

REFLECTIONS

EVENTS AND PERSONALITIES FROM RECENT HISTORY

In a month of remembrance, **John Davis** highlights the book
All Quiet on the Western Front



It is an ironic twist of literature that a book, written as a visceral semi-autobiographical account of the First World War, should become one of the finest anti-war books ever penned.

The author Erich Maria Remarque vividly described the carnage and atrocious living conditions endured by soldiers engaged in endless trench warfare yet managed to imbue his story with the tragic senselessness of large-scale warfare and the wasted potential of millions of combatants. Its universal message about the human cost of war continues to resonate with readers today.

All Quiet on the Western Front (AQOTWF) is an all-action book. It rarely moves beyond the front lines and is told almost throughout in the first person.

Yet it is highly perceptive in the way it channels the thoughts and feelings of its leading character, the young German infantryman Paul Baumer. It charts his progress from the time he enlists as a young student in 1914 until minutes after the armistice which was timed to come into force at 11 a.m. on November 11th, 1918.

Erich Maria Remarque was born in the German town of Osnabruck in June, 1898. His father was a bookbinder but it was with his mother that he established a closer relationship. It was as a tribute to her that he adopted the middle name Maria in 1919. The spelling of the surname was a further change. He was originally christened Erich Paul Remark but the surname was altered to Remarque partly because

of the family's French ancestry and also because he wanted to disassociate himself from a previously written unsuccessful novel when *AQOTWF* was published in 1929.

On reaching the age of eighteen in 1917, Remarque was immediately conscripted into the Imperial German Army and soon moved to front-line trench warfare. Later in 1917 he received shrapnel wounds in his neck, leg and arm but on recovery was re-drafted to the front. Right at the very end of the war he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class, though the reason appears never to have been specified. He was finally demobbed in 1919.

On his return to civilian life, Remarque completed his training as a teacher and taught in a number of schools in the Osnabruck area. At the end of 1920 he took leave of absence and looked for other work. The urge to write took him into journalism and he became a writer of technical manuals for the Continental Rubber Company, a German tyre manufacturer.

Remarque had made his first attempts at creative writing at an early age. He tried his hand at essays, poems, and then a novel but it did not do well. He earned some success with a later novel called *Station at the Horizon*, which outlined the story of an ex-soldier traumatised over the 'lost generation' of the war.

AQOTWF was written during 1927 but slow production meant it was not published until two years later. Once released, it was an instant international bestseller and inspired a new genre of veterans writing about conflict. Furthermore, it spawned dramatic representations of the Great War on both the stage and the screen. Riding on the tail of the success of *AQOTWF*, Remarque produced a number of similar works which detailed life in war-time and post-war Germany. The best known of these is *The Road Back*. Sales of his books made him a wealthy man and he bought a villa in Switzerland where he planned to live in addition to property he had in France. Later he was to spend the second World War in America.

The move from Germany proved to be fortuitous as back in his homeland Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels declared that all Remarque's books were 'unpatriotic' and as such were banned. Copies in existence became part of the infamous Nazi book burning sessions. His French background and Catholic faith were also attacked. The authorities claimed Remarque had not seen active service and his citizenship was revoked. It was even alleged that his real name was Kramer (Remark backwards) and that his antecedents might have been Jewish.

Tragically his youngest sister, who had remained

in Germany with her husband, was arrested in 1943 and put on trial in the People's Court where she was found guilty of 'undermining morale'. The notorious Court President, Roland Freisler declared, "Your brother is unfortunately beyond our reach; you however will not escape us." He sentenced Elfriede Scholz to death and she was guillotined later that year. Remarque was unaware of her fate until after the war but dedicated his 1952 novel *Spark of Life* to her memory

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Following World War II, Remarque returned to live in Switzerland. He continued to write further novels into the 1950s and also several screenplays. Other writing projects, including a stage play called *Full Circle*, continued into the 1960s until his death in 1970 at the age of 72. He was married at the time to the American actress Paulette Goddard and she continued to live in the Swiss villa until her death in 1990. She left a bequest of \$20 million to New York University to fund an Institute of European Studies which is named after Remarque. It is still operating.



Footnote: Only three important film versions of *All Quiet on the Western Front* have ever been made. The first was a black and white production in 1930 starring Lew Ayres. The second in 1930 was released for television with Richard Thomas and Ernest Borgnine in the leading roles. The latest (2022) directed by Edward Berger is available currently on Netflix and stars the young German actor Felix Kammerer.

Semi-retired and living in Lyme Regis, John Davis started working life as a newspaper journalist before moving on to teach in schools, colleges and as a private tutor. He is a history graduate with Bachelors and Masters degrees from Bristol University with a particular interest in the History of Education and Twentieth Century European History.