

The Scottish Poppy Appeal - by Jack Alexander (2011)

Summary: origins of the poppy

On 8 December 1915 Punch magazine published a poem written by a Canadian medical officer John McCrae, who had died of pneumonia on the front line in France nine months earlier. It included the immortal lines "In Flanders field the poppies blow, between the crosses, row on row." The poem was subsequently reprinted in the American magazine Ladies Home Journal on 9 November 1918 and upon reading this a secretary at the New York YMCA, Moina Belle Michael, was struck by its poignancy. She made it her personal pledge to wear a red poppy to remember the dead.

A representative from the French YMCA, Anna Guerin, was in New York for a conference and quickly realised the fundraising potential of Michael's poppy. On her return to France she set about organising women, children and disabled veterans to make artificial poppies out of paper and cloth to raise money for the devastated areas close to the front line. In 1921 she visited the London headquarters of the Royal British Legion who subsequently sanctioned the purchase of nine million poppies from France. On 28 October 1921 Field Marshal Earl Haig, founder of a number of organisations including the Royal British Legion, Officers Association and the Earl Haig Fund, sent letters to the editors of the principal British newspapers urging the public to wear the new red poppies as a mark of remembrance.

In 1922, in order to keep up with demand for Poppies, the Royal British Legion funded the establishment of a poppy-making factory in Richmond, Surrey, which initially employed 150 disabled veterans to produce the required 30 million poppies for the 1922 Appeal.

Scotland, lacking its own manufacturing base, was forced in the meantime to buy poppies from England at considerable cost. In 1926, the wife of Earl Haig, Lady Dorothy, established a Scottish poppy factory and it was at this stage that a distinct design for poppies made in Scotland, bearing four petals and no green leaf, came about. By 1927 the Lady Haig Poppy Factory, then situated at Whiteford House on Edinburgh's Royal Mile, was producing Scotland's entire requirement of three million poppies. The Lady Haig Poppy Factory relocated to Canonmills in 1965 where production of Scottish poppies and wreaths continues today, employing 40 disabled ex-Servicemen all year round and producing five million poppies and 10,000 wreaths.

Summary: origins of the Scottish Poppy Appeal

Many organisations and funds were established in the years after the First World War to support those left injured and destitute on their return from the front line. Initially commissioned officers were unable to access the same levels of support as their more junior counterpart and as a result ex-Servicemen from the commissioned ranks often experienced the greatest hardship. Consequently, one of the most prominent charities established in the aftermath of the war was the Officers Association. Although initially set up to support only the commissioned ranks, its Haig Fund was established around 1919 to enable the OA to support all ranks. It was the Officers Association's distinct Earl Haig Fund that operated the first Poppy Appeal.

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However, having received its Royal Charter the Officers Association in England felt uncomfortable soliciting monies for other ranks and therefore passed the running of this over to the Royal British Legion. In Scotland however, the independent OA office did not share the same concerns and felt there was sufficient legal and administrative segregation between the OA (as defined in its charter) and the OA in its role as “trustee” and operator of the Earl Haig Fund Scotland. The Officers Association Scotland continued to operate the Earl Haig Fund Scotland and the Scottish Poppy Appeal until 1954, when the Earl Haig Fund Scotland was constituted as an independent charity.

In 2006 the Earl Haig Fund Scotland rebranded to Poppyscotland and in June 2011 the charity merged with the Royal British Legion (TRBL), creating the largest Armed Forces charity group operating throughout the UK. Under the terms of the merger, substantial additional investment will be committed to Scotland to make significant improvements to the support services for veterans and their families living north of the Border. Poppyscotland will, however, continue to operate as a distinct, separate charity within the TRBL group of charities.

The Poppyscotland brand will not change and the Scottish poppy and Scottish Poppy Appeal will remain in place, with funds raised from the campaign being used exclusively to support the Armed Forces and veterans’ community in Scotland. The manufacture of Scottish poppies at Lady Haig’s Poppy Factory in Edinburgh will also continue.

The Scottish Poppy Appeal: origins and history

In June 1918 James Hay, a discharged soldier, was arrested at the foot of The Mound in Edinburgh and removed to the local Police Court to face a charge of public begging. Private Hay, who was still wearing his uniform, was sentenced to 30 days in prison. The accused had only one leg: he had lost the other one on active service in France. He had also been gassed twice and wore two wound stripes on his tunic. Before the war he worked as a slater’s labourer; unable to climb a ladder or keep his balance, he now found himself unemployed. He had a wife and two children to support. They were starving: he was penniless. ‘What else am I supposed to do?’ he asked the Court.¹

During the 1918 General Election campaign Prime Minister David Lloyd George promised a comprehensive programme of reform to address grave national shortcomings in the provision of housing, health and education. ‘What is our task?’ he demanded rhetorically. His answer still resounds loudly almost a hundred years later: ‘To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in!’²

¹ Edinburgh Evening News, 25 June 1918.

² *The Times*, 25 November 1918. Speech at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre.

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The heroes in question (of course) were the returning members of the victorious British armed forces, who had lately defeated the might of Germany in what the Prime Minister would later describe as the war to end wars.³

But another war had been underway since 1914. It was a hidden conflict, made up of countless minor engagements, and did not attract the attention of the press in the same way as the bloody large-scale battles of the Western Front. Its victims were men like James Hay and the anonymous author of the following verses.⁴

Where are the lads of the village to-day,
The heroes of the War?
Why, most are in rags, drawing no pay,
Wondering what they fought for!

While risking their lives in khaki,
Fighting their country's foes,
What were their thoughts of the future?
Not starvation and misery? – God knows!

They were promised a better Scotland,
Comfort after the strife.
What a rude awakening
To come back to this miserable life!

When standing knee-deep in water,
Facing the treacherous "Huns",
They moulded their country's future
As they calmly manned their guns.

Now in justice give them something,
A bit of what they fought for,
If it's only a tumble-down cottage
With a good old oaken door.

Printed in 1919, this handbill was widely distributed from pavements throughout Britain by thin-faced men in threadbare clothes. A further line was printed in bold across the top of the sheet:

Being an Ex-Service Man – can you help me by buying this bill?

Before the Great War the distressed ex-service man was a common sight on the streets of British towns and cities. Discharged and disabled soldiers wearing Crimean and South African medal ribbons were often found begging for money to buy food or pay the rent. Public opinion was split on whether they were a feckless, undeserving liability or hapless victims of an uncaring and ungrateful State.

³ *Hansard*, 11 November 1918 vol 110 cc2463-4. 'At eleven o'clock this morning came to an end the cruellest and most terrible War that has ever scourged mankind. I hope we may say that thus, this fateful morning, came to an end to all wars.'

⁴ *The Men Who Manned the Guns* – published privately in 1919 by National Federation of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers and distributed to ex-service men to sell on the street. (McCrae's Battalion Collection).

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Military disability pensions were administered by Chelsea Hospital.⁵ The rates at which they were paid had remained unchanged since the Boer War and were widely acknowledged to be inadequate. The government was content to allow charitable bodies such as the Salvation Army, the Churches and the Soldiers' and Sailors' Help Society to assume the burden of providing necessary additional financial relief. Charitable assistance, however, carried the stigma of the Poor House, and a great many former soldiers, too proud to seek 'institutional' help, preferred a more direct personal approach.

On 4 August 1914 the Kaiser's armies marched across the frontier into neutral Belgium. Great Britain, Belgium's guarantor, mobilised at once and issued an ultimatum demanding withdrawal on pain of military intervention. Germany took no notice: by midnight the countries were at war.

The British Expeditionary Force began concentrating in France eight days later. Its first major engagements took place within a fortnight at Mons, Landrecies and Le Cateau. By September a steady stream of casualties was returning on the Channel transports en route to hospitals and nursing homes across the country.

When the BEF moved to Flanders in October the stream turned into a torrent that would not stop. It was clear that existing pension and military welfare arrangements would soon be swamped. A Liberal administration which before the war had been comfortably preoccupied with the abstract relationship between State and Charity had suddenly to deal with thousands of pressingly urgent cases of real hardship. Parliamentary debate merely blew hot air around the problem until a Select Committee concluded the inevitable: improvements were needed. Finally, in November 1915, The Naval and Military War Pensions Bill was passed:

An Act to make better provision as to the pensions, grants, and allowances made in respect of the present war to officers and men in the Naval and Military Service of His Majesty and their dependants, and the care of officers and men disabled in consequence of the present war, and for purposes connected therewith.⁶

⁵ Royal Hospital for Soldiers at Chelsea. See also the papers of the Royal Patriotic Fund in the Public Record Office. Established after the Crimean War, the RPF made grants to disabled servicemen and dependants of the dead. It was entirely funded by private subscription and enjoyed a reputation for inconsistency. It was reconstituted in 1903 to take account of changed circumstances after the war in South Africa. Further constitutional changes in 1915 represented an attempt to grapple with the huge increase in war casualties; however an organisation funded by voluntary subscriptions and hidebound by decades of poor practice was never going to be equal to the challenge. In 1916 its activities (and funds) were brought under Parliamentary control as a new 'Corporation' with the passing of the The Naval and Military War Pensions Bill.

⁶ Special Report and Second Special Report from the Select Committee on Naval and Military Services (Pensions and Grants), 1915, p.iii: Charity Organisation Review, Volume XXXVII, 1915, page 60. The Committee concluded that the Government must take primary responsibility for pensions. Under the Act, however, passed on 10 November 1915, the voluntary principle remained paramount, although some Government control and funding was incorporated. Heavy casualties from the 1915 actions at Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, Festubert, Givenchy, and Loos had already rendered the new legislation unfit for purpose. The belated cross-party recognition of urgent need for reform and the creation of the Statutory Committee and its LWPCs were, however, hugely important.

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The Act created a centralised 'Statutory Committee', charged with overseeing the work of new Local War Pension Committees (LWPCs). These committees would be staffed by a mix of paid officials and volunteers. There was a long tradition of incorporating a voluntary element in the provision of welfare and it was hoped that local volunteers would have a better understanding of the needs of local men. However, the new procedures took a long time to establish and responses to enquiries were characterised by inconsistency, unfairness and delay. In some areas the committees took months to set up; in others, discharged soldiers and dependants of the dead were treated like malingerers – as if their legitimate claim upon the State were fraudulent or criminal.

By the middle of 1916 there were tens of thousands of desperate cases – by far the majority of them deserving immediate assistance. They included discharged soldiers unable to work and war widows unable to feed their children. Distracted by other pressing matters, the Government had yet to recognise the real scale of hardship.

'National disgrace', was the term used by James Myles Hogge, Liberal Member of Parliament for Edinburgh East. He described the existing welfare arrangements as 'a muddle and a mess'. Hogge occupied a prominent seat on the radical wing of his Party – not so much a thorn in the side of the War Cabinet as a thorn in its collective conscience. In 1915, appalled by the stories he was hearing from ex-servicemen, Hogge had established his own 'Pensions Advice Bureau' with the assistance of Walter McPhail, editor of *The Edinburgh Evening News*. At his constituency office in Edinburgh and his Parliamentary office in London he was soon receiving more than 500 letters a week. Some of the cases, he told his readers, were 'heartbreaking'.⁷

Hogge argued for a simple pension scale, applied across the country – a clear national standard that the LWPC staff would be unable to misunderstand. Rates of payment would be determined by the level of physical disability. He cited the example of a man with one leg who had been advised to take up employment as a commissionaire. When he refused (on the reasonable grounds that he was unable to stand for long periods at a time) he was told no further assistance would be forthcoming. 'Such is the scale of the problem that the Government's only recourse must be to set up a dedicated Ministry of Pensions with a Minister of State in the Cabinet so that never again in this Country shall we submit to the scandal of picking up a discharged or disabled soldier either off the kerbside or out of the workhouse.'⁸

⁷ James Hogge is rarely mentioned in domestic histories of Great Britain during the First World War. Much of the good 'welfare' practice that came out of the war years was originally advocated by him, and the work of his private 'Pensions Advice Bureau' was effectively copied by the ex-service men's organisations and (later) by the British Legion. The Legion, in particular, owes him a substantial unacknowledged debt. There's a good short biography of Hogge in the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 30, Spring 2001. It was written by R. Ian Elder, whose father served with the 16th Royal Scots in 1917.

⁸ Hogge's speeches on this and related issues are numerous throughout the war, but see (for example) the above quote from a meeting at Whitefield's Tabernacle in London on the afternoon of 29 October 1916, as reported in *The Scotsman* on 30 October 1916.

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When Lloyd George formed his Coalition Government in December 1916 the Ministry of Pensions was duly created – with Glasgow Labour MP, George Barnes, at its head. Its stated task was to ‘unify the administration of pensions, grants and allowances during the continuation of the present war and for a period of six months thereafter’.⁹ In recognising that the problem existed, the Government still appeared determined that it was only temporary. Hogge, and others, pointed out that disablement was a lifetime condition and that the challenge would not disappear within six months of peace being declared. However, for the moment, an important victory had been won.

The new Minister drew up a warrant in 1917 which increased the level of pension payments, tying those payments (as Hogge had suggested) to the level of physical loss, rather than the old standard, loss of earning capacity, which in the past had led to men with similar disabilities receiving substantially different awards. Payments would also be adjusted to follow increases in the cost of living. It was a sea-change in welfare provision – a triumph of good will and conscience over other equally pressing financial imperatives. However, partly because of the sheer number of claimants and a continuing reliance on incompetent but well-meaning local volunteers, men could often become ‘lost’ in the system.¹⁰

In August 1917 Ayrshire-born Labour MP, John Hodge, became the new Minister of Pensions. Hodge was also chairman of trustees of a scheme for disabled soldiers - The King's Fund for Disabled Officers and Men. The fund hoped to raise £3,000,000 to help wounded army veterans who were finding it increasingly difficult to find work. The King had opened the Fund with a personal donation of £25,000 and topped it up by redirecting a £53,000 cheque given to him by the City of London on the occasion of his silver wedding. In touring the country in search of donations, Hodge had continually to defend the Fund against criticism that the Government was attempting to divert some its responsibilities on to a charity. James Hogge was curious to know why a disabled soldier begging for money in the street would be liable to arrest while the Minister, engaged (effectively) in precisely the same business (albeit on behalf of third parties), would be allowed to continue on his way. The Government should grasp the nettle (Hogge insisted) and provide sufficient resources centrally to tackle the problems.¹¹

⁹ The Act (22 December, 1916) brought the powers and duties of the Admiralty, Chelsea Hospital, the Army Council and the 1915 Statutory Committee under the umbrella of the new Minister of Pensions.

¹⁰ Under the Warrant, each man was awarded a ‘definite sum of money for a definite hurt’. See Hansard, 5 th Series, 1917, LXXVIII, 251. For example, a private soldier would be entitled to 27/6 per week if he had lost two or more limbs; or 22/- if he had lost one leg at the hip. Payments varied in direct relation to rank held. The complexity of the ‘Pension Scale’ indicates a level of attention to detail unseen in any earlier arrangements for assisting disabled ex-service men. See also Cmd. 1446, The Third Annual Ministry of Pensions Report, 1920-21 (1921), page 58.

¹¹ Speech at the opening of the Stepney Branch of the Federation of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers, 3 October 1918. See The Scotsman 4 October 1918.

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Meanwhile ex-servicemen were finding a voice of their own. In September 1916 the National Association of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers had been formed in Blackburn, Lancashire. With strong links to the trade union movement, the Association provided comradeship, mutual assistance and advice on welfare issues. It also hoped that by banding together, its members might be better able to deliver their message to a government that they considered (at best) to be a little hard of hearing.

In April 1917 the Association's more radical brother was born – with James Hogge as one of the midwives. In drafting a new Military Service Act (the 'Review of Exceptions Bill') the Government announced its intention to re-conscript tens of thousands of men who had already been discharged invalid. They would take up administrative jobs within the military, allowing an equal number of fit soldiers to be re-directed to fighting units at the front. At a time when large numbers of men had not yet served once, many of the country's wounded and discharged 'heroes' would be asked to serve a second time.

This was just inflammatory. The National Federation of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers came into the world in anger.¹² The founders announced that they would campaign politically and fight by-elections. The Government, conscious of events in Russia, was startled into establishing a third group, the somewhat unfortunately named Comrades of the Great War, whose inaugural meeting was presided over by the august figure of Lord Derby, then Secretary of State at the War Office. Supported by the Establishment press and powerful patronage, the avowedly non-political Comrades soon began to attract a substantial membership. James Hogge, whose sights remained firmly set on the welfare issue, was disturbed by signs of rivalry among the groups and spoke out in favour of 'cooperation'. Others went further. Major-General Horace Smith-Dorrien, survivor of Isandlwana, whose stand at Le Cateau had saved the BEF in 1914, was the first public figure to suggest amalgamation. He was followed by the country's most famous disabled senior officer, Major-General Ian Hamilton, who had lost the use of his left hand to a Boer bullet at Majuba in 1881.¹³

¹² The Federation adopted a single word for its motto – 'Justice'. Forty-two branches were formed in Scotland. They finally came together in Edinburgh on 6 April 1918 at the first Annual Congress of the Scottish Federation of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers. It was not a particularly united gathering. The Glasgow delegates vigorously opposed the presence of 'civilians', notably Hogge, who was unanimously elected honorary president after the Glasgow contingent had chosen to leave the conference.

¹³ Hamilton's initiative was carried out under the auspices of the War Office. Sir Ian, of course, had commanded the British Expeditionary Force at the Dardanelles. The able and courageous Smith-Dorrien had been eased out of active service following a disagreement with Sir John French.

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But to no avail. Each organisation remained jealous of its independence. And as the war drew to its victorious conclusion their anger was further inflamed by the crass stupidity of the Government's demobilisation scheme, which classified soldiers on the point of discharge according to their importance to the economy. Thus a man who had served since 1914 and been wounded several times, might have to stand aside and allow other men who had never been abroad, to return to civilian life before them. It was iniquitous. Yet another organisation appeared in protest, the National Union of Ex-servicemen, circulating what at times amounted to revolutionary propaganda. Peace had been declared on the continent, but campaigning would continue at home.

The first anniversary of the Armistice saw informal ceremonies of Remembrance taking place across Great Britain. Families of the dead mourned the loss of loved ones; former soldiers mourned the loss of pals. Campaign medals had already been issued and bright coloured ribbons stood out amongst the grey overcoated crowds. Many of the men, however, had no ribbons. In their place were pinned pawn tickets – simultaneously an expression of deep pride and even deeper national shame.¹⁴

Three hundred thousand ex-service men were unemployed – many for lack of suitable jobs, many because they remained unable to take up employment.¹⁵ The Ministry of Pensions had rationalised its procedures and there were fewer cases of extreme injustice – although men whose physical or mental condition was unstable might over time suffer the indignity of multiple applications and assessments. Two things were clear. Disabled servicemen and families of the „honoured“ dead required a strong advocate to help them in their dealings with bureaucracy. The job had always been too big for Mr Hogge. It required an army of Hogges, a 'Legion' of them, if you will. And there was indeed scope for charitable involvement at the sharp end – to pick up those unfortunates who fell through the net, or who were patiently waiting to be examined and 'processed'.

It was at this point that Britain's most distinguished soldier moved to the front of the stage. Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the victorious British and Commonwealth armies, had previously remained in the shadows. In 1917 he had written to the War Secretary, pressing for adequate pensions for disabled officers and their dependents.¹⁶ Officers were in a substantially worse position than enlisted men. In the pre-war Army they had traditionally enjoyed the benefits of an independent income. The War Office did not consider that they might require Government assistance.

¹⁴ I first heard the pawn ticket story many years ago from members of the 16th Royal Scots. The 'tradition' lasted until well into the 1930s. Richard Holmes referred to it on a number of occasions, most notably in his masterful book, *Tommy – The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London, 2005).

¹⁵ The figure had risen to 350,000 in press reports at the end of 1919.

¹⁶ Letter dated 20 February 1917 to Lord Derby. Quoted by John Terraine in *Douglas Haig – The Educated Soldier* (London, 1990).

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The New Armies, however, had demanded the commissioning of tens of thousands of young men who did not conform to the earlier model of the gentleman soldier. In addition thousands more were commissioned from the ranks. Men who had commanded companies on the Western Front now found themselves destitute – with nowhere to turn for assistance. The Federation, in its wisdom, had banned commissioned men from membership. Some were reduced to peddling matches and bootlaces in the street. Haig took up their cause, acknowledging the plight of other ranks, but pointing out that former officers needed to eat, too. In January 1920 he successfully united a number of smaller organisations to form a single, dedicated Officers' Association and (simultaneously) raised over three quarters of a million pounds to prime the pumps. It was a considerable sum, but with expenditure rising quickly to £40,000 per month, the Officers' Association would use most of the available funds in its first year.¹⁷

Haig spent most of 1920 on the stump. He spoke on countless platforms across the country, coupling his requests for donations with calls for unity amongst ex-servicemen, invoking the spirit which had bound his Armies together during the war and expressing his hope that the same spirit might unite the nation to face the challenges of a world at peace.

Meanwhile, impressed by the success of Haig's initiative, the Federation had softened its position on amalgamation. The Government had established the United Services Fund as a charitable home for the substantial profits made by service canteens during the war. Seven million pounds were available for distribution to deserving military causes. If amalgamation could be achieved, then the new, united, body – possibly to be called the 'Warriors Guild' – might have some real money to work with.¹⁸

It was an attractive prospect.

In August 1920 a meeting took place at the Royal United Services Institute in London. Delegations from the Association, the Federation, the Comrades, the Officers' Association and the National Union gathered to discuss unification, under the chairmanship of the Federation's charismatic and determined Fred Lister, who had been wounded on the first day of the battle of the Somme while serving as a private with the 11th East Lancashire Regiment, the famous 'Accrington Pals'.

¹⁷ The object of the OA was to create a national fund to 'fulfil the nation's obligations to disabled officers and to the widows and orphans of officers who had given their lives'. *The Scotsman*, 5 October 1920 reported the monthly expenditure and estimated that at least £500,000 per year (for an indefinite and extended period) would be needed to alleviate the distress of needy and deserving cases. At that point the Officers' Association had raised only £890,000 in donations. Because of the 'enormous' scale of the problems, it became pressingly necessary to decentralise the work from the OA's London HQ. Branches were opened around the country and the substantial Edinburgh HQ (with close operating links to the Infantry Record Offices in Hamilton and Perth) began operating in March 1920.

¹⁸ The War Office established the United Services Fund under Julian Byng, who served as GOC 3rd Army from 1917 to 1918. The available monies were popularly known as 'Byng's Millions'.

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Lister announced that there would in fact be no unification as such. Rather there would be a process of complete integration, the formation of an entirely new, non-political structure, dedicated to the representation of all ex-service men and their families, regardless of rank. The response was all but unanimous; proposals went out to the branches and by December the matter was agreed.

A Unity Committee would preside over the dissolution of the old and the creation of the new. Almost its first task was to decide on a name. The 'Warriors Guild' fell by the wayside, as did the 'Imperial Federation of Comrades'. In their place the Federation's simple suggestion was chosen. On Saturday 14 May 1921, at a Unity Conference in London, the draft constitution was approved, the Prince of Wales was elected Patron and Sir Douglas (now Earl) Haig was appointed National President. Next morning, representatives of the Association, the Federation, the Comrades and the Officers laid wreaths at London's Cenotaph to symbolise the birth of the 'British Legion'.

Scotland, meanwhile, was busy going its own peculiar way, holding its Unity Conference in Edinburgh on 18 June. Chairman Sir William Dick-Cunyngham presided over what delegates were pleased to call the first Executive Council of the British Legion. Almost immediately the Council elected office bearers and secured headquarter premises at 28 Rutland Square, next door to the offices of the Officers' Association.

London's Legionnaires were confused. There were still two weeks before the official launch of the Legion in England. Scottish representatives had pre-empted that launch. At first it was assumed that the new body would be simply a Scottish 'branch' of the overall British structure. Scottish representatives, however, took offence at the notion that Scotland be designated a mere 'Area' and objected to the suggestion that they pay an annual 'Affiliation Fee' to London. On the official launch of the British Legion, therefore, the Scottish Executive renamed their organisation 'The British Legion Scotland' and proceeded to follow an independent course. Neither the Prince of Wales nor Earl Haig (whose Presidency transcended borders) was able to make them change their minds.

Six million men served in the war. One and three quarter million of them suffered some degree of disablement, of whom half were permanently disabled. There were more than 40,000 limbless men, a surprisingly small number set against the total, but explained by the high number of amputees who had died of their wounds.¹⁹ The Legion was responsible for a diverse community of more than ten million men, women and assorted dependents. The task that the new organisation faced was intimidating. Lobbying for improvements in legislation was a long-term commitment; the representation of individual ex-service men and war widows was a much more daunting challenge. Above all, money was needed for immediate relief.

Reserves from the United Services Fund were used to acquire suitable 'social centres and meeting rooms' for all the many branches – including those in Scotland. At a wider, national level the Legion undertook:

¹⁹ See J.M. Winter, *Some Aspects of the Demographic Consequences of the First World War in Britain*. (Population Studies, Volume 30, 1976); and J.M. Winter, *Britain's 'Lost Generation' of the First World War* (Population Studies, Volume 31, 1977).

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- To inaugurate and maintain comradeship;
- To inculcate a sense of loyalty and service;
- To perpetuate the memory of those who died in the service of their country;
- To endeavour to obtain preferential treatment for ex-service men and women in all matters relating to employment;
- To assist ex-service men, ex-service women and the widows, children and dependents of those who have served in relation to pensions, etc;
- To promote the welfare of the women and children left by those who fell in the War, and to assist them to visit the graves of relatives;
- To assist serving men in connection with their return to civil life, and promote the interests of their dependents while they are serving;
- To promote and support schemes for the education of ex-service men and ex-service women and their children.

This was an ambitious programme and would require a substantial permanent fundraising capability. Haig himself had observed that many disabled soldiers were very young. It often seemed that the Government had missed this salient point. In paying its 'debt' to those men, he said, the Nation was embarking on a commitment that might last 70 years or more. Haig's Officers' Association had survived the merger. A Royal Charter protected its extensive funds which had been donated specifically for the benefit of commissioned ranks. The 'O.A.', however (under the determined leadership of Haig), was able to justify considerable disbursements to the Legion to help with initial administrative costs. The O.A. also handed over the assets and organisation of the 'Great War Remembrance League', set up by Haig in 1919 in order to solicit regular donations from the public.²⁰ Thus the Legion inherited a working appeals office, fully staffed and highly motivated. On 4 August 1921, the anniversary of Great Britain's declaration of war, it issued its first tentative request for donations. £10,400 was raised.

It was a promising start. But how much better might the Legion do if it had a symbol – a recognisable device that defined both the organisation's troubled origins and its hopes for a brighter, better future?

²⁰ The Officers' Association was responsible for operating at least two charitable funds: the 'Great War Remembrance League' (which disbursed money to all ranks), and the 'Earl Haig Appeal Fund', also known as the 'Earl Haig Fund' or 'Earl Haig's Fund'. It's hard to find a precise date for the founding of either of these, but the League is clearly the senior of the two. References to the Earl Haig Fund can be found in the press as early as the end of 1920. The Scottish operation (based in the OA offices at Rutland Square in Edinburgh) was run independently of London. On 9 February 1921 *The Scotsman* reported the opening of new headquarters in Glasgow for the West of Scotland and mentioned that 'the work of the Association [author's italics] had commenced during the last week of December'. Bearing in mind that the OA was originally established as a dedicated officers' organisation (and had clearly solicited donations on that specific basis), it is clear that Haig's establishment of his eponymous 'Fund' was a way of legally adapting the sound administrative structure of the OA to the raising of monies for 'other ranks', too.

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On 8 May 1919 Edward Honey, an Australian journalist, based in London, wrote to the London Evening News under the pseudonym 'Warren Foster' suggesting a short respectful silence at the eleventh hour to commemorate the first anniversary of the Armistice. 11 November 1918 had been disrupted by noisy street celebrations, fuelled by alcohol and a prevailing spirit of unconfined relief.

Honey shared the view of many war widows and bereaved parents who had written to the press over the following days, asking for some simple consideration in the future and some sober public recognition of their deep, abiding sense of loss.

One such parent was Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, whose son, Percy, had been killed in France with the South Africans in December 1917. His letter was forwarded to the King, who on 7 November 1919, proclaimed 'that at the hour when the Armistice came into force, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, there may be for the brief space of two minutes a complete suspension of all our normal activities ... so that in perfect stillness, the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the Glorious Dead'.

In 1919 and 1920 Armistice Day passed quietly. War Memorials had begun to appear across the country, commemorating the dead of cities, towns, villages, schools, universities and even private companies. They provided a focal point for communities to gather and remember. Families and friends of the 'Fallen' were joined by local dignitaries, whose presence lent an air of respectful formality. The local minister or priest would be invited to preside. A bugler would play The Last Post and Reveille. The ceremony that we still recognise today was not designed: like the poppy, it evolved – from bud to bloom, then dying, to bloom again each year.

In 1921 Douglas Haig announced that he was anxious that 11 November become a real 'Remembrance Day', in which connection he proposed to launch several schemes in aid of his latest appeal for ex-service men. The Earl Haig Fund, operated under the auspices of the Officers' Association and, primed with a considerable personal donation, would assist in getting the project off the ground. Among the initiatives was a suggestion that everyone wear a 'Flanders Poppy' as 'a sign of reverence to the many thousands of our heroes who rest beneath this flower in Flanders fields'.²¹

The idea was not original. It was the inspiration of an American woman, Moina Belle Michael, who was employed as a secretary at New York's YMCA headquarters, a convenient place for service men to meet their loved ones before embarking for France. On the morning of 9 November 1918 a young soldier left a copy of the Ladies Home Journal on her desk. As she browsed through the magazine she came across an illustrated poem, written by a Canadian medical officer, John McCrae, who had died of pneumonia at Wimereux, near Boulogne, nine months earlier. Originally published in Punch on 8 December 1915 as In Flanders Fields, it now appeared under the title We Shall Not Sleep:

²¹ Letter to the Secretary of the British Legion. Reported widely in the national and local press. See, for example, The Scotsman, 5 October 1921.

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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. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch: be yours to hold it high!
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.²²

Moina Michael was struck by the final verse, interpreting it as nothing less than a personal challenge. She felt she was being called by McCrae and by countless thousands of other soldiers who had passed the torch from their dying hands. She made a personal pledge never to 'break faith' and resolved always to wear a red poppy to remember the dead. She also scribbled a heartfelt response to McCrae's deathless verses:

Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet - to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.
We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;

It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders Fields.

And now the Torch and Poppy Red
We wear in honor of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

²² McCrae's final intention for the first line remains uncertain. A 1916 autographed manuscript version of the poem reads as follows: 'In Flanders Fields the poppies grow'. See John McCrae, *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems* (London, 1919)

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A conference was taking place that day. In gratitude for the effort she had made to brighten up the room with flowers, three of the delegates gave her a cheque for ten dollars. She showed them McCrae's poem and told them she was going to use the money to buy some red poppies, which she finally found at lunchtime in Wanamaker's department store – one large and twenty-four small, made of fine red silk. When she returned to the office, delegates crowded round demanding poppies to wear. Encouraged by this response, Moina began a personal crusade to promote the poppy as the United States' official symbol of Remembrance. In spite of numerous setbacks, she finally persuaded the Georgia branch of the newly-formed American Legion to adopt the flower in 1920. A few weeks later, on 29 September, the National American Legion convened in Cleveland and ratified the decision.

That meeting was attended by Anna Guérin, a representative of the French YMCA. Anna was profoundly moved by Moina Michael's story. She also saw the fundraising potential. On her return to France she founded the American and French Children's League, organising women, children and disabled veterans to make artificial poppies out of paper and cloth. These were then sold to the public with the proceeds directed to the restoration of devastated areas close to the old front line. In 1921 she visited the London headquarters of the Legion and invited Sir Herbert Brown, Chairman of the Appeals Department, to visit her little office in Paris. Brown returned with a favourable report and in an act of uncharacteristic boldness the Finance Committee sanctioned the purchase of nine million poppies. Selling such a quantity would be difficult – unless the initiative were publicly commended by someone of the standing of Field-Marshal Earl Haig. On 28 October Haig dispatched letters to the editors of the principal British newspapers. This one was sent to The Scotsman:

As you know, November 11, Armistice Day, is the day on which is observed that most impressive two minutes' silence of reverence for those who gave their lives for us in the Great War. This being so, it has been decided to call it 'Remembrance Day'.

For the benefit of my appeal for ex-service men of all ranks – viz., the British Legion – we have decided on that day to sell, through the assistance of ladies in all towns and districts of Scotland, artificial red poppies, this being the flower more associated with the war than any other. It was a Canadian officer who wrote –

If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

The poppies will be made by women and children in the devastated areas of France, by which these sorely stricken people will benefit; the profits made on the sale will alleviate a large amount of distress amongst our own ex-service men and their dependents, and the widows and orphans of those who died.

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I look upon this proposal not by any means in the nature of an ordinary flag day, but as a day of remembrance, on which I hope every member of the community will wear a poppy as a token of respect for the fallen, and a sign that the memory of those heroes is, and always will be, with us.²³

Less widely publicised was Haig's personal guarantee against the Legion losing money on the scheme at this first attempt. Effectively, he had promised to pay for the poppies.

Scotland again asserted its independence. North of the border the Appeal was launched under the direct control of the Earl Haig Fund, which assumed a similar role to that of the British Legion's Appeals Department. The British Legion Scotland had no involvement, other than providing collectors from among its members. Monies raised were held in trust by the Officers' Association and directed towards the British Legion Scotland as and when they were required. The segregation of responsibility was important. The Legion in Scotland handled 'general welfare', including the important issues of pensions and resettlement, while the Earl Haig Fund concentrated on 'benevolence'.²⁴

Of course the O.A. and the O.A. Scotland were the same organisation. The Royal Charter was granted on the basis that the O.A. would be raising funds for the benefit of commissioned ranks. That was the fundamental *raison d'être*. Officials of the O.A. in London took a very strict reading of this. Hence, when the Poppy Appeal (ie an Appeal for all ranks) was organised on a formal footing, they felt bound by the Charter to opt out of direct involvement in fundraising.

North of the border (where a different team of officials was in charge) a more flexible approach was adopted. The Scottish team clearly took the view that since funds raised by the Poppy Appeal would ultimately benefit officers and their dependants (as well as other ranks), there was no obstacle to the O.A. in Scotland becoming involved in the Appeal - in the crucial form of the Earl Haig Fund, which they administered on Haig's behalf both north and south of the border. The inflexibility of the London O.A. may have been justified in law, but the Scottish branch's attitude was more charitable and more consistent with the absolutely pressing needs of discharged soldiers and the dependants of the dead. It is also possible that the officials of the O.A. in Edinburgh more faithfully echoed Haig's own Presbyterian sense of duty to the community than did their colleagues in London.

The first Poppy Appeal raised £106,000 across the United Kingdom – nearly three and a half million pounds in today's values. It was a staggering sum. The cost of mounting the Appeal was £24,000, most of which was accounted for by the purchase of Madame Guérin's poppies. If the Appeal was to be conducted on an annual basis, then it made sense for the Legion to set up its own manufacturing base. If that could involve the employment of ex-service men, then so much the better. Applications were invited from prospective poppy makers.

²³ *The Scotsman*, 29 October 1921.

²⁴ See George Malcolm of Poltalloch, *We Will Remember – Historical Record of the British Legion Scotland* (Edinburgh 1959). Having received its Royal Charter, the OA in England clearly felt uncomfortable in soliciting monies for other ranks. Hence the Poppy Appeal was 'outsourced' to the Legion. In Scotland the independent OA office clearly felt that there was sufficient legal and administrative separation between the OA (as defined by its Charter) and the OA in its role as 'trustee' and operator of the Earl Haig Fund.

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The winning respondent was Major George Howson, MC, founder of the Disabled Society, which was set up during the war to help discharged soldiers with severe injuries. Howson, an engineer by profession, was particularly interested in the development of artificial limbs. He suggested a simple process that would allow someone who had lost the use of an arm to assemble artificial poppies with one hand.

With a grant from the British Legion's Unity Relief Fund, he opened a small factory off the Old Kent Road in London, initially employing just five ex-service men. It was here that the first British poppies were made. Howson wrote to his parents:

I have been given a cheque for £2,000 to make poppies with. It is a large responsibility and will be very difficult. If the experiment is successful it will be the start of an industry to employ 150 men. I do not think it can be a great success, but it is worth trying. I consider the attempt ought to be made if only to give the disabled their chance.²⁵

Within a few months the Disabled Society Poppy Factory (as it was known) was providing fifty severely disabled veterans with paid work, comradeship and a new sense of purpose. It was described as 'the cheeriest workshop in London'. Accompanied by music from a wind-up gramophone, each man produced a thousand poppies a day. Every poppy had the same black button centre, embossed with the familiar letters, 'HF' – for 'Haig Fund'. It was both a stamp of authenticity (to discourage counterfeits) and a simple monogram, a personal endorsement from the founder of the cause.

For its 1922 Appeal the British Legion ordered thirty million poppies, too many for the factory to provide. Additional manufacturers were contracted, and a major publicity drive was undertaken. £204,000 was raised – of which £170,000 was profit. New factory premises were acquired at Richmond Hill in Surrey, along with an adjoining estate, where houses were built for workers and their families. By 1925 190 ex-service men were employed and there was a waiting list of 300.

Scotland, lacking its own manufacturing base, was forced in the meantime to buy English poppies – at a cost of around £4,500 a year. It was February 1926 before Haig and his wife, Lady Doris, persuaded the Earl Haig Fund that Scotland needed a factory of its own. The building chosen was an old wood-chopping workshop at the Scottish Naval and Military Veterans' Residence, Whitefoord House, in Edinburgh's Canongate.²⁶

²⁵ The letter is still in the British Legion's Poppy Factory at Richmond.

²⁶ Whitefoord House was an independent charity, founded by two former officers in the Seaforth Highlanders, Charles Pelham Burn and Chilton Lind Addison-Smith. It was opened on 1 January 1911 in response to the plight of the many disabled and distressed former soldiers who were then living rough on the streets of Edinburgh. The need for such dramatic intervention is further evidence of the utter inadequacy of official provision in the years before the Great War.

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Lady Haig was as determined as her husband and production (using equipment initially provided by Major Howson) began in March. In the run-up to November's Poppy Appeal 28 men were employed in the Canongate. All were Scots, all were otherwise unemployable. Most were classified by the pension authorities as up to 80 per cent disabled; some were fully 100 per cent. Seventeen units of the Army were represented among the ranks, along with one man who had served in the Royal Navy.

As in England, there was already a long waiting list for any possible vacancy. The 1927 Appeal generated unprecedented demand, but Scotland's entire requirement of three million poppies was produced on time.

The Lady Haig Poppy Factory was not a charitable undertaking. It was a self-help movement, run on strict business lines. All employees were paid by results (an average of £2 15s a week): this was not welfare. Like their comrades at Richmond Hill, a growing workforce found work, wages, friendship and self-respect. All materials (including packing boxes) were sourced in Scotland. The manager was Colonel A.C.H. Maclean, who had served in the Great War with the Royal Scots and the fledgling RAF. Maclean explained production to a curious journalist:

There are quite a number of different processes to be gone through in the production of a single poppy. The silk flower has to be stamped out by a cutter, dyed, put through a machine to give it the crinkles and then made up into the flower. The centre has to be cut and stamped, coconut fibre put in, and the tips dipped in boiling wax to make the seed. The process, allowing for drying after dyeing, takes forty-eight hours.²⁷

Each ordinary poppy cost about one penny to produce, and that was their notional price on the street. The Appeal organisers, however, encouraged collectors to ask for the 'utmost' that prospective buyers could afford. They also warned the Scottish public to beware of 'rival' poppies, mentioning no names, but undoubtedly referring to those circulated by the British Legion. Scottish poppies were distinguished from the start by a unique button centre, bearing the words 'Haig Fund' (which were later adopted in England, too). They were also distinguished by the absence of a leaf – more botanically correct than the English version and also cheaper to produce. All profits raised from the sale of Scottish poppies (and the increasingly popular poppy wreaths) were directed towards assisting Scottish veterans and their families. There were grants for rent, grants for clothes, grants for rail fares to job interviews, grants for false teeth, grants for funerals, grants (at Earl Haig's personal suggestion) for emigration. There was hardly a corner of Scottish life that the Haig Fund failed to lighten with what Haig himself once called its 'shining torch of hope'.

²⁷ *Sunday Post*, 17 April 1927.

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The Scottish poppy still proudly bears its founder's name. In England the British Legion replaced the wording in 1994 with the softer and more neutral 'Poppy Appeal'. Continuing controversy over the Field-Marshal's reputation may have made their officials uncomfortable. In the nine decades since the Armistice Douglas Haig has been fought over more bitterly than any shattered wood by the side of the Menin Road. Some of the criticism is unfair; some well-founded. But he was a man of his time – the product of a military culture in which officers were responsible for the welfare of their men. It was a duty that outlived his command on the Western Front. And it was a duty that he fulfilled willingly, tirelessly, and with no little wisdom until the very day that he died. His achievements in helping to unite the community of ex-service men and his singleminded (and almost single-handed) creation of the Poppy tradition (with all the good that has accrued therefrom) deserve to be acknowledged and remembered.

The Earl Haig Fund and the little red flower that bears its name have an honourable history. They were born of anger, grief, hope and high endeavour. There is an old slogan, not much heard these days: 'Wear your poppy with pride'.

There are worse things to do on the 11th of November.

Jack Alexander, October 2011

About the author

Born and educated in Edinburgh, where he still lives, Jack Alexander has been interested in the Great War since he was nine. He is now a professional researcher and author of the book McCrae's Battalion: The Story of the 16th Royal Scots.