

Remembrance poppies

This time of year, you will see British politicians, members of the Royal family, and celebrities on TV wearing red paper flowers. These flowers are poppies, which are worn to commemorate the end of the First World War (11th November 1918). This day is now usually called **Remembrance Day** or even **Poppy Day** in the UK.

In this post I will talk about where this tradition comes from.

War

The First World War (WW1: 1914-1918) was horrifically bloody. It is estimated that at least 15 million people died (although there were probably many more), around 9 million of whom were military personnel.

For most British people, the main image of WW1 is of the fighting in Northern France and Belgium. Recent films and TV series like *Downton Abbey*, *1917*, and *War Horse* have all shown the horrors of these land battles, which were fought in often miserable conditions from trenches, the enemies facing each other over a no-man's-land of barbed wire and unexploded shells.

Poetry

Amidst the death of so many young soldiers, WW1 produced a surprising amount of art and poetry. British school children often learn and study poems written by soldiers who fought in the trenches. One of the most famous, *In Flanders Fields*, was written by a Canadian soldier called Lieutenant Colonel John Macrae. His poem describes poppies flowering amongst the graves of dead soldiers while the battle rages on. Poppies love freshly broken soil, so they thrived in the fields broken up by the bombs, machines, soldiers and horses of the war.

Below is the opening stanza of the poem. You can find the full poem with a Japanese translation [here](#).

*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.
We are the Dead.*

Charity

After the war, with so many wounded and shell-shocked soldiers returning home after years fighting on the front line, charities sprung up to help support them and the families of those who had been killed. In the USA, a woman called Moina Michael, inspired by John Macrae's poem, had the idea of selling artificial poppies to help veterans. This practice spread to other parts of the world, especially to France where Anna Guérin similarly campaigned to make poppies a symbol of peace. She promoted them in the UK and British Empire. Today, poppies are primarily worn in the UK (distributed by the Royal British Legion), Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

From late October, many shops and offices have a poppy collection box at reception desks and shop counters. You'll also see Royal British Legion volunteers in highstreets and other busy shopping centres. There is no set price for a poppy. You can put any amount of money in the collection box and receive a poppy to wear in return.

Ceremony

In public places in towns and villages across the UK there are war memorials engraved with the names of those who died fighting in conflicts. These memorials do not just commemorate deaths from WW1, but also WW2 and other conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The nearest Sunday to 11th November is known as **Remembrance Sunday**. This is when most remembrance ceremonies take place. There is often a ceremony around the war memorial, at which local dignitaries place wreaths of poppies. Groups such as the Scouts, Guides, and St John's ambulance are often invited, and they may march in a parade through the town to the war memorial. At 11am on Remembrance Sunday there is a minute's silence. To mark the start of the silence, a bugler often plays the [last post](#).

There are national war memorials in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London. The London war memorial (on Whitehall) is called **the Cenotaph**, and the ceremony there is [televised](#). This is where the King will lay a wreath this year.

Controversy

Some people believe that the red poppy and the ceremonies of Remembrance Day glorify war, and they therefore reject it as an overtly political symbol. There are some alternatives to the red poppy, such as the white poppy, which is promoted by the [Peace Pledge Union](#), a pacifist organisation which produces white poppies to symbolise peace and remembrance of all war dead. In addition, every year there are some reports of people who are bullied, harassed or criticised for not wearing poppies.

Reflection

In the UK, I always marked Remembrance Sunday in some way. I was a member of a village brass band, which for years has led the yearly remembrance parade through the village to the church and war memorial. One of the band's cornet players plays the last post before the minute's silence, and then there is a service of remembrance in the church.

For me, wearing a poppy around this time is simply a sign of respect and remembrance for those whose lives have been sacrificed in all wars, not just those from my own country or 'side'. I wear one as a reminder to reflect and give thanks, and also to wish for a peaceful future.