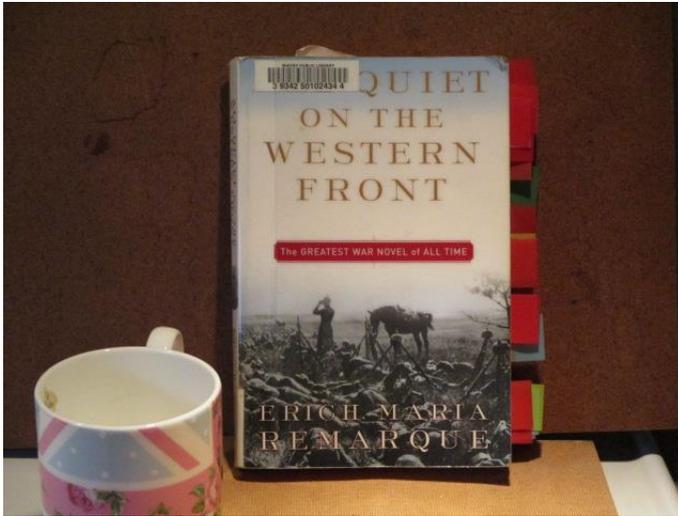


All Quiet on the Western Front

By Rod Fraser



HERE IS ANOTHER war novel I recommend. *All Quiet on the Western Front* was first serialized in a German newspaper in late 1928. Then a few months later, it appeared in book form. It was quite a success.

In its first eighteen months in print, it sold 2.5 million copies in a number of languages. The American journalist, H.L. Mencken, felt it was, “unquestionably, the best story of the World War.” I tend to agree.

It was also made into a film twice. The 1930

version was a box-office hit. It won academy awards for best picture and best director. As late as 1990, it was ranked as the seventh best American epic film, presumably in all time.

I watched the 1979 film adaptation recently, starring Ernest Borgnine and Richard Thomas, as Stanislaus Katczinsky and Paul Bäumer. I expect many of you will know Richard Thomas as John-Boy in *The Waltons*. And of course, Ernest Borgnine is a well-known actor with decades of movie roles behind him.

Both film adaptations (as well as the novel) are available for sale from Amazon. I was able to find a copy of the novel at my library and watched the film on *Amazon Prime*. This is a great online resource. It offers many films, as well as free shipping on most Amazon products. It is very cost effective.

I read *All Quiet on the Western Front* twice. Once a few years ago, and again recently—to write this review. In my second reading, I was surprised to find it was still enjoyable—fresh and compelling. When I mentioned this novel to my brother, Drew, he complained it was too pacifistic. He suggested I read another novel, *Storm of Steel*, which in his view was more balanced and true to life.

It appears the Nazis agreed with Drew. They

banned *All Quiet on the Western Front* (book and film) when Hitler came to power in the 1930s. They also stripped the author, Erich Maria Remarque, of his German citizenship in 1938. Fortunately, he was wise enough to leave Germany (to take up residence in Switzerland), or he might have been arrested and interned. Later Remarque immigrated to the United States.

I think this pacifistic criticism is overstated. In my opinion, this novel is a realistic tale of soldiering and army life during World War One. It is an interesting book that people should read if they are interested in The Great War. But in deference to those who would like to make up their own mind, I plan to review *Storm of Steel* in a future posting.

ERICH MARIA REMARQUE (1898–1970) was born Erich Paul Remark. After publishing an earlier novel in 1920, *The Dream Room*, he changed his name. Some say it was to disassociate himself from this earlier work, but the evidence for this is unclear. He added Maria as his middle name to honour his mother and Remarque was chosen, as it was an earlier spelling of the family name.

Remarque was educated in private Catholic schools during his early years and was in training to become a teacher, when at the age of 18, he was

conscripted into the German army.

After his basic training, he was transferred to the Western front. In mid-1917, he was seriously wounded by shrapnel during a British artillery barrage and was sent to an army hospital. Remarque spent a number of months recovering from his wounds.

When he was back on his feet, Remarque worked as an orderly room clerk for a time. Then declared fit for service, he was assigned to the 78th Infantry in late October 1918. The armistice prevented him from returning to the front.

After his success with this novel and its film adaptation in 1930, Remarque became quite the celebrity. He moved to the United States in 1939, had affairs with Marlene Dietrich and Hedy Lamar, married twice (latterly to actress, Paulette Goddard), became a U.S. citizen in 1947, wrote a number of novels and other works and died of a heart attack in 1970 while living in Switzerland.

REMARQUE'S NOVEL TELLS the story of a group of young German soldiers from the early days of the war in August 1914, to late in the conflict in 1918, when the narrator, Paul Bäumer, is killed. In the second last paragraph of the book, his death is

reported in the novel as follows:

"He fell in October 1918, on a day that was so quiet and still on the whole front, that the army report confined itself to the single sentence: All quiet on the Western Front."

In the first pages of the novel, a class of twenty German schoolboys, all more or less nineteen years of age, are encouraged by their schoolmaster, Professor Kantorek, to enlist in the army when war was declared. Soon enough the boys are sent for ten weeks of basic training and shortly thereafter they arrive at the Western front.

Here they are met by Stanislaus Katczinsky (called 'Kat'), who becomes the leader of their group and a mentor to Paul. Kat is a private in the army, but he is "shrewd, cunning, hard-bitten, 40 years of age, with a face of the soil, blue eyes, bent shoulders, and a remarkable nose for dirty weather, good food and soft jobs."

Each platoon is matched up with a man such as Kat, to teach the younger soldiers how to survive in the early months when they know nothing, and when knowing nothing is a sure way to a needless death or a senseless wounding.

In the Second Company, to which they have been

assigned, are Müller, Kropp, Leer and Bäumer, all classmates from school. Franz Kemmerich is also a fellow student, but the narrator, Paul Bäumer, mentions him only when they visit Franz at a dressing station. He was wounded, his foot amputated and now Franz is expected to die.

Müller wants Franz's "fine English boots of soft, yellow leather." Bäumer explains the situation as follows: "the boots are quite inappropriate to Franz's circumstances.... Why then, should Müller not have them?"

Bäumer continues, "We have lost all sense of other considerations, because they are artificial. Only facts are real and important for us. And good boots are scarce."

The other boys feel bad when they hear Müller speak up about the boots, but they say nothing. Privately, they agree with Müller, when he says, "they are no use to ... [Franz]" anymore.

The four boys are joined in the Second Company by Kat, Tjaden, Westhus and Detering. There are others, but the novel largely revolves around the nine soldiers mentioned above. It tells of the many details of army life, with fighting taking a minor role. There is leave home for Paul Bäumer, a trip to the hospital after he and Kropp are wounded, guard duty

at a Russian POW camp, the constant and amusing search for food and the tragic death of Kat and Paul at the end.

Paul introduces the story of his leave by mentioning he was deloused before arriving at the rail head for his trip home. Kat and Kropp came to see him off. There is a two hour wait for the train and his friends leave to return to duty.

As his friends walk off, Paul observes, "They go off and wave [goodbye] once or twice. Their figures dwindle. I know their every step and movement; I would recognize them at any distance."

The leave is a terrible disappointment. His mother, father and people he meets all want to hear about life at the front. Paul says of those at home:

"I find I do not belong here anymore, it is a foreign world... [My father] does not know that a man cannot talk of such things; I would do it willingly, but it is too dangerous for me to put these things into words. I am afraid they might then become gigantic and I be no longer able to master them. "

By the final year of the war, Kropp has been invalided home with a leg amputated at the thigh, Müller, Westhus and Leer are dead. Detering dese-

rted to return to his farm, but he is caught and presumably executed. Tjaden is not mentioned, but presumably dead as well.

It is only Kat and Paul in these last months. Then Kat falls with a leg wound while foraging for food in the final months of the war. Paul picks him up and carries him to a dressing station. It is a long walk and when they arrive, the medic tells Paul that Kat is dead of a shrapnel wound to the head. It happened in the last minutes of their walk when shells were bursting near them.

Just days before Paul's death, described so quietly in an earlier paragraph of this review, he says, "I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront [the future] without fear." If this book is pacifistic, then let it be so. It is a wonderful story, brilliantly told.

September 15, 2018