgotten. Its main character is a man—when to appeal to its primary audience most historical fiction is carried by a female protagonist. The setting can be off putting too. It begins in 1783, a difficult and depressing time in English history after the loss of the American Colonies, when social, political and economic upheaval crippled the country. Fueled, by angst, obsession and regret, it is about as far removed from the refined country drawing rooms, witty repartee and genteel romance found in Jane Austen novels as it could be.

Despite these questionable first impressions, this novel and its eponymous hero have "legs." It has never gone out of print and continues to build a fan base, mostly generated from the 1975 - 1977 landmark television adaptation, Poldark, starring Robin Ellis. And now after forty years the BBC and PBS have joined forces again for a reboot of this very popular classic starring Aidan Turner as the swashbuckling hero. With so much clout behind it, who could not be tempted to see what the original novel was all about?

Set in Cornwall, Royal Army officer Captain Ross Poldark returns home a scarred and weary soldier from fighting in the American Revolutionary War. It is a disheartening homecoming. His father Joshua has recently died, his sweetheart Elizabeth Chynoweth is engaged to his cousin Francis Poldark and his inheritance, the family residence, farmland and tin mines lie totally derelict. There does not appear to be any reason for him to stay.

The local economy does not fare much better. The tin and copper mines owned by the landed gentry are in serious decline while nouveau riche banker George Warleggan prospers by extending credit, foreclosing and building a financial empire on the hard work of others. Bonded to the land, his tenants and the hope that Elizabeth will return to him, the temptation to leave and take the easy road is not even a serious option for this Poldark. With the help of two of his father's idle servants, Jud and Prudie Paynter and a street urchin turned kitchen maid Demelza Carne, Ross fights to rebuild his pride and his family fortune.

"Looking east, upon Hendrawna Beach, the sea was very clam today: a smokey grey with here and there patches of violet and living, moving green. The waves were shadows, snakes under a quilt, creeping in almost unseen until they emerged in milky ripple at the waters edge." (p. 33)

Surprisingly, we are immediately drawn in by author Winston Graham's opening chapters. His writing is succinct, lyrical and hypnotic. He throws so much adversity in our hero's path that we cannot help but root for the underdog. We learn early on that Ross Poldark is not your typical landed gentry. He may have left for the war a young ensign with a dubious reputation, but he returned two years later a seasoned captain—a mature leader of men tempered by British injustice and influenced by the ideals of liberty and equality by the American patriots. Deeply committed to helping the local villagers, his proletarian views are not welcomed by his own class. In his mind, what is right to be done cannot be done soon enough regardless of the consequences. He abhors aristocrats and their privileged way of life—delighting in thumbing his nose at them in scandalous ways.

About half-way into the novel we realize that Captain Ross Poldark could be an iconic romantic hero to rival Mr. Darcy, Mr. Rochester and John Thornton. He's handsome. He's rebellious. He's broody. He's the dark Poldark; the one with the youthful reputation as a wastrel, gamester and smuggler clutching at his left shoulder. He drinks and thinks way too much, and his cousin Verity, the only family member to visit him, is deeply concerned for his welfare.

Ross reaches a low point in his life at the wedding of his beloved Elizabeth to his cousin Francis. "All of the time at the back of his mind had been the half conviction that somehow the wedding would not be. It was as hard to believe as if someone had told him he was going to die." (p. 44) During the wedding banquet at his uncle's estate, Trenwith, while a cock fight is underway in the dining room for the amusement of the guests, Ross seeks out an encounter with Elizabeth who attempts to explain her decision to not follow through with their youthful promises to each other.

"There is no time to explain everything; perhaps I couldn't explain it if there were. But I do want you to try to forgive me for any unhappiness I may have caused you."

"There is nothing to forgive," said Ross. "There was no formal undertaking." (p. 48)

This conversation, and their choices of how to deal with the situation, foreshadows their continued, tormented relationship—her fickle nature and need to please her family and society, and his poker-faced indignation against adversity. Each of these personality foibles are the backbone of this story; while there are many other characters and subplots churning throughout the novel, it all comes back to Elizabeth's decision to marry another man and Ross's obsession to possess her.

Author Winston Graham's writing is superb. Fast paced, descriptive and engaging, his style is a clever blending of both literary and commercial fiction. He particularly excels at multi-character scenes where the action and dialogue joyfully skips about a room. The Truro Assembly Room ball is one of our favorites. In the course of one chapter we are introduced to Cornwall's polished society bathed in candlelight and decked out in elegant frocks and swaggering finery. Here we witness polite conversation and scurrilous gossip, flirtations and put-downs; meet a scheming mother with five unwed daughters, a handsome captain courting an on-the-shelf spinster and our hero Ross, scandalously dancing more than two times with a young, ambitious debutante, then fleeing the scene in anguish upon the arrival of Elizabeth and Francis. "Elizabeth's beauty struck him afresh. The fact that another man should be in full enjoyment of her was like the torture of damnation." (p. 64) Sullen and brooding, he arrives at a local tavern to drown his sorrows in brandy and the local light skirt.

This scene is as close as we get to anything remotely resembling a Jane Austen or Georgette Heyer novel. Refined society is not where Ross Poldark chooses to spend his time, nor does Winston Graham. This story is about money, or the lack of it, the shifting fortunes and social standing of the ruling classes, and the emotional forces that drive men to achieve success and the women that they desire. Along the way we learn a lot about late eighteenth-century copper and tin mining in Cornwall while swash and buckling through fist fights, riots, prison breaks, duels, poaching and pillaging. After all, this is a man's story and we certainly see life through Ross Poldark's manly eyes. When he rescues thirteen-year-old street urchin Demelza, and her mongrel dog Garrick at the Redruth Fair from a gang of bullies, we begin to see that there might be a softer side. Nobly, he feeds her and offers her a ride home to her father.

"They reached a break in the track. Ahead lay the way to Illugan; the right fork would bring him to skirt St. Ann's whence he could join the usual lane to Swale." (p. 75)

Before they part, he generously offers her a job as his kitchen maid. She gladly accepts, if only to get out of the thrashing that awaits her at home. Unknowingly, he has reached an important juncture in his life and it will never be the same after this point. Society is scandalized by his altruistic actions, thinking he has taken her for carnal reasons, but he holds firm and pays her greedy father her annual wages. She brings life to his lonely home with her youthful energy, humor and dedication to him. It will redeem his embittered soul.

When after three years of service her father wants his daughter back, and commands her to return, Demelza must comply. Heartbroken, she is certain that Nampara is her home now and that she cannot leave Ross. She loves him, even though he has never shown her anything but the respect that a master owes their servant. Desperate to stay, her first attempt at coquetry is a painful failure. Ross is angered and confused. "He felt like someone who had adopted a tiger cub without knowing what it would grow into." (p. 215) Concerned by her flirtations he angrily tells her,

"You know what people say of you, Demelza?"

She shook her head. "What?"

"If you act like this, what they say of you will become true."

She looked at him, candidly this time, without coquetry and without fear. "I live only for you, Ross." (p. 217)

If you read one historical fiction novel this year, let it be Ross Poldark. Adventurous, addictive and wholly romantic, history buffs will applaud Graham's meticulous research, Jane Austen fans will delight in the witty repartee and humor, and romance readers will swoon over the discovery of an iconic romantic hero truly worthy of wearing the mantle.

Laurel Ann, Poldarkian.com

## Jozrone

I saw the first season of the PBS series before reading the books, so my views are shaped by my admiration for the program. This book covers about a half of season one. What I appreciate most about this series is the complexity of the characters that Graham created. These people are real to me. The main characters have flaws that are believable. They struggle through difficult times and make decisions based on the circumstances of their status and upbringing at the time. So many historical fiction novels are written like costume dramas where the morays of today are imposed on a prior century. Poldark does not do that and therefore allows the reader to sink into the era and experience their struggles first-hand. It's as if Graham had actually written the books in the 18th century. At its heart, it's a love story and entails many different relationships woven together. There's nothing sappy about the story - every morsel of happiness is hard won. If you watch the TV series, the books follow the story fairly closely with more detail in the book. You should read this book with the expectation to read the entire series, because the story ends abruptly and without a real finish. I've now read several in the series and find they all end this way. You have to be in it for the long-haul. BTW, I listened to this book on audio and the reader is very good. While this first book is read by a man, there is a female reader for book 2 (Dimelsa). It took me by surprise at first, but she was very good, too. The male voice comes back for book 3. If you are an audio reader like me, you will like the presentation.

Loni

I watched and fell in love with the series done o Masterpiece theater and seeing as the first season was a big success, they are working on more. I just couldn't wait that long. I had to find out what happens next. The style of writing is very easy to follow, the flow of conversation between the characters is great. You can really place yourself in the town and with the people as you read. While I don't look for that with every book, I was happily surprised to find that with this one. I will most likely keep ordering the books to get the complete series. So, if you want to spend a little time away without having to leave your couch, this is indeed a great getaway.

Ceck

As soon as I read the first few pages of this book, I was hooked.

The prose is beautiful, even graceful, without being ornate or fussy and Graham writes his characters, female and male, with clear-eyed but sympathetic insight that reminds me of George Eliot. There are touches of history (the doings of mad King George, the unrest in France, etc.) and humor, but the heart of the story centers on the families--noble and not--of Cornwall. We see their courtships, their marriages, and their home lives, and we travel to the mines, farm fields, and ocean waters where they earn their livings. It's a credit to Graham's skill as a writer that I was actually interested in the sections on copper mining.

In the first chapter of the book--and first episode of the TV series--Ross Poldark returns to Cornwall after fighting with the British in the American Revolution, only to find his father dead, his property in ruins, and his girlfriend engaged to his cousin. Ross is the son of a younger son, and not much interested in the niceties of class and society, making him an appealing character for modern sensibilities. His quick to learn but almost feral kitchen maid Demelza also plays a major role in the story, and so does Elizabeth, his former girlfriend, and his cousins Verity and Francis.

The book and the TV show complement each other wonderfully. The gorgeous scenery of the BBC production made my reading pleasure all the more vivid, and the book fills in details that the show has to skim over. The novel also gave me a chance to dwell in the story a little longer--an addictive pleasure. Immediately after finishing the first book I started the second volume in the series.

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