

Teacher's Notes: Second – Third Level

History of the Poppy: Lessons 1 - 3

Background Notes

What is the Poppy?

The red poppy is a symbol of both Remembrance and hope for a peaceful future.

Poppies are worn as a show of support for the Armed Forces community.

The poppy is a well-known and well-established symbol, one that carries a wealth of history and meaning with it. Wearing a poppy is still a very personal choice, reflecting individual experiences and personal memories. It is never compulsory but is greatly appreciated by those who it is intended to support.

But what is the inspiration and history behind the poppy becoming a symbol of Remembrance?

The Western Front

During WW1, much of the fighting took place in Western Europe in France and Belgium. The countryside was blasted, bombed and fought over repeatedly. Previously beautiful landscapes turned to mud; bleak and barren scenes were created where little or nothing could grow.

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Fields of Poppies

There was a notable and striking exception to the bleakness of the battlefields of World War One - the bright red Flanders poppies.

These resilient flowers flourished in the middle of so much chaos and destruction, growing in the thousands upon thousands.

In the Spring of 1915

Shortly after losing a friend in Ypres, a Canadian doctor, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae was moved by the sight of these poppies and that inspiration led him to write the now famous poem '**In Flanders Fields**'.

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In Flanders Fields by Lt Col John McCrae

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.

Lt Col John McCrae 1862-1918

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Further information on John McCrae and his poem

Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, MD, had been a doctor in Canada who had shown an interest in the military and had an artistic side. Before the First World War broke out in 1914 he could not have been aware that his interests and talents would combine and he would write a poem which is remembered to this day. Canada had joined the First World War on the side of the British and many Canadian troops were sent to fight against the Germans in the trenches that ran through France and Belgium. The line of trenches was called the Western Front. McCrae and his colleague were thousands of miles from home, in a foreign country zigzagged with trenches. Often the trenches filled with rain water and became muddy. Rats fed off food, dead bodies in no man's land, and often nibbled sleeping soldiers' faces. McCrae was a field surgeon in the war and saw his fellow Canadians horrifically injured by machine gun and artillery fire. During the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, some 6000 Canadians were killed or wounded in just two days of fighting.

McCrae was working at a field dressing station based at Essex Farm. Field dressing stations were where soldiers would have their wounds treated immediately before being sent back to a hospital many miles behind the lines. McCrae had been working for hours trying to save injured soldiers. McCrae was particularly affected by the death of his friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who was killed by a German artillery shell.

McCrae was so tormented by his friend's death and by the numbers of his fellow soldiers who were being killed that he sat and wrote a poem in the back of an ambulance.

As he looked over the fields, he thought he could see a sea of blood. It was, however, poppies in the fields. Poppies grow on ground that has been churned up.

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Poppies sprang up all along the Western Front after years of fighting, the digging of trenches and artillery shells exploding on the farmland.

Today, we use the poppy as a symbol to remember those who suffered in the First World War and in the many wars thereafter. Essex Farm is still there, and you can today see the cemetery next to it and the remains of the bunkers in which the doctors worked in the field dressing station.

The spread of the poppy as a symbol

The poem then inspired an American academic named Moina Michael to adopt the poppy in memory of those who had fallen in the war. She campaigned to get it adopted as an official symbol of Remembrance across United States and worked with others who were trying to do the same in Canada, Australia, and the UK.

Also involved with those efforts was a French woman, Anna Guérin who was in the UK in 1921 where she planned to sell the poppies in London.

There she met Earl Haig, founder of the Royal British Legion, who was persuaded to adopt the poppy as an emblem for the Legion in the UK. The Legion, which had been formed in 1921, ordered nine million poppies and sold them on 11 November that year.

Sold out!

The poppies sold out almost immediately. That first 'Poppy Appeal' raised over £106,000 to help veterans with housing and jobs, a considerable sum at the time. Today's Poppy Appeal? 40,000 volunteers distribute 40 million poppies.

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Poppy popularity grows

In view of how quickly the poppies had sold and wanting to ensure plenty of poppies for the next appeal, Major George Howson set up the first Poppy Factory in England to employ disabled ex-servicemen.

The demand for poppies in England continued unabated and was so high, in fact, that few poppies actually managed to reach Scotland. To address this and meet growing demand, Earl Haig's wife Dorothy established the 'Lady Haig Poppy Factory' in Edinburgh in 1926 to produce poppies exclusively for Scotland.

Lady Haig's Poppy Factory employed two disabled veterans at first who made poppies for for the whole of Scotland ahead of Remembrance Day on 11th November 1926. Soon there was a long waiting list of veterans wanting to work there, the factory quickly grew and was soon making all sorts of goods which were sold in a shop in Edinburgh and through a mobile shop which travelled around the country. The poppy machines were designed to be able to be used one handed by veterans who had lost an arm or a hand in the First World War.

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Photos of Lady Haig's Poppy Factory In The 1930s



Men showing the different products made in the factory



Men making wreaths

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Men making wreaths



Men making toys

Today, over five million Scottish poppies (which have four petals and no leaf unlike poppies in the rest of the UK) are still made by hand by disabled ex-Servicemen at Lady Haig's Poppy Factory each year and distributed by **Poppyscotland**.



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An enduring symbol

Remembrance in the UK today is very different than it was 100 years ago. People take part whatever their political or religious beliefs. The poppy remains a humble, poignant symbol of Remembrance and hope.

Remembrance Day on 11th November every year is a day of reflection, it allows us to remember or think about all those people who are affected by wars, both in the distant past and more recently. It allows us to think about all those people who suffer in wars all around the world and reminds us how important it is for each and every one of us to work for peace.

By ignoring or letting go of the past, we might forget the horrors of war and the importance of working hard to maintain peace.

