

# Dead Poppies: Militarism, False Patriotism and Remembrance Lead to a Lack of Peace

By [Lesley Docksey](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*Each year the Royal British Legion has to work harder to promote the fundraising 'poppy campaign'. Poppy sellers on the streets become fewer and older, and while people will donate to help support veterans and families who have lost members in our frequent wars, they are not so keen on wearing the poppies.*

In 2014 a lot of noise and publicity was generated by Prime Minister David Cameron's plan to 'celebrate' the centenary of the outbreak of World War I – noise which, by the following year, had mostly been forgotten.



In 2017 giant red poppies appeared, fastened to lampposts, telegraph poles and anywhere else they could be displayed. There were streets full of them. Some people liked them but many found them ugly, 'in your face' and confrontational.

This year, being the centenary of the end of WWI, our streets, churchyards and public spaces are being dominated by black metal 'Silent Soldier' silhouettes, with the message 'Lest We Forget'. They are unsettling, make people feel uneasy and are not universally liked – some have been vandalised or stolen, and at least one place refused to install one.

And as for the message Lest We Forget, the Legion is still forgetting its initial aim: to prevent further sacrifice by reminding the nation of the human cost of war and to work actively for peace. They have forgotten that WWI was 'the war to end all wars'.

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*In Flanders fields the poppies blow*

*Between the crosses, row on row*

*From In Flanders Fields*

*by John McCrae, May 1915*

It was that time of year again, when sellers of poppies knock at the door and veterans line the streets of the local town with collecting tins and trays of fake red flowers sold in aid of the Royal British Legion; a time when, if you don't buy or wear a poppy you would be made to feel 'unpatriotic'. But times they are a-changing.

The 'Remembrance' poppy grew out of WWI and became a symbol for that dire and catastrophic war. Catastrophic, that is, for those British men who died (725,000) leaving widows and orphans behind, or the 1.75 million wounded, half of whom were permanently disabled and unable to work or support their dependents. The British Legion was formed by an ex-serviceman who, realising that the government was unable or unwilling to do anything to support those who had suffered fighting the politicians' war, decided to act. They took the poppy (of *In Flanders Fields* fame) as their symbol and it was first worn at Armistice Day ceremonies in 1921.

Selling the poppy is a way of raising funds and the Legion (it only gained its 'Royal' status in 1971) still supports ex-servicemen and/or their families. But, to quote the RBL's [website](#): 'When the Legion's leaders looked around them in 1921, not only did they see a gigantic task in front of them looking after those who had suffered in the recent war, they also sought to prevent further sacrifice by reminding the nation of the human cost of war and to work actively for peace.'

There's precious little evidence of the Legion or anyone connected to the military seeking to prevent further 'sacrifice'. 'Reminding the nation of the human cost of war' is sanitised by the language used – the 'glorious dead', the 'heroes' who sacrificed themselves. What noble, clean and tidy images those words create! Sadness and grief there might be, but no honest retelling or reliving of the true cost will be part of the many ceremonies at war memorials across the land.

And 'working actively for peace' has always been absent. That got left to the wearers of the white 'Peace' poppies. The [white poppies](#) grew out of the desire of the widows, mothers, sisters, daughters and fiancées who had lost men to the war to promote the message 'Never Again'. WWI had been so truly apocalyptic that we should learn the lesson and never tread the road to war again. Except, of course, that not many years later we were all embroiled in WW2.

Although the RBL has no official policy on the white poppy it is still highly disliked and regarded with suspicion by military people, particularly some veterans. The Canadian Legion however is '[staunchly opposed](#)' and has even taken legal action against stores selling them. Some years ago a peace-campaigning acquaintance told me she had been refused entry to Westminster until she removed her white poppy. "And what about those people?" she asked, pointing to the red-poppy-wearing individuals filing through the security

checks. Her question was unanswered.

The Poppies that were once worn just on Armistice Day (it became known as Remembrance Day after WW2) creep onto the streets earlier and earlier, with buyers expected to wear them from the moment of purchase, and stay visible for some days after November 11. This year the RBL Poppy Appeal began with the [launch](#) of their official song, a very mawkish *The Call*, performed by the Poppy Girls, and a pop concert at RAF Northolt, where 'Thousands of service personnel and their families will wear their poppies with pride during the concert...'.

This took place on October 24<sup>th</sup>, weeks before Armistice Day. Three and a half weeks of hard sell, not to remember the dead but to support the military.

The message 'Never Forget' has become 'look to the future'. A Legion [press release](#) contained a photo of four children with giant poppies. Printed on the T-shirts of three of them were the words 'Future Soldier'. How tasteless and tacky is that? And Prince William's wife Kate put a glittering final touch to a black evening dress with a [crystal red poppy](#), a present from the Legion. Poppies that sparkle are in vogue this year it seems. Another year or two and poppies will be like the flower in a clown's lapel – the touch of a hidden button and it will either spin or squirt water at you.

Except that, over the last year or two, I've seen fewer poppies being worn while the conversation in the media about how relevant the wearing of poppies is becomes more strident. And in the build up to next year's centenary of the outbreak of WWI the pro-military lobby becomes more visible. We must wear poppies to support 'our boys' still bravely doing battle in Afghanistan.

Defending the poppy on the BBC's [Moral Maze](#), Helen Hill, the Legion's Head of Remembrance, claimed that 'there were 40 million poppies on the streets'. Really? That would mean that four out of every five people, from tiny babies to most elderly and infirm, would be sporting the things. And they are not. Travelling up to London by train on Remembrance Sunday I noticed that, where a few years ago most of the passengers would be wearing poppies, this year 25% at most were wearing them.

The less people wear poppies, the louder the accusations of lack of 'patriotism' become. But as Robert Fisk, whose father fought in WWI, [asked](#), 'How come this obscene fashion appendage – inspired by a pro-war poem, for God's sake, which demands yet further human sacrifice – still adorns the jackets and blouses of the Great and the Good?' Knowing his WWI history rather better than most politicians, he has refused to wear a poppy for some time 'Is there not,' he wrote, 'some better way to remember this monstrous crime against humanity?'

Those who refuse to wear them are pilloried and subject to abuse. The University of London Student Union faced [threats of violence](#) and accusations of "disloyal and unpatriotic bullying" – all because the Union had taken the decision that, while individual students could make their own choice, the Union would not be sending a representative to the Remembrance ceremony. Comedian David Mitchell, in a [rant](#) about "twinkly" poppies that glamorise war, made the point that those who appear in public wear poppies primarily to avoid disapproval. It makes the poppy meaningless.

A Shropshire Methodist minister, Patricia Jackson, caused [uproar](#) when she said she would not wear a red poppy while conducting the Remembrance service. She said the red poppy 'advocates war'. ITV news presenter Charlene White was [blitzed](#) with racist abuse for

deciding not to wear a poppy on air. Former journalist Ian Birrel, about to appear on a television news show, was [asked](#) more than once if he would wear a poppy. He refused. He believes that 'there is something wrong with enforced displays of patriotism and public grief.'

He also had this to say: '...it remains baffling why decent treatment of soldiers and sailors needed to be subject to legislation rather than standard practice. And the welfare state is supposed to provide support for anyone who needs it. Now the proceeds of fines on banks are being passed to military charities, while firms and councils are being pressured to provide special help for service personnel.' He has a point. There should be no need for a charity like the Legion but successive governments have found the long term costs of their wars unaffordable.

Also taking part in the Moral Maze discussion on the modern meaning of the poppy and Remembrance was British ex-SAS soldier, [Ben Griffin](#). More than anyone on the panel he knew the horrors of war firsthand and he was scathing about the modern Remembrance Day ceremonies. 'We have stopped remembering,' he said. When asked to justify that statement (his inquisitors being very pro-Remembrance) he said that we don't remember what war is really like. We dress it up in rites that talk about 'the fallen'. 'Soldiers don't fall,' he added brutally, 'they get their heads blown off, get burnt alive or riddled with bullets. There is no true remembrance', he said again. If there were, we'd maybe stop fighting wars.

His hero was Harry Patch who was, when he died in August 2009, the last surviving soldier who served in the trenches. Harry Patch – who said that 'War is organised murder'. Harry Patch – who, arriving at the Front, made a pact with his friend that they would not kill anyone. He didn't want a 'state' [funeral](#), nor yet a military one. To the despair of some of his peace campaigning friends he pretty well got both. As Britain had not long pulled out of Iraq and was ratcheting up casualties in Afghanistan, the government's desire to promote the military and its ongoing 'sacrifice' for the country over-ruled sensitivity.

Ben Griffin was right. There is no real remembrance because we do not remember the true nature of war. In fact we go out of our way to avoid remembering it. We spend a minute or two remembering the heroes, the glorious dead, the fallen, those who gave their lives, our boys who sacrificed themselves for freedom, for democracy, for our country, for.... what? But, because our wars are not fought here on our own precious inviolate soil, we do not remember the terror, the screams, the blood, the noise and the mindless violence of war. We comfortably leave that to the armies we send abroad. We do not remember the mangled bodies with faces half-shot away and guts spilling over the ground. We do not remember soldiers with limbs blown off as their lives soak away into foreign soil along with their blood. We do not remember those made mad by war, who live on our streets and fill the prisons and shelters for the homeless with their nightmares. Nor, standing in front of our war memorials, do we remember the countless hundreds of thousands that we, the British, have slaughtered in our wars. Like those 40 million poppies that were supposed to be out on the streets but somehow were not to be seen, the dead are invisible.

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Articles by: [Lesley Docksey](#)

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