

They Still Remember

November 27, 2006

Thomas Lorman

If, in some early November, your search for a fresh perspective on international events leads you to watch BBC World, or if, on some evening news program you catch sight of another British politician paying the customary visit to this superpower's shores, then you will notice that on each Brit's lapel, or on her blouse, sits a small red flower.

The two leaves are made of red paper about an inch wide, centered on a small, back, plastic bulb behind which is appended a green plastic stem that is inserted through either button hole or safety-pin. This flower, the poppy, is worn throughout Britain through the first days of November, until two events have run their course. First, when the clock strikes the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, all of Britain stands still for two minutes of silence. Classes pause, the traffic falls quiet on the streets, people cease their shopping, and the fallen, all those who died in all wars, are remembered. Secondly, on the Sunday nearest to 11 November, Remembrance Sunday, various officials, representatives of all the services, old soldiers, and those who still wish to bear witness, gather at the war memorials that stand at the center of every town and village across the country. In London, the Royal Family and leaders of all political parties lead the wreath laying, but at the base of every war memorial in Britain on that Sunday one will find fresh wreaths made solely from that small red plastic flower – the poppy.

It was the First World War that gave rise to these rituals, these national acts of remembrance and the symbolism of the poppy. Memorialization of war had, of course, begun much earlier. Standing stones mark the site of ancient battles. Marathon and Thermopylae were essential stops on the European Grand Tour. The Napoleonic Wars were eagerly commemorated by both sides. One thinks of Nelson's Column and the Arc de Triomphe, but these are monuments to military prowess not military loss. With later 19th century wars armies grew larger and the casualty lists grew correspondingly longer; while paintings, poems, photos and newspaper reports 'direct from the front' all ensured that the sense of loss grew more apparent. By the end of the century every respectable

town in the western hemisphere had its memorial to the fallen, erected by innumerable associations of 'patriotic' ladies, citizens of 'public spirit' and the invariable public subscription. These monuments of local stone or polished marble, crested perhaps with captured cannon or a sculpted lion, stood as testaments to civic duty and the nobility of sacrifice. Devoid of cynicism, the mason could still carve out across the monument, the old Roman motto, *Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori*.

The First World War stripped away that nobility. The all-volunteer British Expeditionary Force was sent to Northern France and the Low Countries, (Flanders in the parlance of the day) only to be ground down by the fighting. On the first of July, 1916, at 7.30 on a fine summer's morning, the British launched an attack by the Somme River. That first day they lost twenty thousand men. The offensive went on for four more months. Stretcher bearers went out every evening to bring the bodies back. The sheer scale of the casualties ensured resources could not be 'wasted' bringing the fallen home. There were too many bodies. Instead, they were buried just behind the front lines, in mass graves, marked at first with simple wooden crosses. By late 1916 the British introduced conscription in an effort to plug the losses.

Monuments to the dead reflected the somberness of the sacrifice. In Britain, most of these monuments took their cue from the Cenotaph erected in Central London in 1921 which was always intended to be the focus of national commemorations. It was strikingly simple: a slab of white stone, without ornamentation except a carved wreath at each end and the phrase 'the glorious dead'. Frequently, on the slabs of stone placed in every town and village, the names of the fallen from the local community were inscribed. Row after row of names in alphabetical order bearing witness to the scale of the losses. All told, Britain and her empire lost over 700 000 men and more than 2.3 million total casualties. America arrived late to the war, and still buried some 120 000 of her sons in France's soil.

Poets were particularly adept at capturing the horror. Into their pocket notebooks they compressed the enormity of the emotions unleashed by the conflict. In the very first

month of the conflict, as the surge of patriotic enthusiasm that had greeted the outbreak of war dissipated while the newspapers ran out of space to list the latest casualties, the British poet Laurence Binyon published his poem entitled 'For the Fallen'. In its admiration for the soldiers 'straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow' who 'fell with their faces to the foe', Binyon's poem struck a deep, resounding chord. To this day, all across Britain, every Remembrance Sunday, as the assembled gather at their local war memorial, an old soldier always steps forward to recite this poem's fourth and most famous verse, declaring

**They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.**

Other poets, however, saw the war in far less glorious terms. Wilfred Owen, knee-deep in the mud of the trenches, chiseled his anger into lines of poetry that stripped away the nobility of sacrifice for generations of his readers. Referring to his own experience of war, he told his readers that if they had seen, heard, lost what he had lost

**You would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.**

It was a Canadian poet, however, whose lines of verse directly led to the cult of the poppy. Published in 1915, the poem, 'In Flanders Fields', written by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae who had 'rallied to the flag', became especially popular. It reads

**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**

It was this poem that enshrined the vision of a field full of blood-red poppies into the popular imagination as the symbol of a battlefield. Yet it was an American lady, the marvelously-named Moina Belle Michael, a devout and fiery lady from Georgia, who first recognized the potency of the poppy's symbolism. She had volunteered for war service in 1918, as part of the YMCA's efforts to support American servicemen, but her application was rejected due to her age and she was given a desk job in New York City. There, at least, she came into regular contact with departing and returning soldiers. And it was there, in November 1919, that she was inspired by John McCrae's poem, and by the approaching anniversary of the armistice, to purchase 25 poppies which she handed around to her friends to commemorate the fallen. She summed up the sense of duty that inspired her to begin wearing the poppy, in her own poetic response to Lieutenant Colonel McCrae. Entitled "We Shall Keep the Faith", its last verse reads

**And now the Torch and Poppy red
We wear in honour of our dead.**

**Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.**

She then lobbied furiously, and successfully, for the poppy to become America's national memorial symbol. The American Legion formally made the poppy its memorial symbol in 1920 and called for the wearing of the poppy on each anniversary of armistice day. The symbolic torch was, by the way, quietly abandoned – a solitary poppy was quite enough to capture the sense of loss, the sacrifice. The popularity of the poppy was also enhanced by French efforts to employ war widows in the manufacture of replica poppies which were then sold in a host of countries, including America and Britain, in order to both provide employment and raise funds for those parts of France devastated by the war.

When the Royal British Legion was formed in 1921 to represent the interests of former British soldiers it adapted both the American Legion's name and the symbolism of the poppy. It also adapted the French idea of mass producing poppies to raise much needed funds. The Legion was established in 1921 to represent the interests of returning soldiers who faced, as all soldiers face, profound challenges in readjusting to civilian life. By encouraging former soldiers to sell poppies throughout Britain, the legion raised funds to help ex-soldiers in distress, while also publicizing both the new organization and the plight of the soldiers they represented. From 1922 onwards, a factory has been in continuous operation producing replica poppies, funded by the Legion and staffed exclusively by disabled soldiers. The British poppy was designed so that workers with a disability could easily assemble it and this principle continues to govern the design and production of the British poppy to this day.

While the needs of the World War One soldiers gradually diminished, fresh waves of soldiers returned from other wars bearing fresh scars, in need of the legion's assistance. The poppy has now become a symbol of all fallen soldiers in all wars and its popularity among the British people remains undiminished.

This is strange, for it is painful to note that in America the tradition of wearing the poppy has fallen out of favor. Yet in Britain, a country devoid of a single annual national celebration, the wearing of the poppy still remains a truly national ritual. From late October, Royal British Legion volunteers fan out across the towns and villages of Britain, replete with boxes of poppies and a collecting box – the poppies are free, the donations are voluntary and always given. Efforts to politicize the commemorations by wearing the white ‘peace’ poppy have recurred ever since the 1930s, yet, in general, early November marks a recognition that sometimes the ultimate sacrifice should transcend political point scoring.

Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae did not live to see the growth of the poppy cult that his poem had inspired. He died in Flanders in 1918. His last words, however, conveyed a message that still has resonance. ‘Tell them this’ he said “‘if ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep’. When you catch a glimpse of a poppy worn on that visiting British diplomat, or politician, or member of the general public minding his own business in the first days of November, or if you caught sight of a citizen of this country who still commemorates Veterans Day with a small red poppy, you will know that they still hear the poet’s words, ‘they did not break faith’, they still remember, in Flanders fields....