

Poppy meanings



Most of us probably think we know what the red poppy stands for: but what's all this about the *white* poppy? As summer turns to autumn and the month we give to 'remembrance' in this country, it's a question that continues to need an answer.

As it happens, white poppies go back nearly as long ago as red ones; but the two have somewhat different origins. The 'poppy appeal' launched in 1921 by the Royal British Legion aimed to help military veterans with employment and housing. Its focus was on the veterans - the surviving soldiers returning home, trying to rebuild lives shattered by war. When in 1933 the Cooperative Women's Guild began to sell the white poppy, on the other hand, they wanted to give a slightly different message. After the 'war to end all wars' and the years of public victory parades and private hardship, they felt there was a widespread wish to have a symbol of something else: the determination to work for peace. Taken up later by the Peace Pledge Union, the idea was to express the urgent need for international peacebuilding.

While they differ in origin, there is something the two have in common. Both poppies are about remembering: both triggered by Remembrance Day – originally set to mark the date (11th November 1918) of the signing of the armistice between warring countries in Europe. Wearing the red poppy shows a commitment to remember and honour the British servicemen and women who died in both world wars and the many others in conflicts since.. The white poppy asks us to remember these, but also a much wider range of war victims, not only from the British armed services, but also the many others, all over the world - civilians as well as military - for whom armed conflict has meant death, disaster and despair.

Perhaps there is now a need for both poppies. Global warfare has dramatically changed. During the first world war, 80% of the victims were military personnel, and just 20% civilian. In the world we live in today, the figures of those harmed or killed by war are reversed: 90% of the victims are civilian; just 10% are those in the armed forces. Throughout the world, war brings slaughtered victims, survivors wounded for life in mind and body, millions made

sick or homeless, families and communities torn apart - and many killed or imprisoned for refusing to fight.

Wars begin with 'us' and them'. History teaches us that they do not bring peace. Armistice Day gives us a chance to reconnect with our energies to prevent them. It's a reminder to grieve for all victims, combatants and non-combatants alike. It's also a day to remember, support and honour the courageous work of peacebuilding: nonviolent resistance, negotiation, reconciliation.

Both red and white poppies have messages we can listen to.

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*Nailsworth Quaker meeting
September 2017*

Refs

http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/early/poppy3_early_years.html

<http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/remembrance/how-we-remember/the-story-of-the-poppy/>

Lyn Smith, 'People power: fighting for peace from the first World War to the present'
pub Thames and Hudson, 2017

(illustration: remembrance Sunday wreath, Stevenage, 2016)