

Topic 3

Whose Poppy?

The red poppy is one of the most recognisable symbols of commemoration and remembrance. Traditionally it is worn on or around the anniversary of the armistice (ceasefire) of World War I, the 11th of November, it has become associated with the sacrifice and bravery of the many servicemen and women who have been engaged in conflict since 1914 right up until the present day, but why?

Poppies were the first wild flowers to grow in the fields of France and Belgium, which were the battlefields of the First World War after the war ended. Even during the conflict poppies could be seen and soldiers often wondered how such delicate flowers could survive? It was the mention of poppies in the 1915 poem by a Canadian soldier, John McCrae, which led to the poppy being used as a symbol of remembrance after the war. His poem begins:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

The tradition of wearing a poppy as a symbol of remembrance is international. It was the idea of an American woman Moina Michael, she published a poem herself in response to McCrae's and started selling silk poppies to raise funds for disabled veterans in Georgia in the United States of America. As a result the American Legion Auxiliary (the ex-servicemen's organisation) adopted the poppy as symbol of remembrance in 1921. A Frenchwoman, Anna Guerin, was inspired by this to produce and sell artificial poppies similar to the ones worn today, to raise money for those in need as a result of the Great War.

A banner carried by women protesting against Britain engaging in conflict in the Middle East.

Emily Johns b.unknown d. unknown,
We Are Running Out of Poppies, 1995.
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Anna campaigned for the poppy to be used across Europe to raise funds for ex-serviceman and their families. She came to Britain and visited Field Marshall Douglas Haig, commander of the armed forces in World War I and president of the Royal British Legion, an organisation which to this day aims to support ex-servicemen and their families. He made a decision to back the idea and artificial poppies were produced and sold for the first time in 1921. Veterans' organisations, in Australia, New Zealand and

Canada, followed Britain's lead, further spreading the idea of the red poppy as a symbol of remembrance for all servicemen, including those in the Indian regiments, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, the Gurkhas and the British dominion forces.

In Britain this poppy fundraising campaign became known as the Haig Appeal and this was printed in the centre of the artificial poppies. In 1926 the Co-Operative Women's Guild lobbied for this to be replaced with 'No More War' but were unsuccessful and as a result, in 1933 they produced their own poppy, a white poppy for peace. The Haig Appeal remained in the centre of the red poppy until 1994, when it was replaced with 'Poppy Appeal'.

White poppies

In 1933 the first white poppies were worn on Armistice Day (now more usually called Remembrance Day). The white poppy was not intended as an insult to those who died in World War I, in which many of the white poppy supporters lost husbands, brothers, sons and lovers; quite the opposite it was a symbol both of remembrance and of the challenge to create peace and put an end to war. The white poppy is produced today by the Peace Pledge Union which was formed in 1934 and which still campaigns for an end to all war.

Purple poppies

A much more recent variety of poppy is the purple one. Have you heard of 'War Horse?' You may have even seen the film or read the book! The main character may be fictional, but many thousands of horses were 'conscripted' to serve in the Great War, many of them were killed and there are many stories of their courage. Today animals still serve in the military; dogs are used to find bombs and injured armed forces personnel and civilians; horses are still used for ceremonial purposes and still get injured on occasion as in the Hyde Park IRA bombing in 1982. Animals are also used in experiments to test weapons. The purple poppy was introduced by an organisation called Animal Aid in 2007 to remember and commemorate the role played by animals in all wars and conflict and to publicise the on-going use of animals in military and arms experiments.

Controversial poppies?

In Ireland many people refuse to wear the red poppy, as they see it as glorifying the military who killed innocent civilians in the 'troubles' in Ireland in the 20th century. Today some Muslims refuse to wear it and there have been incidents of 'poppy burning' as a response to the killing of civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and tribal areas of Pakistan. Some people find the white poppy deeply offensive as they believe it belittles the bravery and sacrifices that are made by people in the armed forces and their families; others will only wear this as they believe the red poppy glorifies war. Some feel the purple poppy is unnecessary others see it as long over-due! Many people are of course happy to wear all three poppies, claiming that remembrance alone is not enough, that we should never forget, but we should also never stop hoping and working for peace.

What do you think? What choice would you make?

Is remembrance enough or could we do more?

Why is the wearing of poppies, both white and red often seen as contentious?

Why do you think some people choose to wear both a white and a red poppy?

Would you wear a purple poppy?

What would you choose to campaign for?

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**Key
Questions**