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## "The market is flooded with them": Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* and the War Books Boom

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## Chapter 6

### “The market is getting flooded with them”: Richard Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* and the War Books Boom

#### Vincent Trott

In recent decades a number of scholars have identified a period known as the “war books boom,” roughly covering the years 1926 to 1933, when numerous influential works reflecting on the experience of the First World War were written and published.<sup>1</sup> This was not only an important juncture in the development of literature about the Great War, but also a significant point in the formation of a popular mythology of the conflict. Samuel Hynes argues that during this period a “Myth of the War” was created - this myth was “not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it,” one that characterised the conflict in terms of bitterness, disillusionment and futility.<sup>2</sup> Yet while the “war books boom” has rightly been understood as a critical cultural event, the fact that it was also a *commercial* phenomenon has been largely overlooked. The role of the publishing industry in fuelling the boom has received little scholarly attention. Exploring the role of publishers during this period, however, can reveal how they drove the commercial climate, where they chose to exploit public interest, and how these considerations influenced their relationship with their authors. This chapter will demonstrate how publishers played a crucial role in determining and shaping the popular response to the First World War during the interwar years. This in turn

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1991), and Janet Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).

would lay the framework for how the war would come to be represented in the following decades.

To illuminate these themes, I provide a case study of the publishing process and reception of one key novel of the war books boom - Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929). This work is ideal for a study of this nature for a number of reasons. Aldington had a very productive relationship with his publisher, Charles Prentice, a partner at Chatto and Windus. Their regular exchange of letters provides valuable evidence regarding the process leading to the publication of the novel. *Death of a Hero* is also of interest because it articulates the disillusionment and bitterness that typifies many books of this period, including works such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) and Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929). Yet Aldington had a distinctly aggressive stance which made his novel inherently divisive: whilst commercially successful, *Death of a Hero* never sold as many copies as some of its more well-known competitors, and its critical reception was mixed. This record reflects a marketing approach shaped by a number of competing tensions, and provides clues concerning the factors which determined popular success. *Death of a Hero's* publishing and reception history is therefore particularly worthy of consideration.

Richard Aldington was born in 1892, into a provincial middle-class family. He began his literary career as a poet, and with H. D. and Ezra Pound founded the imagist movement. In 1916 he voluntarily enlisted and fought on the western front with the Royal Sussex Regiment as a private, before being commissioned in 1917. The war had a profound psychological effect on Aldington, and he found it difficult to express himself creatively throughout much of the twenties, instead making a living through literary criticism and translation. During this period he made a number of aborted attempts at writing a war book

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<sup>2</sup>Hynes, *A War Imagined* (see above, n.1), p. x.

based on his experiences, before completing *Death of a Hero*, his first novel, in early 1929. The book was published in September of that year by Covici-Friede in the US and Chatto and Windus in the UK. The main body of the novel comprises three parts. The first describes protagonist George Winterbourne's Victorian and Edwardian childhood. The second focuses on him as a young artist in London, including his ménage à trois with his wife Elizabeth and mistress Fanny. The final section deals with the war, culminating, inevitably, in Winterbourne's death on the western front: 'The line of bullets slashed across his chest like a steel whip. The universe exploded darkly into oblivion.'<sup>3</sup>

Through its depiction of Victorian and Edwardian life, the first part of the novel acts as a scathing generational critique. Aldington rails against the hypocrisies of the era including the public school ethos, patriotism, imperialism, philistinism and sexual repression. The older generation are therefore held responsible for the tragedy of the war. It is the war section that defines the novel, however, and here Aldington vividly conveys the physical and mental strain of combat, depicting battle as "a timeless confusion, a chaos of noise, fatigue, anxiety and horror."<sup>4</sup> The title is of course ironic: there were no heroes in an age of mass, mechanised warfare. Ultimately the war is dismissed as a futile tragedy, and the novel is an indictment of "the whole sickening bloody waste of it, the damnable stupid waste and torture."<sup>5</sup> *Death of a Hero* typifies the tone of irony and disillusionment which tends to characterise what is now seen as canonical First World War writing. The work also married this bitter tone with unpalatable language: it contains sexual references and profanity which led to it being expurgated for publication.

Scholarly responses to the novel have varied. Bernard Bergonzi, in his seminal survey of First World War literature, *Heroes Twilight* (1965), argued that Aldington's untempered

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: Hogarth, 1984), p. 372 (hereafter cited as Aldington).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

vitriol detracted from the book's anti-war thesis.<sup>6</sup> More recently, there have been efforts at rehabilitation. Andrew Frayn, for example, suggests that *Death of a Hero* "was significant in testing and expanding the market for subsequent disenchanted representations of the war."<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that *Death of a Hero* is an exemplar of British disenchantment with the war, and a synthesis of many key myths that have frequently come to define it. To understand how *Death of a Hero* fitted in to an evolving mythology of the war, however, it is necessary to consider the publishing climate from which it emerged.

### **"The War Books Boom"**

*Death of a Hero* was written and published at a time of intense public interest in the First World War. This was also a period during which the war was beginning to be cast in an increasingly disillusioned light. In 1928, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* were published, but it was the enormous success of two works later that year which really fuelled the publishing boom. The first of these was R.C. Sheriff's drama, *Journey's End*, a hit in the West-End, which ran for 593 performances, and sold 175,000 thousand copies, occupying bestseller lists for most of 1929. The second was Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a German anti-war novel which achieved international fame. In Britain, it sold 25,000 copies in two weeks, and was under heavy demand in public libraries.<sup>8</sup> Stepney Council, in east London, for example, had purchased an unprecedented 126 copies of the book by January 1930, but still had a waiting list of 553 people waiting to borrow it.<sup>9</sup> The two works were rather different in tone,

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes Twilight* (London: Carcanet, 1996), p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Frayn, *Writing Disenchantment: The Development of First World War Prose, 1918 – 1930* (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2008), p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> Rosa Maria Bracco, *The Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> 'The Lighter Side,' *Nottingham Evening Post*, 2 January 1930, p. 4.

however. Despite conveying the tragedy of the war, Sherriff's play was far gentler than Remarque's novel, which was a fierce and bitter indictment of the conflict.

War books themselves were nothing new in the late twenties; many works reflecting on the war had been published since the armistice, but the most popular of these had tended to be middlebrow novels, such as Ernest Raymond's *Tell England* (1922), which advanced traditional, patriotic messages.<sup>10</sup> The popularity of more disillusioned works in 1929 was indicative of a shift in the popular mood. But we should not assume that publishers were simply reactive in this regard. As Geoffrey Faber noted in an address to fellow publishers, the change in public attitudes which fostered the boom "was intelligently anticipated by publishers."<sup>11</sup> The industry had been instrumental in gauging public perceptions throughout the twenties, and was quick to recognise when commercial opportunities presented themselves. Many publishers were also motivated by a desire to publish books which conveyed a more critical perspective on the war, and had been doing so throughout the twenties. This allowed them to influence public attitudes and test the market for more challenging representations. Chatto and Windus had been instrumental in this respect, publishing a number of books of this nature including Wilfred Owen's *Poems* (1920), C.E. Montague's *Disenchantment* (1922) and R. H. Mottram's *Spanish Farm* trilogy (1924–26).

The success of Sherriff and Remarque, however, triggered an immense wave of publishing activity. The trade paper, the *Publisher and Bookseller*, is illustrative of this phenomenon; its pages are awash with adverts for war books, many of which make overt references to the commercial climate. An advert from May 1929, entitled "THIS IS THE DAY OF THE WAR BOOK," typified this trend:

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<sup>10</sup> Bracco, *Merchants of Hope* (see above, n. 8), p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Faber, *A Publisher Speaking* (London: Faber, 1934), p. 24.

Undoubtedly the bestsellers of recent months have been about the War; there is a public for them and the demand has not yet been satisfied. Messrs. John Lane The Bodley Head Limited believe that they have found one of the best and most thrilling accounts of personal experience in *SQUAD* by James B. Wharton, which has already sold six big editions in America.<sup>12</sup>

Publishers saw a large potential market for these books and used aggressive promotional techniques to exploit this. Many, such as James Wharton's *Squad* are largely forgotten today, but others that were published in 1929, including Graves's *Goodbye to All That* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* have become classics of the genre. Indeed, the latter was republished as part of the first batch of Penguin paperbacks in 1935.

Despite the voracious appetite for war literature during this period, the mythology of the war was still hotly contested terrain and it sparked intense debate. Whilst anti-war novels were very successful, other representations, such as *Journey's End*, were more measured. There was no guarantee that Aldington's bitter invective would be greeted by a wide and eager audience. The marketing of the work would need to be finely tuned to capitalize on a commercial climate which was undoubtedly expanding but that was still complex in its attitude to the war.

### **The publishing process**

By early 1929, Aldington had already agreed a publishing deal with the American firm Covici-Friede, and it was through them that he was put in touch with Charles Prentice, a

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<sup>12</sup> *Publisher and Bookseller*, 31 May 1929, p. 994.

partner at Chatto and Windus. Aldington wrote to Prentice on 30 March, buoyed by the commercial climate:

Will you let me know quite frankly whether you are really interested in a novel by me? I don't mind in the least bit your saying "no," because I know I can sell the book in England. On the other hand, I admit I should like to have it published by Chattos.<sup>13</sup>

Aldington projected confidence, implying that the book may already have received interest from other publishers. Yet his desire to have it published by Chatto and Windus suggests that he felt them to be a particularly appropriate home for his work. The firm's proven track record in publishing challenging war books is likely to have been a factor.

Aldington realised, however, that speed would be necessary to exploit the market whilst it was still receptive to war books. On 1 May 1929, in a telegram to Covici-Friede, he wrote:

Referring great success *Journey's End* and German war novels urge earliest fall publication *Death of a Hero* to take advantage public mood. Large scale English war novel might go big now.<sup>14</sup>

Later that day, Aldington contacted Prentice, quoting his telegram to Covici-Friede, and urging a swift decision.<sup>15</sup> Although *Journey's End* was milder and less venomous than *Death of a Hero*, its popularity was evidence of a growing public interest in the war, whilst Remarque's work no doubt convinced Aldington that an English novel of comparable vitriol could prove equally lucrative. Another German war novel Aldington may have had in mind was Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* (1928), also a commercial success. Aldington sensed, however, that this literary trend might be a fleeting fad rather than a more

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Aldington to Charles Prentice, 30 March 1929. Reading, University of Reading Special Collections (hereafter UoR), Chatto & Windus archive, MS 2444, CW 48/3.

sustained reengagement with the war, and suggested to Prentice that the novel be marketed accordingly: “I think...that the book must be ‘put’ over as a war novel and we must get it out as soon as possible.”<sup>16</sup> *Death of a Hero* is broader in scope than *Journey’s End* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, both of which focus solely on the experience of war. Its depiction of pre-war society opened up other avenues for marketing, but Aldington clearly felt it wise to draw on the novel’s war section and exploit the popularity of this theme. He was not alone in his desire to act quickly in this respect. The publisher Peter Davies had urged Frederic Manning to complete his war novel swiftly but was concerned by the author’s inability to finish what he had started. He therefore “lured” Manning to his house, freed him from distractions, and forced him to stay there until his war novel was finished.<sup>17</sup> The result, *Her Privates We*, was finally published in January 1930, and capitalized successfully on the boom. A commercial and critical success, it sold 15,000 copies in three months.<sup>18</sup>

On 15 May, Prentice confirmed that Chatto and Windus had accepted Covici-Friede’s terms for the rights to publish the novel in the UK. Prentice also used the letter to express his own enjoyment of the text: “I can now say how much I enjoyed reading ‘Death of a Hero’, and what a splendid piece of writing I think it is ... I would like to congratulate you if I may”.<sup>19</sup> Prentice was evidently sympathetic to Aldington’s vision of the war, and, as a war veteran himself, may have shared similar experiences. His warm praise for the work helped foster a productive working relationship which was to prove invaluable, for it allowed the two men to cooperate in overcoming obstacles to the publication of the book. The first of these concerned the need for expurgation in order to avoid prosecution. The manuscript of *Death of a Hero* contained a number of sexual references in addition to occasional profanity

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Christopher Ridgeway, ‘Introduction’ to Aldington (see above, n. 3), i-xi (p. iii).

<sup>15</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 1 May 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>16</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 11 May 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Marwil, *Frederic Manning: An Unfinished Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 1988), p. 254.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

within the dialogue. This stark use of language was a potent weapon in Aldington's attack on the inhibitions and hypocrisy of the Victorian era, yet he and Prentice were faced with little choice but to expurgate the text. As J. H. Willis Jr. has demonstrated in his study of war book censorship, publishers had good reason to be cautious. Covici-Friede had recently been taken to court in America for publishing Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), a novel which documented a lesbian love affair, and Jonathan Cape were forced to withdraw the book from circulation in Britain. Ernest Hemingway's war novel *A Farewell to Arms* fell victim to censorship on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>20</sup>

From a commercial standpoint it was prudent to expurgate the text. As the publisher Stanley Unwin noted, "it never in the long run pays a reputable publisher to 'overstep the mark.'" <sup>21</sup> Prentice did not want to take risks and upon acceptance of the book he sent Aldington "a list of purple words and passages" which he felt would have to be omitted. He was keen, however, to stress his sympathy with Aldington's message.<sup>22</sup> Aldington had been aware of the likely need for expurgation since he had commenced correspondence with Prentice and, despite his frustration, was pragmatic enough to acquiesce.<sup>23</sup> He did, however, insist that rows of asterisks be used to replace the words omitted from the text, in order to draw attention to the restraints imposed upon him.<sup>24</sup> Despite understandable concerns, Prentice reluctantly agreed to Aldington's wishes on 2 July.<sup>25</sup> The result of the excisions was, as Willis has argued, "a badly damaged and compromised text."<sup>26</sup> This was true in an

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<sup>19</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 15 May 1929. UoR, Chatto & Windus archive, MS 2444, CW A/124.

<sup>20</sup> J.H. Willis, Jr., 'The Censored Language of War: Richard Aldington's Death of a Hero and Three Other War Novels of 1929,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 45.4 (1999), 467-87, there 469-70.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1929), p. 326.

<sup>22</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 15 May 1929 (see above, n. 19).

<sup>23</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 30 March 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>24</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 16 May 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>25</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 2 July 1929 (see above, n. 19).

<sup>26</sup> Willis, 'Censored Language of War' (see above, n. 20), 484.

aesthetic as well as literary sense. In some instances the asterisks stretched across the page for a number of lines to the detriment of the book's visual appeal.<sup>27</sup>

The tension between artistic integrity and mass appeal was also reflected in the design of the dustcover. Whereas book jackets had initially been intended simply as a protective covering, by the 1920s their marketing potential was beginning to be recognized, with many publishers employing colourful, pictorial designs to catch a potential reader's attention.<sup>28</sup> Aldington had clearly considered the value of dustcovers and on 28 June he wrote to Prentice with the following suggestion: "why not ask Paul Nash to do one? ... Tell him from me to make it hard, abstract and bitter."<sup>29</sup> Nash had been an official war artist, heavily influenced by Vorticism, and during the twenties was at the vanguard of the modernist movement in British art. Aldington evidently felt that Nash's work complemented his experimentation with modernist literary forms, and intended the cover to reinforce the novel's bitter message. It became apparent, however, that Aldington's commitment to the culturally highbrow might not be conducive to commercial success. Prentice prudently advised Aldington that the cover should not be so abstract as to deter readers:

I hope, however, that the abstractness will not be carried too far; a dust cover must have some pictorial quality and some popular flavour; otherwise it will not do its job of attracting the populace.<sup>30</sup>

Prentice remained a shrewd businessman and was not afraid to temper his author's ambitions if he felt it necessary. Such disagreements over dustcover art were not uncommon. Whereas

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<sup>27</sup> For another reference to the visual impact of these excisions, see Andrew Nash, 'Literary Culture and Literary Publishing in Inter-War Britain: A View from Chatto and Windus', in Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash and Ian Willison (eds), *Literary Cultures and the Material Book* (London: British Library, 2007), 323-342 (pp. 328-331).

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Connelly, *Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 28 June 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>30</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 2 July 1929 (see above, n. 19).

the primary goal of publishers was to entice the public, authors were often swayed by less populist artistic considerations. Robert Graves, for example, had been in dispute with Jonathan Cape for similar reasons over the jacket design for *Goodbye to All That*.<sup>31</sup>

Upon receipt of Nash's initial design, Prentice expressed reservations, noting that "it is quite pleasing, but not very arresting," though he did concede that "when the colours are completed the effect will be more brilliant."<sup>32</sup>

**[INSERT Figure 6.1. Paul Nash's dustcover design for the Chatto and Windus edition of *Death of a Hero* (1929)]**

The final cover suggests that Prentice's wishes were fulfilled (figure 6.1). The design employed recognisable symbols of the western front, such as barbed wire and plumes of smoke, and was likely to resonate with the public imagination. This was perhaps the perfect compromise, because whilst not abstract, these symbols firmly alluded to the horror of the battlefield and were largely in keeping with Aldington's bitter denunciation of the war. Aldington himself seemed pleased, expressing his support for the dustcover in a letter to Prentice on 1 September.<sup>33</sup>

The cover was actually a more explicit reinforcement of the book's themes than that used for the first UK edition of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In this instance the publishers, Putnam, eschewed cover art altogether (figure 6.2). But Prentice's concerns that Nash's cover was perhaps not arresting enough is understandable given the rather less subtle cover that accompanied the second 1929 reprint of Remarque's book (figure 6.3).

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Graves to Jonathan Cape, August 1931, in Paul O'Prey, ed., *The Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1914 – 1946* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 216.

<sup>32</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 7 August 1929. UoR, Chatto & Windus archive, MS 2444, CW A/125.

<sup>33</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 1 September 1929 (see above, n. 13).

**[INSERT Figure 6.2. Design for the first Putnam edition of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).]**

**[INSERT Figure 6.3. Design for the second Putnam edition of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).]**

For this second edition, striking red lettering and gothic imagery were employed, complementing the uncompromising battlefield images that characterise the novel. That such morbid cover art could be used to promote a bestseller also suggests that the public were becoming more receptive to anti-war imagery. At the very least, it attests to what Michael Paris has described as the “pleasure culture of war.”<sup>34</sup> If many readers of these novels were not ardent pacifists, they certainly enjoyed reading about the grizzlier aspects of armed combat. So whilst Nash’s cover could have been more striking, its use of recognisable symbols of war’s horror suggests that the book had enough of the “popular flavour” that Prentice desired.

Aldington was initially keen to capitalize upon the contemporary demand for war books by marketing *Death of a Hero* accordingly. But in a letter to Prentice on 4 August, he advocated a different approach:

It is not for me to interfere in the “publicity” of the Hero, but I should like to offer a suggestion. I feel it would be a mistake to present it merely as a war book – the market is getting flooded with them.<sup>35</sup>

Although the popularity of war books had provided impetus, it was now proving to be a deterrent. The sheer quantity of this type of literature led Aldington to fear, as publication approached, that the market was becoming saturated. One solution would be to differentiate the book from its competitors. Though Nash’s cover alluded to the war, the accompanying

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850–2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 185.

blurb and advertising provided opportunities for Chatto and Windus to reposition the novel. Aldington therefore used his letter to establish the book's additional themes, describing it as a "tri-partite survey of English lower-middle and middle-class society ... and an attempt to show, by 'energetic satire,' how a catastrophe like the War is rendered possible by the human failings of ordinary people as much as by the machinations of politicians."<sup>36</sup> The novel was not just a reflection on the tragedy of the war, but a visceral attack on the society that had permitted it.

Prentice responded positively, assuring Aldington that the information would be "of the utmost use to our publicity department". He also agreed with Aldington that the market was threatening to become saturated, stating that, "I am glad you suggest that the book should not be presented merely as a war book; one hears of several that are coming out in the autumn. It will go down far better as a mixture."<sup>37</sup> The ideal marketing solution was to exploit the war books boom whilst simultaneously differentiating the product. Striking the right balance would be paramount.

The blurb for the first edition gives a clear indication of how Chatto and Windus chose to position the novel. *Death of a Hero* is described as:

a survey of English middle-class society and an attempt to show, by forceful satire, how a catastrophe such as the War is rendered possible by the failings of ordinary people as much by the machinations of politicians; in other words, to show that if people were more intelligent, and had a better sense of reality, humbug could not so easily engineer them into tragedy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 4 August 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 7 August 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>38</sup> Back cover blurb to Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929).

This is a considerable concession to Aldington's wishes regarding product differentiation, mirroring many elements of the author's aforementioned letter. This was not uncommon; publishers frequently based blurbs on their author's suggestions, and this certainly carried less risk of offending an author's sensibilities.<sup>39</sup> Yet the blurb hardly courts mass appeal. By conveying Aldington's combative, accusatory message, and by laying the blame for the war at the foot of "ordinary people," it risks alienating its potential readership. It does, however, firmly position the novel within a growing mood of disillusionment, allying the book with other vitriolic attacks such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Given the huge success of Remarque's work, emphasising Aldington's bitterness was not necessarily antithetical to commercial success. As with their position on censorship, Aldington and Prentice continued to balance mass market appeal with artistic integrity.

It is also worth noting that the novel is presented as broad societal critique - a reflection on the causes, rather than the conduct of the war - and in this sense it is not marketed as a conventional war novel. It is surprising that Aldington's own war experiences, which heavily influenced elements of the novel, are not drawn upon here. Nowhere is there reference to the novel's war section, or the experience of the trenches. Consequently, the blurb is able to exploit popular interest in the war by alluding to the conflict, whilst still distancing itself from the recent spate of trench narratives. As we have seen, this was no accident, but the product of meticulous planning by Prentice and Aldington.

The blurb's depiction of the protagonist is also significant. George Winterbourne is described as "one of millions who accepted death as the immediate end to their youth. More sensitive than the generality of Englishmen he stands, nevertheless, as a true representative of a generation; his story is a monument to the dead."<sup>40</sup> This is clearly an attempt to broaden the

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<sup>39</sup> Unwin, *Truth About Publishing* (see above, n. 21), p. 243.

<sup>40</sup> Back cover blurb (see above, n. 37).

novel's appeal - a suggestion that it in some way encapsulates the common experience of war, and that it can perform a commemorative function. Whilst it is conceded that Winterbourne is an unusually sensitive artist, it is implied that his untimely death in combat makes him typical of his generation. These are ambitious claims. Winterbourne is not an everyman but a largely insular character whose sensitivity and intellect leave him feeling distanced from his fellow soldiers.<sup>41</sup> And whilst Winterbourne's death in combat is crucial to the novel's rendering of the war as tragedy, this was not the common experience of most British men and their families (around 88% of men who had served in the conflict returned).<sup>42</sup> For these men, the war ended with the gradual and often painful process of reintegration into civilian society rather than death. Winterbourne's story was in this sense not representative but this did not necessarily matter; it was certainly in the commercial interests of Aldington and Prentice to present it as such. In doing so, they also played an important role in constructing a popular mythology of the war which was increasingly centred on death and tragedy rather than victory or heroism. That numerous other fictional protagonists die in combat, such as Remarque's Baumer and Manning's Bourne, is a testament to this.

On 19 September, the book's publication date, Prentice updated Aldington regarding subscription sales. The interest of booksellers and commercial lending libraries was crucial to the success of the book, and great efforts had been made to secure orders from them. The libraries, in particular, were of great importance. As Nicola Wilson has shown, "it was via the counters of the public and subscription libraries that the vast majority of readers got hold of new books".<sup>43</sup> The subscription libraries, which usually charged readers an annual fee in exchange for borrowing rights, were often run by large companies such as W. H. Smith and

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<sup>41</sup> Aldington (see above, n. 3), p. 241.

<sup>42</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Great War: 1914 – 1918* (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), p. 440.

Boots. Their financial clout and extensive distribution networks meant that “they were the most important and significant purchasers of the novels that were produced during the years 1880 to 1940.”<sup>44</sup> The initial forecast was fairly promising: of the first impression, consisting of 5,000 books, 1,664 had already been sold. But whereas the booksellers had “come up to the scratch nobly,” Prentice complained that “some of the libraries on the other hand are hedging.” Mudie’s had taken 150, Smith’s only 100, and Boots only 50.<sup>45</sup> The subscription libraries catered towards a conservative, middle-class audience and tended to promote middlebrow works, with conventional, traditional themes and messages. Popular authors with the libraries included Ethel M. Dell, P. G. Wodehouse and Gilbert Frankau.<sup>46</sup> *Death of a Hero*, however, in both form and content, might well have been interpreted as an attack on the values the libraries upheld, and was treated with caution. The novel’s bitter tone and controversial need for expurgation certainly appeared to be hindering its wider distribution. Hugh Walpole’s Book Society Ltd for example - which espoused similar values to the libraries - had rejected the novel due its large number of “puritanical subscribers,” as Prentice scathingly put it.<sup>47</sup> Prentice, however, remained optimistic, reassuring Aldington that “subscription sales do not necessarily mean very much to subsequent sales of the book.”<sup>48</sup> Reviews and advertising could both play an important role.

Aldington was particularly keen to exploit the power of advertising. On 22 September he complained to Prentice that the initial adverts were “too gentlemanly,” stating “two things must hit the public eye: the title which in itself is a ‘selling proposition’ and the name ‘Chatto

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<sup>43</sup> Nicola Wilson, ‘Libraries, Reading Patterns and Censorship,’ in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011-), 4: 36-51 (p. 37).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 19 September 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>46</sup> Wilson, ‘Libraries, Reading Patterns and Censorship’ (see above, n. 42), p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 13 August 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>48</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 19 September 1929 (see above, n. 31).

and Windus.’”<sup>49</sup> Despite not wanting the novel to be pigeonholed as a war book, Aldington’s desire to emphasise the title of the novel - which alluded to its war theme - suggests that he still saw a commercially exploitable market for these books. He was also clearly aware of the power of Chatto and Windus as a brand name and felt that being associated with such a reputable publisher would encourage sales.

Prentice responded a day later, keen to defend his initial marketing strategy and noting that the adverts “certainly are mild, but I think they did their work.”<sup>50</sup> Disagreements between publishers and authors over matters of advertising were not uncommon. Novelist and publisher Frank Swinnerton wrote in 1935 that “I have only once come across an author who was satisfied with the advertising for a book of his own,” before concluding that the “the truth is authors do not understand the business of advertising.”<sup>51</sup> Swinnerton argued that “the authors most ostentatiously indifferent to success are the ones who write most privately and pressing to their publishers on the question of advertising. It is not a base thing in these authors, but an urgent egoism which leads them to be over-occupied with a matter which they do not understand.”<sup>52</sup>

The author Swinnerton has in mind bears more than a little resemblance to Aldington. Despite his refusal to pander to popular opinion there can be no denying that Aldington craved commercial recognition. Swinnerton emphasised his cynicism in this regard by stressing that “*advertising does not sell books.*”<sup>53</sup> His reasoning was “that we never notice advertisements until the things they advertise are familiar to us.”<sup>54</sup> Advertising, according to Swinnerton, was only of value once a book was already popular and well-known; it would be

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<sup>49</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 22 September 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>50</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 23 September 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>51</sup> Frank Swinnerton, *Authors and the Book Trade* (London: Hutchison, 1935), p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

of little value if a book had not already made an appreciable impact. Publisher Stanley Unwin expressed very similar sentiments:

the conclusion at which we arrive...is that it pays to advertise a book if it shows signs of being successful without advertising, but that it does not pay to advertise at all expensively a book that shows no sign of catching on.<sup>55</sup>

If Prentice shared this view he must have had considerable faith in the book as it was advertised heavily in the national press in the weeks after its publication. Aldington appears to have been placated. On 25 September, he wrote approvingly that the advert in the “*Publisher and Bookseller* was the Platonic ideal of a good ad.”<sup>56</sup>

**[INSERT Figure 6.4. Chatto and Windus advert for *Death of a Hero* in the *Publisher and Bookseller*, 27 September 1929, p. 543.]**

The advert in question was simple in design but bold and arresting (figure 6.4). It pithily described the work as “A long novel of peace and war, which is the epitaph of a generation.”<sup>57</sup> Again the carefully balanced marketing approach is evident; the novel is not just portrayed as a war book, but a more thorough examination of the pre-war world. Like the blurb, this description also suggests a certain commemorative quality to the text. It is implied that Winterbourne’s story is representative, as if the experience of the trenches engendered a common bond amongst the generation who fought. As Aldington had wished, both the title of the book and the name of the publisher are strikingly visible, rendering Chatto and Windus as

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<sup>55</sup> Unwin, *Truth About Publishing* (see above, n. 21), p. 263.

<sup>56</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 25 September 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>57</sup> *Publisher and Bookseller*, 27 September 1929, p. 543.

central as Aldington to the novel's identity. Crucially, the advert included a small quotation of glowing praise from Gerald Gould's review in the *Observer*.

## Reception

Before its publication, Prentice and Aldington had carefully distributed the book amongst selected critics. The popular author Arnold Bennett - a reviewer for the *Evening Standard* - was deemed a worthy recipient, for example, whereas the *Observer's* Gerald Gould was not.<sup>58</sup> The reasons for this antipathy towards Gould are unclear, but however attuned to the market Prentice was, he evidently did not foresee the praise that Gould would subsequently offer. Nevertheless, this pre-publication strategy allowed Prentice and Aldington some influence over initial reactions to the book, though of course once the work entered the public domain this was beyond their control. As with advertising, not all publishers appear to have been convinced by the value of reviews. Again, Swinnerton was rather dismissive, portraying critics as belonging to a feuding, bickering "coterie." As most were authors themselves, Swinnerton argued, many critics used reviews to take a swipe at their rivals, often in revenge if they had fallen victim to a similar tactic: "it is for this reason that, outside a small public, most of the reviews printed by the critical press have no influence."<sup>59</sup> But whilst reviews may have reflected petty squabbles within insular literary circles, there is evidence to suggest that they could have a considerable impact on public opinion. Prentice, for example, was convinced of their value, noting that "an ordinary newspaper reader will not believe the

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<sup>58</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 13 August 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>59</sup> Swinnerton, *Authors and the Book Trade* (see above, n. 50), p. 119.

publisher - but has to have quotes from Bennett, Gould etc.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, he had observed the direct influence reviews could have on sales:

One of the principal booksellers in Scotland turned down the Hero because he did not like the tone of it. Yesterday, he wrote for ten copies, observing that it had been well reviewed. Such people have not helped create the demand but the demand has come to them. There were many instances like this.<sup>61</sup>

Reviews were not only seen as a gauge of the novel’s success but also as a potential factor in it.

In general, the critical response was mixed. Although a laudatory sentence of Gerald Gould’s review in the *Observer* had been used for advertising purposes, the piece on the whole - as Prentice had in fact predicted - was far less positive. Whilst Gould was impressed with the war sections he was very critical of the first two parts of the novel. He wrote that the “indictment of pre-war society ... is as feeble as the indictment of the war is fine” and complained that in order to get to the excellent war passages “you must wade through (or skip) more than two hundred pages that are crude, petulant and, save in flashes, artistically worthless.”<sup>62</sup> Arnold Bennett’s review in the *Evening Standard* expressed similar sentiments. He found Aldington’s strident critique of British society “often annoying” and “sometimes exasperating,” but felt that “the war sections are on the whole superb.”<sup>63</sup> It appears that it was not Aldington’s bitter denunciation of the war that had failed to impress critical readers, but his scathing attack on Edwardian and Victorian values.

A more positive review came from Aldington’s fellow war writer, Edmund Blunden, in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Blunden was not entirely supportive of the book,

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<sup>60</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 23 September 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>61</sup> Prentice to Aldington. 26 September 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>62</sup> Gerald Gould, ‘New Novels: War and Peace,’ *Observer*, 22 September 1929, p. 6.

complaining that there was “no coolness or detachment”; indeed, Aldington’s scathing satire is markedly different from Blunden’s measured tone and delicate pastoral allusions in *Undertones of War*. Aldington was not fond of Blunden either, and complained to Prentice that he was not an ideal reviewer.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, Blunden praised the war sections saying that they represented “some of the finest and closest narration of the western front warfare that has been produced.”<sup>65</sup> Prentice and Aldington had perhaps been unwise to divert attention away from the novel’s war book credentials. Aldington’s war passages struck a chord with reviewers, particularly whilst disillusionment was in vogue. On the other hand, Aldington and Prentice’s efforts to promote the book as a societal critique appear to have been misguided.

But Aldington and Prentice had been right to harbour some fears regarding the saturation of the war book market because some reviewers were tiring of the genre. A highly critical review by St. John Ervine in the *Daily Express* was titled: “I say there are too many war novels.”<sup>66</sup> In 1930, disillusioned war narratives were vehemently decried by the critic Douglas Jerrold who disputed the growing sense of negativity that was engulfing the memory of the war.<sup>67</sup> This critical response was indicative of a wider backlash against disillusionment from certain parts of the population, which maintained that despite being horrific, the war had been a worthwhile struggle for a noble cause. Numerous ex-servicemen expressed this opinion, arguing that the war had brought out the best in those who fought.<sup>68</sup> The mythology of the war at this stage was fractured; even works as popular as *All Quiet on the Western*

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<sup>63</sup> Arnold Bennett, ‘Three Modern Rebels,’ *Evening Standard*, 19 September 1929, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 27 September 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>65</sup> Edmund Blunden, ‘The War Generation,’ *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 September 1929, p. 713.

<sup>66</sup> St. John Ervine, ‘I Say There Are Too Many War Novels,’ *Daily Express*, 3 October 1929, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas Jerrold, *The Lie About the War: A Note on Some Contemporary War Books* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930).

<sup>68</sup> See for example Lieutenant-Colonel W.B. Little, ‘Forces in the War,’ *Times*, 17 April 1930, p. 10.

*Front* were met with outrage by some. It was little wonder that Aldington also fell victim to criticism.

On 2 October, a couple of weeks after publication, sales had risen encouragingly to 3,600, but it was clear that the book could be performing better. One problem, Prentice noted, was that the libraries were continuing “to hold aloof.”<sup>69</sup> Concerns over the novel’s bitterness and its controversial subject matter were proving a barrier to greater success - particularly amongst the commercial libraries. Prentice was certainly convinced that this was the reason for disappointing sales, claiming that the commercial libraries “are afraid of their subscribers coming in and waving sticks and umbrellas at them.”<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, sales did steadily increase, reaching the respectable figure of 9,000 by early December 1929. A French edition of the work was also arranged, and, according to Aldington’s biographer Charles Doyle, he was now earning around \$60 a day - an “undreamed of state of wealth!”<sup>71</sup> But relative to some other war books of the time, *Death of Hero*’s success was modest. Aldington’s envy was palpable when he wrote to Prentice in December enquiring as to whether *Goodbye to All That* had really sold 30,000 copies.<sup>72</sup> This bestselling figure certainly seems plausible: as Robert Graves’s biographer Miranda Seymour has shown, *Goodbye to All That* sold 20,000 copies within a week of its September publication.<sup>73</sup>

Prentice was also disappointed. He wrote to Aldington on 4 December admitting that the absence of “a big initial sale” had “rather handicapped the Hero.” Hoping that *Death of a Hero*’s moderate success would inspire greater commercial opportunities in the future, Prentice instead turned attention to Aldington’s next book, a collection of short stories about

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<sup>69</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 2 October 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Doyle, *Richard Aldington: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 128.

<sup>72</sup> Aldington to Prentice, 21 December 1929 (see above, n. 13).

<sup>73</sup> Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1995), p. 192.

the war entitled *Roads to Glory* (1930).<sup>74</sup> Chatto and Windus would also publish Aldington's second novel, *The Colonel's Daughter* (1931). This sold 7,000 copies within three months, but, like its predecessor, it required expurgation, causing commercial libraries to withdraw the book from circulation.<sup>75</sup>

As the exchanges between Richard Aldington and Charles Prentice reveal, the literary marketplace weighed heavily in the minds of publishers and authors. Aldington was quick to identify a commercial opportunity which would allow him to profit from a literary project that he had been toying with for nearly a decade. Both he and Prentice were acutely aware of the immense popularity of works such as *Journey's End* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and sought to exploit this. Yet Aldington had a distinct agenda and a message he needed to convey which not only denounced the horror and futility of war, but also provided a vitriolic indictment of pre-war society. Prentice was evidently sympathetic to Aldington's viewpoint, and, like many other influential publishers, played an active role in promoting this disenchanted image of the war. Yet Prentice was also an astute businessman and whilst remaining as faithful as possible to Aldington's ideals he realised that expurgating the book was a commercial necessity. He also remained in tune with the sentiments of the reading public, ensuring that the dustcover retained some "popular flavour."

Prentice and Aldington were aware of the need to differentiate their product, particularly amidst concerns that the "war books boom" might be abating. With its broad scope, *Death of a Hero* opened up a variety of marketing opportunities, providing Aldington and Prentice the luxury of exploiting the current trend in the market whilst simultaneously differentiating their product. The book's marketing reflected this by attempting to convey the novel's broader themes. But Aldington and Prentice were torn between a commitment to

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<sup>74</sup> Prentice to Aldington, 4 December 1929 (see above, n. 31).

<sup>75</sup> Doyle, *Richard Aldington* (see above, n. 70), p. 153.

producing a scathing critique on the one hand and a popular success on the other. Despite their desire for commercial recognition, the book's marketing, which clearly emphasised the novel's bitter, accusatory message, demonstrates that financial reward was not their only motivation. But the novel's critical and commercial performance suggests they were unrealistically ambitious in their aims. Aldington's satire and the novel's combative tone made it inherently divisive and its need for censorship no doubt deterred sections of the public - not least because of the visual damage it did to the text. Similarly, whilst a large proportion of the population was clearly receptive to a tone of disillusionment regarding the war, Aldington's critique of British society was less palatable. This perhaps in part explains why other war books, some of which were equally vitriolic, were more successful. Remarque may have evoked uncompromisingly brutal battlefield images, but it was German society rather than British society that was attacked. British readers could indulge in Remarque's novel safe in the knowledge that they were not being indicted for its horror. No such comfort was available when reading *Death of a Hero*. With the benefit of hindsight we can see that the marketing of the book should have played to its strengths, promoting it as a war novel. The early sections clearly detracted from its vivid western front climax, whereas Remarque's work, in contrast, was more concise and distilled. Despite proving to be commercially lucrative for Aldington, neither he nor Prentice could hide their disappointment. It was clear that *Death of a Hero* was to be no *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

### **Acknowledgments**

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