
Vast Disillusion?: The 'war books boom' 1928-30 and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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Abstract

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (originally *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, literally meaning 'Nothing New in the West', 1929) is recognised as a hugely significant piece of war literature, especially as a landmark in the period 1928-30 when war books became more popular with publishers and readers. *All Quiet* is associated with widespread acceptance of disenchantment narratives. This article will evaluate such assumptions by considering aspects of publication, including acquisition, censorship, design and reception. It considers the changing publishing scene in the late-1920s, particularly comparing German, British and US publishers' strategies for a disillusionment narrative such as *All Quiet*, using book theory from Bourdieu, Genette and Heath to analyse this. It will also evaluate reception in order to assess the novel's impact and publishers' decisions surrounding it.

Key Words

WWI literature, Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, censorship, paratext

Introduction

The 1928-30 'war books boom' has received much scholarly attention, with most agreeing that in this period, Germany and Britain experienced an influx of war books, plays and films, with France and the US experiencing a scaled-down version of the phenomenon (Eksteins 1980, 345). Within this trend, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*All Quiet*) has been identified as 'the most influential novel about World War I' (Eilefson 2017, 1), not least because it is responsible for both Remarque's symbolic and commercial success (Bourdieu, 1993). Indeed, the novel's reach was immense: by the end of 1929, a million

copies were sold in Germany, with another million across Britain, France and the US combined (Bance 1977, 360). *All Quiet* has been seen as the key transformer of WWI narratives from instability towards cohesive disenchantment, encouraging similar titles to be published. However, *All Quiet's* publication, translation, censorship and reception reveal more than a supposedly accepted narrative of disillusion within the book trade, indicating a more nuanced scene whereby the meaning and benefits of such novels were constantly disputed.

The changing scene of late-1920s Britain

During WWI, publishing crucially provided information and escapism. Publishers sought to balance commercial and conscientious objectives, many having clear agendas; for example, Hodder & Stoughton aimed to uphold Home Front unity and morale (Potter 2007, 11). War books sold well during 1914-18 and into 1919 and 1920 (Trott 2017, 14). Throughout the rest of the early-1920s, the 1899 Net Book Agreement's impact was felt, encouraging a conservative, 'middlebrow' trend to supply a stable market. Hence, successful literature fitted middlebrow tastes; where war featured, messages were comfortable, and endings resolved. Thus, publishers could appeal to a larger market and maximise profits through inoffensiveness.

Therefore, a period of 'curious imaginative silence' occurred (Hynes 1992, 38), observable by 1920s commentators as well as modern book historians. Richard Church, poet and critic, reviewed *All Quiet* for *The Spectator*, reflecting: 'Surely everyone...has asked himself...what is this conspiracy of silence maintained by the men who returned from the war?' (*The Spectator*, April 20, 1929). Various causes have been proposed, pertaining to authorship, publishing and public sentiments: Samuel Hynes (1992, 38) argues that writers needed temporal distance, Richard Trott (2017, 14) sees industry-imposed silence responding to wider disinclination to revisit the war, and Modris Eksteins (1980, 346) proposed that war was universally too painful.

Like Eksteins in 1980, *The Bookseller* in May 1919 reported that the public were disinterested in descriptions of war, with vivid depictions causing readers to shrink away and cry 'Hold, enough!' (Trott 2017, 13). Meanwhile, a June 1929 article in *Country Life* aligned more with Hynes' (1992) argument, seeing authors as 'tongue-tied' and disconnected from patriotic and peace propaganda:

For some years...one heard the question: 'Where is the great literature that such a war should give birth to?'...With few exceptions, the generation that endured its brunt was silent. While the storm lasted they were tongue-tied, and the tidal wave of peace propaganda...had no meaning for them either. (*Country Life*, June 8, 1929)

By 1928, socio-political changes in Britain coincided with those in publishing. The 1928 Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact indicated emerging anti-war sentiment amongst governing classes, whilst a 1926 General Strike involving veterans revealed wider post-war dislocation (Bance 1977, 360). In this context, a decade after armistice, war literature was produced and read in large quantities. Many argue this change was sudden and absolute: Bance (1977, 360) argues for 'strange unanimity', and Eksteins (1980, 345) states that silence 'shattered with a vengeance'. Contemporaries, too, observed a watershed, with *Country Life* reporting that 'artists...now that the world is again in a mood to listen, have their faithful story to tell' (*Country Life*, June 8, 1929). Yet, there are exceptions to this suddenness, with Chatto & Windus publishing C.E. Montague's *Disenchantment* (1922) and R.H. Mottram's *Spanish Farm* trilogy (1924-6).

After a modest number of earlier disenchantment works, *All Quiet* was a defining text in the 'explosion of war material' (Eksteins 1980, 346) and the mode of disenchantment. Of course, soldiers and civilians felt disenchanted before 1929, but *All Quiet* helped the attitude to become more commonplace and publishers to confidently publish on the topic (Frayn 2015, 201). With the accumulation of these books, especially Remarque's, enduring myths of WWI were formed. Myths were, according to Vincent Trott (2017, 11), not entirely falsehoods, but narratives involving simplification or distortion in a

complex historical record. Publishers in Germany, Britain and the US were central to myth formation as they publicised and distributed such narratives.

Domestic success of *All Quiet*

Remarque's struggle getting published reveals reluctance to publicise disenchantment narratives prior to 1929. The manuscript remained unpublished for six months, having been rejected by conservative literary publisher S. Fischer Verlag because Fischer believed that Remarque's depiction of war was unsaleable (Eksteins 1980, 352). However, *All Quiet* was later accepted by the more liberal Ullstein Verlag, who serialised it in their magazine, *Vossische Zeitung* in late-1928, testing the appetite for such content. Whilst sales of the paper did not grow exponentially, circulation increased and daily editions sold out (Eksteins 1980, 353). Ullstein Verlag could now confidently print *All Quiet* in book form. Yet, the announcement of the print edition in *Vossische Zeitung* remained cautious, describing *All Quiet* as a 'testimony of an ordinary soldier' which would reveal his disillusionment (Schneider 2016, 494). Ullstein made no political statement, for example, no explicit reference to pacifism, instead promising the novel would 'tell the truth about the war, finally' (Schneider 2016, 494).

The domestic success of *All Quiet* was partially ensured by Ullstein's unprecedented advertisement campaign. Most notably, the implementation of four posters, released one at a time over four weeks in a sustained marketing tactic: 'It's coming', 'The great war novel', '*Im Westen Nichts Neues*', 'By Erich Maria Remarque' (Eksteins 1980, 352). This initiative stimulated advanced sales of 10,000, and post-publication sales of 200,000 in three weeks, 640,000 in three months and a million by the end of the year (Eksteins 1980, 353). Therefore, *All Quiet* became an unprecedented domestic success despite initial conservativeness of publishers who misperceived readers as unreceptive of disenchantment notions.

Widening readership: translation and its aims

Although translation is certainly a meticulous enterprise, in this instance, its purpose related to the symbolic importance of *All Quiet* as a soldier's testimony. The English translation was to convey 'feeling' rather than being strictly true to words or dialects. Following success in Germany, Remarque was published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in London in March, 1929. The translator, A.W. Wheen, admitted that he was chosen not because of exceptional German, but because he was a veteran like the original author (Eilefson 2017, 4). The importance of the parallel experiences of author and translator can be seen in the book's reception, where reviews emphasised Wheen's role as an enemy-turned-comrade to Remarque. Richard Church commended the translator as someone who 'lived and suffered in the trenches' and 'fought against the fellow artist whose book he has now so graciously introduced to the English-speaking world' (*The Spectator*, April 20, 1929).

However, the current English translation in the UK is Brian Murdoch's, who retranslated Remarque's book in 1993, criticising the very features of Wheen's translation which had previously been commended. Murdoch felt that Wheen prioritised the 'sense' of words over literal translation and had not differentiated character dialect (Eilefson 2017, 4). Therefore, symbolic capital, defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 7) as relating to consecration of honour, here a soldier's honour, was crucial with temporal proximity to the war. With distance, and as the book became an educational set text on secondary school syllabi across Britain, accuracy is once again revered. Yet, in the US, Wheen's translation prevails, meaning that even with temporal distance from the late-1920s to 1930s interpretations, there remains no definitive Anglo-American version of *All Quiet*.

Varied censorship and reception in Britain and the US

Prior to the disparity between the Murdoch and Wheen translations, there was an even greater difference between British and US versions of *All Quiet* because of varying censorship and perceptions of obscenity. Often, variations were caused by publishers' expectations of public tolerance. As Diana Heath (2007, 511) argues, concepts of 'obscenity' and 'indecent' are socially determined, changing according to reader. Indeed, censorship varied according to publishers and governments in Germany, Britain and the US.

There are several criteria for perception of obscenity in Western culture, outlined by Heath (2007), which coincide with much of *All Quiet's* censorship and reception in the territories considered in this article. The 'Greek sense' of obscene refers to the bringing onstage what is usually offstage (Heath 2007, 513). In a novel, this could mean bringing into the narrative something usually implied; for example, describing sexual encounters rather than implying. In *All Quiet*, there are several, prolonged 'usually offstage' scenes. For example, a 4-page passage where men use latrines; and a 3-page passage depicting an injured soldier and his wife's intimacy in a hospital (Remarque 1929, 13-7; 288-92). Norman St. John-Stevas (1956, 2) pointed to unconventional moral attitudes as perceivable as obscene in the West, which becomes evident when we consider the banning of *All Quiet* in Germany due to potential pacifist messages at a time when the National Socialist party espoused militaristic values.

Beyond Heath's (2007) broad causes of censorship, there are other causes specific to *All Quiet* and its time period. In Germany, *All Quiet* was criticised by the left for not going far enough, and by the right for pacifism undermining German values (Frayn 2015, 204). Military personnel, especially, found it slanderous, banning it from military libraries in 1929 (Eksteins 1980, 356). Under Hitler's chancellorship, *All Quiet* was banned as politically and morally un-German and burned at the University of Berlin (Eksteins 1980, 363). Here, objections were not to language or graphic content, but the overall message of futility of war and its discord with the political and social identity being forged at that time.

In Britain, the translation was uncensored, although certain aspects still met with objection. According to Trott (2017, 31) Putnam's manager, Constant Huntington, had a desire to shock. Yet, under his direction, initial marketing was cautious and restrained, not emphasising the negative tone in case this was perceived as German defeatism and deterred British readers. The book was positioned, as described on its dust jacket, as about 'the war, the fate of a generation and true comradeship', avoiding the anti-war sentiment (Remarque, 1929). Although uncensored, the unabridged content was not fully welcomed. Whilst Richard Aldington, inspired by Remarque to publish his own book, described *All Quiet*

as 'a great thing to have done', he felt that 'the work of art demands a sort of restraint', referring to the sometimes sensational horrors in Remarque's writing (Frayn 2015, 210).

The unstable nature of obscenity, outlined by Heath (2007), is evident when comparing the British and US editions. In the US, resistance began with *All Quiet's* acquisition: Putnam's US office refused it, despite the success of Putnam's London office. Boston's Little, Brown accepted the manuscript in June, 1929 but the company was governed by Suffolk County's obscenity laws, so 'Boston's watchdogs' (Willis 1999, 469) ensured modifications ahead of publication. Expletives which remained in Putnam's edition were exchanged, for example, 'shit' became 'swine'. Other words were removed entirely: 'masturbate' and 'turd' especially were considered too explicit for American readers (Willis 1999, 471).

The major objections came from the Book-of-the-Month Club, which requested 60,000 copies in January 1930. To make it acceptable to the club's 100,000 members, substantial changes were required, which R.A. Firda described in his study of *All Quiet* as on the 'borderline of sound publishing practice' (Firda in Eksteins 1980, 353). Whilst the press picked up on modifications, printing headlines such as 'Volume Expurgated on Book Club Advice: German War Story...Toned Down for Americans' (*New York Times*, May 31, 1929), reports were often vague. The Book-of-the-Month Club's Vice President, Larry Sherman, described changes as 'trivial', whilst Little, Brown's president simply said some words and sentences had been 'too robust' for Americans (Eilefson 2017, 5). However, Sarah Eilefson's (2017, 11) extensive study of *All Quiet's* censorship found more changes in the first chapter than early media reports claimed for the entire novel. The most substantial being the deletion of the two aforementioned passages set amongst the latrines and a hospital, which fit Heath's model of obscenity.

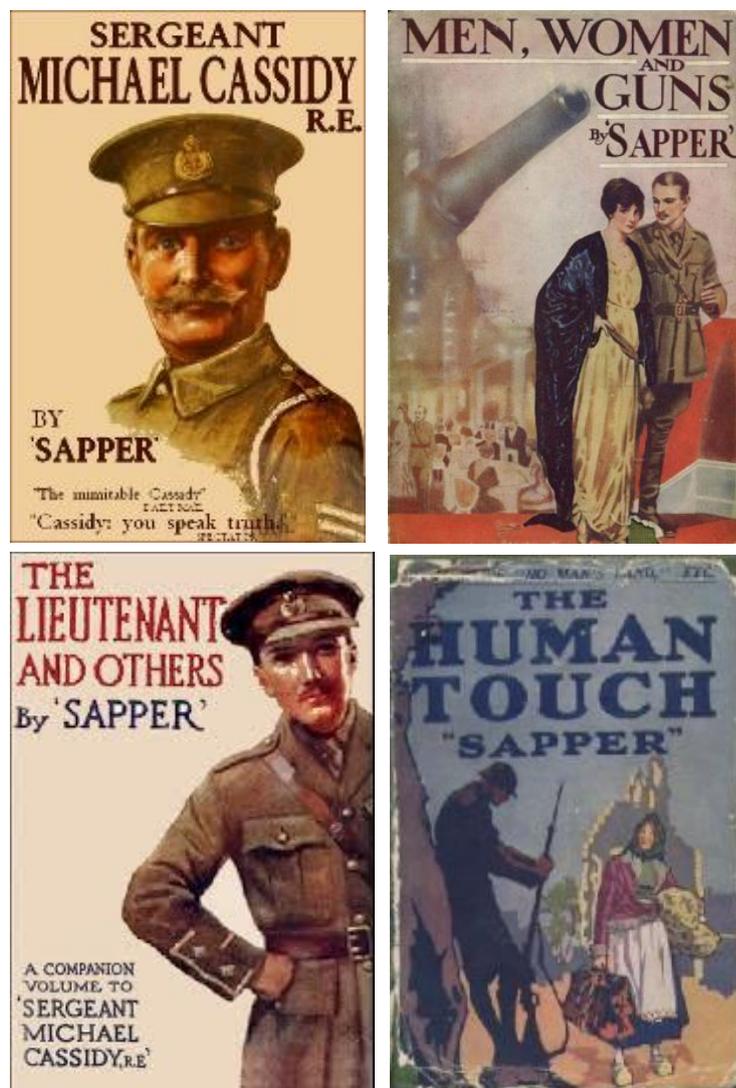
The lack of censorship by Putnam's compared to Little, Brown indicates different, not always accurate, expectations of readers' sensibilities. Sections survived censorship in the British version but did not escape critical reception. Siegfried Sassoon, himself renowned for depictions of war, differentiated an 'English' way of talking about the war

from a 'German' way, finding the detail of bodily functions ungentlemanly and distasteful (Trott 2017, 60). Media reports categorised characteristically 'German' elements, with the *London Mercury* stating that Germans found lavatories 'intensely interesting' (Trott 2017, 60), whilst other papers described Remarque as the 'high priest of the lavatory school of war novelists' (Eksteins 1980, 354). *Country Life* reported that 'some will find...too much insistence on the fact that the fighting man's life is the life of the shell-hole, the latrine and the hospital' but recognised that Englishmen 'are only gradually overcoming our nicety in literature' (*Country Life*, June 8, 1929). The book's varying censorship reveals that there was no consensus on futility and graphic description contemporaneous with *All Quiet's* publication, but rather slower development towards accepting dire realities of war, to which the publication of *All Quiet* contributed.

Vast Disillusion?: Genette's paratext and publishers' caution

Various editions of *All Quiet* and subsequent reception in Britain, the US and Germany show that there was not cross-border consensus on the book or the nature of its apparent obscenity. In Britain, it has been argued that Remarque's success was symptomatic of unstable war narratives solidifying into a 'coherent and widely accepted line' of disenchantment (Frayn 2015, 232). Indeed, there was an influx of works similarly disavowing of war, such as Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) and Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (1929), suggesting greater public appetite for disillusionment narratives. However, as Jessica Meyer (2008, 4) has argued, books from this period were and are disputed. Sales figures are impressive, indicating wide readership, but mask varied responses and publishers' navigation of uncertainty around public opinion.

Dust jackets, one of Gérard Genette's (1997) 'paratexts', indicate publishers' positioning of the book at different points. For Genette (1997, 2) a paratext is a threshold in which an influence is exerted on an audience, aiming for better reception and pertinent reading 'in the eyes of the author and his allies'. Applying this to *All Quiet*, it appears the intended influence changed as time progressed.



Some publishers had already recognised the value of illustrative design; for example, Hodder & Stoughton's visually arresting covers for Sapper's wartime books (Figure 1a-d), but in the 1920s, plain designs remained common (Trott 2017, 29). Genette (1997, 28) argues that a cover or jacket should attract attention, so dramatic means such as garish illustrations should be permitted. Yet, because the priority of paratext is always functionality, if an aesthetic does not ensure 'destiny consistent with the author's purpose', it is unnecessary (Genette 1997, 407).

Figure 1: Sapper book covers, 1915-18. (a) Top left (Sapper, 1916); (b) Top right (Sapper, 1917); (c) Bottom left (Sapper, 1915); (d) Bottom right (Sapper, 1918)

Genette perhaps over-favours the author when considering aesthetics, because publishers largely control this. Therefore, Putnam's first jacket served a function rather than being aesthetically striking. As pictorial dust jackets were often associated with commercialisation, Putnam's were cautious to commercialise war with their first edition of *All Quiet*, so their design was simple and unillustrated (Figure 2). This decision reflects Genette's (1997, 410) argument that paratext can exceed its function and impede, requiring a light touch to neutralise this risk. Whilst the blurb on the inside flap reflected

disenchantment notions, describing Remarque's generation as 'friendless, embittered, resigned', the cover did not indicate graphic war content, in order to seek wide appeal.

Even the books advertised on *All Quiet's* jacket were described either moderately or matter-of-factly. Emil Ludwig's *Kaiser Wilhelm II* was 'not a personal apologia or a specious piece of propaganda', and Wilfred Ewart's *Way of Revelation* addressed both 'good and evil' of 1914-19 (Remarque, 1929). Endorsements were 'German opinions', claiming the book as a German 'war memorial', perhaps to provide distance between the British publisher and the disenchantment notions inside.

However, by 1930, Putnam's issued a new edition with an illustrated cover depicting war content, as they could now be more confident about the novel's appeal (Figure 3a). Yet, this 1930 edition still did not truly reflect the book's content despite being more clearly positioned as a war novel, reflecting some continuation of Genette's (1997, 410) 'light touch': it features a blue sky and blossom trees, with only smaller hints of trauma in the muddy ground and broken tree. It was not until a further jacket in 1936 that the darker themes of the novel were represented with symbols of death such as the rat and the skull (Figure 3b).

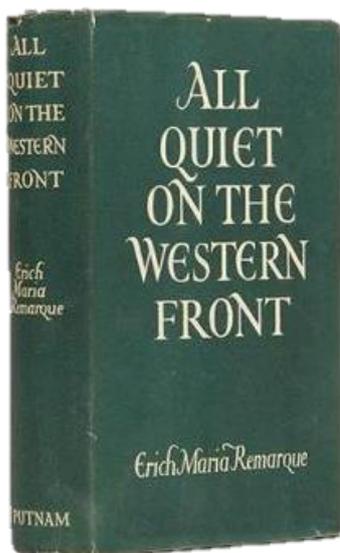


Figure 2: Putnam's 1929 dust jacket (Remarque, 1929)

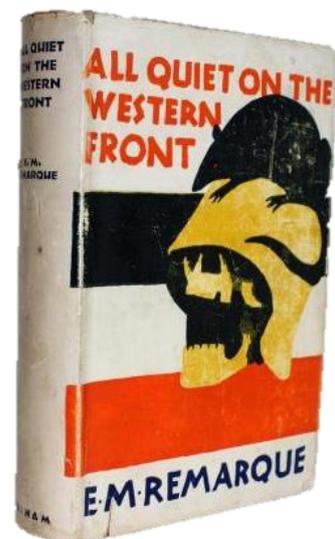
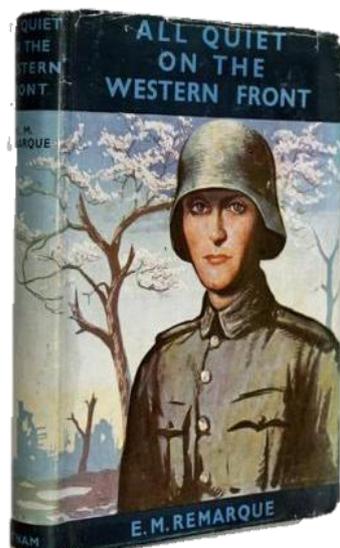


Figure 3: (a) Putnam's Sons 1930 (left) and (b) 1936 (right) editions (Remarque 1930; 1936)

Since, there have been numerous covers for *All Quiet*, later becoming more explicit about the tragedy of conflict as temporal distance from the World Wars grew. However, it is notable that by 1996, when Vintage published Brian Murdoch's translation, the [design](#) reverted to simplicity, using imagery of a poppy to depict the novel as memorialising as it had been positioned by German commentators in 1929. In [Vintage's 2005 edition](#), an endorsement from *The Times* was added ('Remarque's evocation of the horrors of modern warfare has lost none of its force'), making the horrors within clear. But the imagery is simple for both editions, with only mild reference to violence in a white bandage textured background and red poppy. Using Samuel Hynes' (1992) concept of myth, this could demonstrate that the 'myth' of the war as one of futility and loss is now consolidated and unequivocally depicted by the poppy icon, so a realistic war landscape is unnecessary.

Further evidence of how *All Quiet's* sales success does not necessarily equate to a consensus of vast disillusion is found in reader experiences. Whilst references to Remarque and *All Quiet* appear only twice on the Reader Experiences Database, the comments are revealing. In late-1929, Winifred Moore wrote in a personal paper: 'I also have been reading *All Quiet*...Stanley and I stood for an hour outside my hotel at midnight in Southampton Row...and rowed about it' (Moore, 1929). Whilst details of the argument are unspecified, the record reveals that in 1929 there was not necessarily a 'coherent and widely accepted line' of disenchantment as Frayn (2015, 232) has proposed. Winifred was a Quaker, so it is possible she had pacifist inclinations and agreed with the futility presented in *All Quiet*. Perhaps, then, Stanley disagreed. Whatever their dispute, Winifred's comments show that publishing *All Quiet* in Britain entailed risk as varying opinions and reception existed. Putnam's was perhaps sensible to have an initially conservative jacket and avoid overtly indicating the disillusionment narrative within.

Whilst *All Quiet* is said to have inspired an influx of similar semi-autobiographical war novels, publishers still acquired a variety of texts. Some attempted to differentiate from disenchanted narratives which were growing to dominate the war books market. By presenting a broader spectrum of opinions, publishers could expect wider readership. In

1930, Eyre & Spottiswoode published *Great Short Stories of the War*, representing various standpoints. In the collection, German, English, American and French works coexisted, with lighter, patriotic texts such as Sapper's included alongside *All Quiet* and *Death of a Hero* (Trott 217, 47). That Eyre & Spottiswoode displayed a variety of opinions on the war reveals that disenchantment was not the only mode of writing or reading about the war, nor was it all that publishers sought to represent. Whilst disillusionment narratives may have had the most symbolic pertinence, publishers could secure maximum commercial capital by representing a wider spectrum of views, especially important as European and US economies struggled through the depression era.

Conclusion

All Quiet challenges Bourdieu's assertion that cultural production is 'an economic world reversed' (1993, 7) and that economic success bars consecration and symbolic power. It is a bestseller, selling 30-40 million copies since publication (*Smithsonian*, June 15, 2015); yet, it retains symbolic value as one of the most pertinent narratives on the futility of war. It is now on school syllabi, confirming that Remarque fulfils Bourdieu's definitions of symbolic capital: prestige, celebrity and honour, alongside commercial renown. Arguably the symbolic significance has even grown with the novel's success, with later editions clearly memorialising with poppy-themed covers. This investigation of *All Quiet* has also revealed a complicated scene regarding publishers and reception, suggesting, like Isherwood argues (2016, 340), that publishers such as Ullstein Verlag, Putnam's and Little, Brown contributed to myth-formation by publishing narratives such as Remarque's, but also encouraged debate with contested memories of war.

Commentator John Brown remarked in 1930 that, 'the war-book boom is over, the public interest has slumped – back to normal' (Isherwood 2016, 332). Yet, there remains to this day a keen public interest, with Vintage's 1996 edition selling over 6,200 copies since January 2018 (Nielsen BookScan), 90 years since *All Quiet*'s first publication. Therefore, Remarque's symbolic prestige has consolidated through accrual of celebrity alongside

commercial success, although at publication, publishers were handling uncertainty around disillusionment narratives and their reception.

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