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## **The Poppy: Contextualising a Seemingly Timeless Symbol in History, Materials and Practice**

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## **Abstract**

The poppy, a blood red flower, is the British nation's symbol of remembrance. For over one hundred years, the poppy has been worn on the lapels of numerous generations as an act of respect for the military men and women that lost their lives serving the nation during times of war. The tradition ultimately began with World War I and since that time the poppy, its meaning and its use, is often viewed in a timeless manner; it transcends time to unite the past and the present. However, the poppy is not an unchanging, static and bounded symbol.

This research therefore represents an attempt to historicise the poppy. In other words, it is an attempt to contextualise the materials, the meaning and the use of the poppy in and through time. Analysing the material properties of the poppy, its relationship to the bodies of soldiers, to embodied practice, to industrialisation, and to nationalism, I will argue that the poppy has undergone a series of transitions. Beginning first as a form of therapy, the construction of the silk poppy shared an intimate association and gained legitimacy through the touch of veterans. In 1978, industrial technologies transformed the poppy's colouring to purify the symbol's association with pain, warfare and the bodies of soldiers. With the advent of the centenary anniversary of the start of the war, the poppy once again changed. Using ceramic, the anniversary celebrations broke the poppy into pieces and used the biographies of the dead to resonate with the living. Through historicising the poppy, it becomes evident that history, material objects and meaning are not stable. Instead, they are process entangled in webs of relationships between objects, bodies, and time.

## Executive Summary

On the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month, British citizens from around the nation are encouraged to reflect upon the consequences of war and the honourable sacrifice of the military dead. Perhaps the most prominent symbol of this remembrance period is the poppy. A bright red flower, with a black centre and a narrow green stem, the poppy gained an association with the bodies of soldiers on the battlefields of the Western Front during World War I. Growing in the desolated landscape of warfare, the poppies were symbolically eternalised in the poem *In Flanders Fields* by John McCrae. The poem asks readers to keep faith with the dead and to remember their sacrifice in relation to the purpose of the war (Harrison 2012). As the ideals and message of the poem spread, the symbol of the poppy was adopted by a charitable organisation, today known as the Royal British Legion. Through their efforts, drawing on both commercialisation and nationalism, the poppy was officially selected as the nation's symbol of remembrance.

The poppy is often portrayed as timeless. In other words, it is viewed as a static and complete product; its meaning and use unchanged since World War I. However, rather than transcending time, the poppy is a symbol with a history and is situated in a context of dynamic relations. This research is therefore an attempt to historicise the poppy. It is an attempt to contextualise the materials, the meaning and the use of the poppy through time. In essence, I analyse three major shifts in the production of the poppy, the use of its material properties, such as colour, and its relationship to the living and dead bodies of soldiers to illustrate the ways in which the poppy can be observed as a dynamic symbol rooted in history.

Returning from war, British veterans made the first poppies by hand on British soil from silk. Viewed as a form of therapeutic labour that reinstated the labour capacity and consequently the wholeness of the individual, the production of the poppy became intertwined with the rehabilitation of veterans. Made by men with the experience of warfare and without the use of industrial techniques tied to the mass deaths of the battlefield, the poppy also gained legitimacy. Consequently, its intimacy with the bodies of battle made the poppy a worthy symbol of national remembrance, charity, and hope for the future.

In 1978, the production of the poppy was transformed. On Remembrance Sunday the year before, gushing like blood from an open wound, the soluble, crimson red dye of the poppy stained the porcelain white uniforms of the Royal Marines Guard Band, as rain fell from the sky. For the spectators, now generations removed from any direct experience with the war, this visceral image highlighted the poppy's intimate ties to pain, suffering and the bodies of soldiers. It proved too shocking and it was at this point that industry and science were introduced to the production process to transform the poppy's colouring from a natural property to a chemical dye. Through removing the poppy's direct and bodily association to warfare, industrial techniques can be considered as cleansing the poppy of pain and suffering. In other words, through using industrial techniques whereby the consumer does not see, experience, or understand the processes of construction, the paper poppy is crafted as a complete and bounded consumer product. Its story, its history, begins not with the veteran that makes it, but with the person that buys it. The poppy's ties to warfare, death and suffering are consequently obscured and the poppy seems to transcend the boundaries of time and the consequences of war. Similarly, the war dead that the poppy represents become a generic, faceless and unknowable dead.

The final transition in the production of the poppy occurred with the approach of the centenary anniversary of the beginning of World War I. Incorporating art and imagination as a method to reinvigorate remembrance and cross generational gaps, an exhibit entitled *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* occurred at the historic Tower of London. Here, the poppies were made from ceramic. Unlike the industrial poppies described above, these poppies were once again handmade by citizens who had direct ties to the loss of a loved one at the hands of war. Whereas the paper poppy symbolised a faceless unknowable dead, the ceramic poppy symbolically represented an individual soldier. Furthermore, a piece within the whole, the ceramic poppies collectively acted as a unifying national force. Simultaneously symbolising individuals and a gathering of individuals, or a collective, the art exhibit subsumed the identities of not only the living spectators, but also dead—they were British.

Ultimately, through historicising the poppy, I hope to demonstrate that the poppy is not a timeless symbol and its narrative of the war and its relevancy to the present are not stable. Instead, the construction of the poppy reveals how the symbol has been adapted, changed and moulded by human hands. Mirroring the changes in material properties are dynamic relationships to the memories of World War I, to the biographies of the dead, and to the boundaries of the British identity.

Although at first glance this project may be seen as simply a retelling or a revealing of history, I think it goes deeper than that. In his critique of modernisation, Bruno Latour proposes a method of purification whereby objects become separated from the processes of production (1993). Thus, objects are sometimes used unquestioningly and are viewed independently from larger issues of politics, power and identity. For example, as November approaches it may become automatic, an unconscious reaction, to reach for those few extra pennies to buy a poppy

from the veteran on the street corner; to view the poppy solely as a symbol of peace, respect and remembrance. But, the poppy is so much more. Therefore, I historicise the poppy to not only tell a narrative, but to also demonstrate how seemingly stable material objects and their properties, purified from the processes that created them, have a superficially objective and authoritative potential to legitimise the past, the present and the future.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

On the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month, Britain remembers. Throughout the country, in villages and cities alike, the people of Britain collectively pause, for two minutes, to remember veterans, to reflect upon the honourable sacrifice of the dead, and to consider the impact of war on their lives today. The main event is of course centred in the heart of the nation and involves the Queen, as well as the political leaders of the time, laying wreaths at the foot of the nation's most prominent memorial, the cenotaph. Parading past the memorial, as the military bands proudly play, veterans, as well as current servicemen and women, are also an integral part of the day's pageantry. Attracting multiple generations, the day asks both the old and the young to remember. Similar sights and sounds occur across the country, even across the Commonwealth, each with their own regional twist. Central to this day, to this season of remembrance, and to the success of this event, however, is the symbol of the poppy.

The poppy is a common flower throughout Europe. With crimson red petals, a black centre and a straight narrow green stem, the poppy gained its most prominent association to remembrance on the battlefields of the Western Front. Here, growing in the disturbed and desolated landscape of World War I, the poppy marked the first sign of new life. Captured in a poem by a military physician, the image of the poppy became entwined with the loss of the dead, with the suffering of soldiers and with the comradeship of warfare (Harrison 2012). This image spread both on the battlefields and at home. Women, for example, grieving for their men, began to wear and distribute the flower as an outward symbol of keeping faith with the dead (Harrison

2012). But, with only a limited supply of fresh poppies, the symbol was transformed into a more permanent silk representative. After the war ended, and Armistice was declared on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918, the poppy continued to be used as a symbol to honour and remember soldiers that did not return home.



**Figure 1: *Papaver rhoeas* (“Poppy Flowers—Pictures and Meanings”).**

Worn above the heart, and secured with a simple pin, the symbol gained an official status through its association with the Royal British Legion, a charitable organisation dedicated to the rehabilitation of veterans. Launching as a small enterprise that employed a handful of veterans, it was ultimately in 1921 that the Royal British Legion legitimised the use and distribution of the

poppy as a symbol of national remembrance. After this official endorsement, the poppy developed into a symbol with two prominent roles. The first was as a symbol of lasting respect and honour for the dead. The second was as a charitable commodity. Sold for a few pence, the poppy was intended as a source of money to provide further support, beyond the limited job opportunities at the factory, for the men returning from the battlefields and their families. Thus, as the season of remembrance approached, women on street corners, in community centres and at local events would sell the silk poppy to be worn by each and every citizen of the nation (Royal British Legion “The Story of the Poppy”). Gathering around community memorials the crowd, not simply just a collection of individuals, would become a sea of red; a field of poppies.



**Figure 2: The paper version of the poppy (“What colour poppy will you wear on Remembrance Sunday?” 2013; photo courtesy of Robert Free/Alamy).**

Yet, what is important to consider is that although the poppy is a symbol that is often seen as transcending time, uniting the sacrifice of the past with the lives of the present, the poppy

has not remained a static and bounded construction. Reflected in the change of its material properties, the poppy, its meaning and its association with the dead and the living, has developed and will continue to develop throughout time. This research, therefore, represents an attempt to historicise the symbol of the poppy; to place it within the context of time. However, instead of solely focusing on what remains or what has been forgotten, I am going to look at the interplay, the relations, between the two. In other words, I am going to analyse the ways in which the properties and the uses of both the past and present poppies have interacted to create a meaningful story of World War I. Nevertheless, this narrative, although seemingly concrete when told, is not a finished product or even a complete story. What is remembered, how it is remembered and why it is remembered, from year to year, is never the same. Instead, this story is situated in a web of interconnected relations that stress different threads of the story at different times with different aims. What is remembered today can never be the same as what is remembered yesterday, or that which will be remembered tomorrow.

To support my argument, I will draw upon the following social theorists. First, using the literature of materiality, I hope to demonstrate the importance of material objects as sites of meaning. In their book *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey explore the ways in which material objects acquire meaning through embodied practices (2001). Seemingly simple objects, such as watches or photographs, become sites of memory and also sites of negotiated meaning. Consequently, the poppy can be considered as a material object that, through its associations with the bodies of soldiers and battlefields, acts as a site of memory for World War I. Thus, through the ideas of Hallam and Hockey, I hope to demonstrate the importance of embodied practices and material objects to the making of memories and meaning surrounding British remembrance.

However, the memory of the war must pass through generations. In other words, its relevance must have a longevity that outlives the duration of the war itself. Therefore, when considering the poppy, it is important to reflect upon how generations far removed from the direct consequences of World War I connect to national remembrance. Here, the theory of post-memory, first developed by Marianne Hirsch, who analysed the intergenerational memory of the Holocaust, and later adapted by Lyla Renshaw, who applies such thinking to her excavations of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War, becomes relevant. Post-memory is defined as the “project of arranging, assembling, or constructing material objects of mourning, to fill the gap between losses endured in the past, but experienced directly by the present generations” (Renshaw 2010: 452). This concept is applicable to the poppy because post-memory “is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (2010: 452). What is relevant therefore, is the role of a creative investment, even imagination in material objects. As I shall demonstrate, the centenary celebrations at the Tower of London, an art exhibit, exemplifies this attempt to bridge the generational divide through imagination.

The above theories will all be intertwined and perhaps pushed further through the lens of anthropologist Tim Ingold, and his analysis of stories and the properties of materials. Ingold suggests that material objects are not static or bounded constructions. Narrating the process of sawing wood, where each stroke is unique yet builds on the movement before, Ingold argues that to describe things is to place them in relation to other things within a field of things. For example, the saw is placed in relation to the wood, to the person who is sawing, and to the person’s previous experience with the saw, with wood and with sawing. Thus, the “meanings of stories are recognised through the alignment of present circumstances with the conjunctions of the past” (2011: 57). Stated in a different manner, every story becomes a relationship in which

the present is cast through the lens of the past. Hence, no story remains the same through time. For the poppy, Ingold's stories become insightful when considering how the poppy is placed in relation to the bodies of soldiers, to industry and technology, and to the dead through and between time. As I shall demonstrate, the story of the poppy gains different meanings at different points in time as its connections to soldiers, to industry and to the identity of the dead change.

Additionally, throughout his analysis of stories, Ingold highlights the importance of the properties of materials, such as hardness, opacity and durability, to meaning making (2011: 30). The qualities of materials as they move through networks of relations create the conjunctions of the story that reveal meaning. For the poppy, I will highlight how its relationship to nature, to blood and to kinship is directly associated with the material construction of its properties. It is through these properties that the meaning of the poppy is both understood and changed.

Often depicted as the antithesis to Ingold (especially by Ingold himself), Bruno Latour provides critical insights into the construction of seemingly static and objective objects. In his critique of modernisation and an objectified science, Latour proposed a process of purification whereby objects become separated from the processes that produced them. These objects are subsequently capable of portraying an idea independently from their context and the history of relations that brought them into being (1993). In relation to the poppy, Latour's process of purification is evident when considering the ways in which the symbol of the poppy has been crafted as a timeless, finished and independent commodity. As I shall expand upon in later chapters, industry, commercialisation and nationalism have all played a role in purifying the poppy from the processes of production. The symbol that is so recognisable today is often separated from its past. Bruno Latour's ideas therefore prove invaluable when considering why it is important to historicise the symbol of the poppy. To truly understand the meaning of the



poppy, we must consider how and why it has changed through time. We must contextualise its meaning—and matter.

The final theorist that I shall draw upon is anthropologist Katherine Verdery. In her ethnography *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, Verdery analyses statues as a way to draw group boundaries and to legitimise or overthrow political authority (1999). With a more material permanence than the ephemeral nature of bodies, Verdery suggests that statues draw upon the biographies of the dead to unite, collectivise and legitimise group identities. Although situated in an entirely different context than the poppy and World War I, Verdery's ethnography contains insights into the ways in which material objects support or contradict the formation of nationalist identities. Thus, material objects do not stand apart from politics, but instead are intertwined with its complex web. The poppy, too, is deeply related to politics. Most prominently, for example, it symbolises keeping faith with all of the soldiers that died under the British, and of course the Commonwealth, identity (Harrison 2012). It identifies both the dead and the living as a collective—both are British. Consequently, Verdery's consideration for the interplay between material objects and national identities cannot be overlooked when considering the role that the poppy plays in constructing and legitimising the British national identity. Remembrance is, after all, a national affair.

As I move through these theorists and apply their concepts to the symbol of the poppy, I will demonstrate how the creation of the poppy has been a dynamic process. But, this process cannot be removed from the context in which it developed. In fact, I shall demonstrate throughout the following chapters, events in history that have changed the poppy at multiple scales all the way down to its most basic properties, such as its colour. Whilst these events often seem as distant as perhaps even the war itself, they are nevertheless crucial to the construction

and meaning of the poppy. Understanding the poppy, in all of its complexity, as a process of continual construction pushes the boundaries of the seemingly finished commodity that Britain has consumed for over one hundred years. Placing the poppy in its historical context, enables us as informed citizens to know and to question what, how and why we remember. No story is ever a simple and stable narrative.

## Chapter 2

### History

On June 28<sup>th</sup> 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was assassinated. His death would result in nearly every European empire and their territories to engage in war. What came to be known as the Great War, or the war to end all wars, would take the lives of nine million men on the battlefield alone. Many more would die due to diseases, such as influenza, and due to the harsh conditions of life in the trenches. Initially, both the Allies, consisting of Russia, Britain and France, and the Central Powers, made up of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, believed that the war would be over in a matter of months. In fact, the German general Kaiser Wilhelm II proclaimed that he would have “Paris for lunch and St. Petersburg for dinner” (Baggett, Winter and Byker 1996). Yet, after the Christmas of 1914 passed, the war was at a stalemate with both the Allies and the Central Powers deeply entrenched into the earth itself. Eventually, each side would call upon its territories for more men, more ammunition and more resources. In 1917, the United States entered the war after Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare and sunk a passenger ship carrying US citizens. But, with an increase in disillusionment, a declining faith in the meaning of war and death, and an association of the battlefield with mass slaughter, the allure of battle began to fade. Finally, in 1918, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, an armistice was signed and the war ended.

Despite the disillusionment of warfare towards the end of World War I, some battles gained an unforgettable prestige; perhaps though due more to their sheer horror rather than their

success. The Battle of Verdun, for example, that lasted for almost the entirety of 1916, was the longest battle of the war and resulted in an estimated one million casualties. That same year, just 125 miles northwest of Verdun, was the Battle of the Somme. A Franco-British offense against the Germans was orchestrated to relieve the pressure on the French. Trying to uproot the entrenched Germans, Britain introduced a new industrial war machine—the tank. Although an effective tool, it was too few in number to make any difference. Ultimately, it could not prevent the loss of nearly three-quarters of a million British and French men. In fact, it was at the Battle of the Somme, on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1916 that Britain suffered the most casualties ever recorded in British military history. The extent of the warfare could even be heard across the English Channel on the Home front. In the end, the battle could not force the Germans out of their trenches. In 1917, this time in Belgium, the British again tried to uproot the Germans in what came to be known as the Third Battle of Ypres. Mines were laid in the hopes of disrupting the highly organised German defence. However, after the mines had little impact, and a wet season hit the trenches, men, machines and animals were swallowed by the mud likened to quicksand. Other infamous claims that World War I holds include the first use of chemical weapons, the first bombing of civilians from the sky and the first genocide (Baggett, Winter and Byker 1966).

A war of such magnitude and destruction severely impacted every aspect of life. From the economy, to the roles and rights of women, to the destabilisation of world powers and their territorial claims, to the eventual discontent that would result in another World War, the Great War ruptured the fabric of life and death. A war of the masses, men and boys from all over the British nation regardless of class fought and died on the battlefields. In 1915, the War Office banned the repatriation of all British war dead. Thus, not only did men die on the battlefield, but



**Figure 3: Belgium cemetery for British World War I soldiers (Carradice 2010).**

they were buried or simply lost on foreign land. A leaflet entitled *The Care of the Dead*, intended to comfort and reassure family members that their loved ones and their bodies had been properly cared for, read “Everything is done as tenderly and reverently as if the dead man were in an English churchyard among themselves” (Moriarty 1995). However, with the advancements of modern industrialised warfare, bodies were more vulnerable than ever before to dismemberment, fragmentation and to being lost in the mud beyond recognition. For many family members at home, the uncertainty around the final resting place and rightful respect to the dead was a source of anxiety and sorrow. For centuries, unmarked graves have been associated with punishment, barbarity and victimisation. Unmarked graves were not fit for the brave and noble sacrifice given by soldiers (Moriarty 1995). Consequently, in 1917 the Imperial War Graves Commission was established. Charged with the care of graves, the creation of cemeteries and the identification of the dead, the IWGC acquired land on behalf of the British nation and its empire and began

building monuments to the dead. Bodies that were found were analysed in the hopes of any identification and great effort went into maintaining documentation of the location of the body, its condition and its eventual resting place within a cemetery. Between 1914 and 1918, 180,861 unidentifiable bodies were placed into individual graves. Their tombs read “known but to god” (Laqueur 2015: 417). They were laid to rest in sanctified soil, surrounded by English flowers, shrubs and a landscape similar to the English countryside or at least an English garden. Here, in a space once dominated by war and desolation, nature was firmly forced back into the appearance of cemeteries (Moriarty 1995).

However, far removed from cemeteries, grieving families often sought alternative and more symbolic sites and methods of commemoration. On a national level, this was accomplished with the burial of the Unknown Warrior in West Minster Abbey (see Figure 4). Laid to rest with the Kings and nobles of the nation, the Unknown Warrior in one body represented all British soldiers lost at war. It was a site of national remembrance, but also a tangible place where women and families could come to grieve. In the first week 1.3 million visitors came to the grave (14-18-NOW “Letter to an Unknown Soldier”). Without a name, a face, or a family, the Unknown Warrior was every families’ son, brother, father or uncle. Even more so, buried in the heart not only of the nation, but also the Empire, the Unknown Warrior would come to symbolise the heroic sacrifice of all who died under the British banner (Macleod 2013). This is perhaps most evident in the dedication on the tomb that states he died “for King and county, for loved ones home and Empire” (Macleod 2013: 650).

Nevertheless, the Unknown Warrior was only one memorial to the dead. Many more memorials, with more community based identities, were constructed around the nation. Often located in the centre of towns and villages these monuments, some simply a list of names other



**Figure 4: The Unknown Warrior in the nave of Westminster Abbey before his final burial (14-18-NOW “Letter to an Unknown Soldier”; photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum).**



**Figure 5: The Unknown Soldier, a bronze statue reading a letter on the platform of Paddington Station (14-18-NOW “Letter to an Unknown Soldier”; photo courtesy of Dom Agius).**

more elaborate statues, would stress the local identities of those that died. In Scotland for example, soldiers were depicted wearing kilts (Moriarty 1995). Industries and places of work also made their own monuments, often in the forms of plaques, to those that were lost during the war. Here, it was not grief that was emphasised, but pride (Connelly 2002). Some communities even built monuments to further advance their status within the British identity. In London, for example, one Jewish community honoured the dead from their local, whilst promoting a more positive image of the Jewish faith and its role to the defence of British freedom and integrity (Connelly 2002). Of course, it was not only soldiers that were commemorated, but also innocent civilians that lost their lives to the war. For instance, a memorial was made to honour several children that died during an air raid (Connelly 2002). Memorials therefore acted as sites of both public and private grief for the loss that was suffered during and after the war.

One particularly prominent form of commemoration was the bronze statue. Here, soldiers were immortalised on the battlefield. Although rarely engaged in warfare, soldiers were instead depicted reading letters, sitting in the trenches and were often formed in a reflective pose (Moriarty 1995, see Figure 5). Beyond poses, the properties of bronze were an integral part of the statues. As Tim Ingold reminds us, the properties of the bronze statues were intertwined with their stories, with their meaning, and with their ability to symbolically replace the dead (2011). Clay, for example, the initial step in making a bronze sculpture, was likened to the mud and filth of the battlefield. Thus, clay could be seen as creating bodies from the “form-less” (Moriarty 1995: 23). Stated another way, bronze statues materialised the immaterial (Stephens 2007, quoting Pierre Nora). Additionally, clay was linked to the fragility of flesh; in order to eternalise its subject, it relied on the properties of a less ephemeral substance, metal. Consequently, through transforming a flesh like substance to a hard, almost impenetrable shield, the bronze statue could



be envisioned as creating bullet proof and eternal soldiers (Moriarty 1995). Additionally, bronze sculptures were placed in opposition to other techniques such as carving which was seen as a process of subtraction and destruction. Such oppositions reinforced the more personal touch of sculpture work and distanced it from industrial techniques that were irrevocably tied with warfare. Through such qualities, bronze statues were perceived as creating whole and figurative bodies for soldiers whose own flesh had been segmented and torn apart by modern artillery (Goebel 2004).

Whilst bronze statues looked to symbolically recreate whole bodies, living soldiers, themselves torn into parts by artillery, were beginning to return from the battlefields. In need of intensive care, these wounded soldiers relied heavily upon the support of charitable institutions to transition back into the life of a civilian. Thus, complementing the communal investment in memorials was an attempt to honour the dead through serving the living. Communities attempted to invest in institutions that could support the deserving soldiers returning from war. Funding hospitals, for instance, was seen as a form of respecting the dead that equalled the establishment of monuments (Inglis 1992). Subsequently, certain medical advancements, particularly in the realms of orthopaedic surgery, were particularly evident at this time. In fact, some have even gone so far as to suggest that an entire “army of people” had livelihoods and professions dependent upon “maintaining a supply of cripples” (Bourke 1996: 51). Thus, it was not only soldiers that benefited from a memorial investment in institutions. Intertwined within these efforts were notions surrounding acceptable forms of charity, the role of therapy and the status of the deserving poor (Bourke 1996). Nevertheless, despite the flourishing of orthopaedics, the long term stability of these institutions of care was prone to failure (Connelly 2002). Both a war

stripped economy and calls for a whole host of funds for monuments like those mentioned above, damaged the potential for lasting memorials that honoured the dead through serving the living.

Ultimately, it was perhaps through education that memorials had their most lasting effect on the living. Memorials for instance, were “clearly perceived as something to comfort the present generation and serve as a didactic instrument for those yet to come” (Connelly 2002:55). Cast as heroes, exemplifying the ultimate and most noble act, memorials ensured that the young did not question the purpose of the war, but instead felt only admiration to the status of the soldier (Connelly 2002). The dead were glorified, their position unquestionable. Such sentiments enabled the dead to become role models for the living in which new generations would emulate their predecessors if the need arose again (Connelly 2002). Some scholars have argued that a glorification of those that died in war not only contradicts the initial meaning of the memorials, but also justifies modern military pursuits in the Middle East (Harrison 2012). The Great War, for instance, was intended to be the war to end all wars. After its end, citizens pledged a commitment to peace. Yet, over glorifying war enables noble deeds and a knightly status to be achieved only through the negation of that very pledge (Harrison 2012). Thus, through honouring soldiers only as heroes, perhaps remembrance can verge too far towards glorification and the sanctification of war.

Nevertheless, memorials continue to be used as sites of Remembrance Day ceremonies around the nation. Originally termed Armistice Day and coinciding with the Armistice treaty on the 11<sup>th</sup> November, Remembrance Day became the official and national day of respect to the military dead. In 1919, King George V sanctified this national event and called for the day to be a communal and public event in which all, including members of industry and even the banks, would observe a two-minute silence at exactly eleven o'clock. The event was marked with

Christian overtones and was likened to Christmas in that it was capable of inducing the most reluctant Christian to mourn (Connelly 2002). Held during November, Armistice Day also correlated to other Christian events that remembered the dead during the autumn season.

Of course, the day and its purpose have not remained constant through time. In the 1920s the day was officially moved to fall on the last Sunday of the month of November so that the event could truly be a communal, civil and Christian day. Capitalism has also crept into the day with the selling of commemorative items such as the poppy. The message during the 20s was of hierarchy, teamwork and spiritual brotherhood (Connelly 2002). Between 1930 and 1935, the day stressed the importance of new generations and their connection to the national memory and the importance of sacrifice. On the eve of World War II, Remembrance Day further enforced national and local bonds. The day has continued to evolve ever since, with periods of discontent, anguish and perhaps even a greater nationalist rhetoric. Today, it has been argued that the remembrance ideology has reembraced and in subtle ways reconfigured the 1940s sentiment of “they died so that we might live in freedom” (Harrison 2012: 49). Regardless of the decade, it is evident that although continually recalling the dead and the role of sacrifice, Remembrance Day ultimately relates the importance of the war to the dynamic and ever changing context of the present.

Throughout this process, women have played a varied role in remembrance services and the maintenance of symbolic sites of grief. Most practically, as it was men that ultimately fought and died at war, women were the bodies left behind to grieve. To women, therefore, fell the duty of paying respect and honouring the dead. Masculinity was embodied in statues. But, femininity was embodied in the care given to these statues. The laying of wreaths of flowers at the foot of memorials, for example, was a role associated with the grief of women. In fact, the national

remembrance flower, the poppy, was initially made and sold by women, for women (Connelly 2002). Of course, it was not only the dead that women cared for. As mentioned above, new medical fields and necessities developed during and after the war. Following on from Florence Nightingale, women often fulfilled the role of caretakers for the injured and sick, especially as nurses (Andrews 2014).

However, as the rhetoric of Remembrance Day turned towards national identity rather than bereavement in the 1920s, women were pushed to the periphery. The weeping of women, for example, during the two-minute silence was perhaps cruelly portrayed as the cooing of pigeons (Connelly 2002). Like street vermin, the private sorrow of the women was uncontrollable and no longer fit for the strong and public nationalist identity of remembrance. A further event in 1973, in Northern Ireland, emphasises the marginality of women and the Irish Catholic identities to the British national rhetoric. Again breaking the two-minute silence, two women declared “What about the war widows?”. Abruptly silenced by police, reportedly placing their hands over the females’ mouths, some have suggested that the women’s protest was against “their exclusion and poverty, which lay unaddressed behind the public façade of national ritual commemoration” (Andrews 2014: 4). Like the event itself, these examples hope to demonstrate the ways in which the role of women, and perhaps even their importance, has changed as the need to remember, to grieve and to create a nation has changed throughout time.

Today, Remembrance Day is once again trying to bridge the divide between generations. Like the memorials that were both commemorative and didactic, remembrance events especially following the centenary of Armistice Day have pushed for the education of children and an understanding of the significance of World War I to their lives. The widening cross generational divide, and thus the need for education, is evident in the misuse and decay of memorials.

Vandalism for example, is a major threat to monuments throughout the nation. Whether graffiti, or simply teenage misuse of a space designed to be respected, there is a public sentiment that the younger generations of the present no longer value the sacrificed made in the past (Harrison 2012). This is echoed for instance in the following statement: “the sacrificed are to them, not even a memory, those who lived and loved and laughed with us...are but names” (Connelly 2002: 193). Besides the young, the misuse of statues is also attached to “undesirables” who portrayed by some do not appropriately use the monuments (Heathorn 2008: 274). Sleeping on granite steps, public urination, or even leaving used coffee cups on the same steps are examples of some of these unwanted activities. Additionally, processes considered more natural are also leading to the decay of memorials. Staining, due to spilt coffee, pigeon excrement, weathering, coupled with declining maintenance budgets have led to the aging and degeneration of certain monuments, especially at the local level (Heathorn 2008). The natural decay of materials, such as rusting metal resulting in illegible names, is a further example of processes leading to the decline and thus the resultant disrespect of memorials (Stephens 2007).

To revitalise national interest in these memorials and the nation’s past an investment in educational events flourished. Orchestrated at the national level, these events hoped to permeate all localities and again encourage community bonding. Most prominently, such events have used art to reenergise an investment in the past. Here, I propose to apply the concept of postmemory which was defined by Renshaw as “the project of arranging, assembling, or constructing material objects of mourning, to fill the gap between losses endured in the past, but not experienced directly by the present generation”. Postmemory is a “powerful form of memory . . . because its object . . . is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (2010: 452). 14-18-NOW, a publically funded, national organisation associated with

the Imperial War Museum, has been established to commission art events that create shared experiences designed to connect the public with World War I (“FAQs”). Through the definition of postmemory, these art events, such as the Tower of London’s poppy installation titled *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* and its successors the *Weeping Window* and *Wave*, can be viewed as an imaginative investment that acts to bridge the generations and to make the seemingly irrelevant losses of World War I relevant once again. Including dance, photos, theatre, music and the exhibition of material objects, these events hope to “encourage people from every community to reflect on how World War I has shaped today’s world and our attitudes to conflict” (14-18-NOW “FAQs”). Prioritising schools and young children, 14-18-NOW states that the legacy of such events will be “to build lasting connections for young people in their own family history and the nation’s history” (14-18-NOW “FAQs”). Thus, through its attempt to create lasting cross generational connections, 14-18-NOW utilises art as a material object of postmemory. Ultimately, the aim is to create a greater interest in national knowledge and a subsequent respect for the dead.

World War I drastically altered the landscape of both life and death throughout the British Empire. Slaughtered on killing fields by industrialised war machines, the bodies of British soldiers were to remain far from home. Eventually buried at commissioned sites, surrounded by English flowers, these graves did little to satisfy the grief of those left behind. Attempting to symbolically repatriate and honour their heroic dead, communities around the nation built memorials as material objects of mourning. Cast in bronze, and formed from clay statues of masculine and knightly soldiers, these monuments served as sites of grief, national identity building, and education. Here, women would lay flowers, weep and would battle to gain their rights. As one hundred years have passed since the beginning of World War I and the

construction of these monuments, their meaning and their respectful use has perhaps slipped from the national memory. Such apathy has demanded a national response in the form of once again educating the young. Statues, themselves a form of public art, and more importantly their significance have been revitalised with the help of artistic events around the nation aimed at bridging the divide between old and young, past and present. Yet, central to this narrative, is a continual process whereby the meaning, the importance and even the methods of remembering and honouring the dead are constantly changing. The dead, the living and the very materials themselves do not remain static through time. And although a war of the masses, what was experienced in life and in death was not and continues not to be equal for all.

### Chapter 3

#### The Poppy

The poppy is Britain's most powerful symbol of remembrance. Worn above the heart, the simple but evocative blood red flower has been used for over a century. Associated with nature, the inevitable flow of time and the idealised countryside, the poppy has been a symbol of new life and hope. However, also associated with sleep, narcotics and forgetting, the poppy is not the ideal symbol of remembrance, or even peace. Through processes of commercialisation and nationalism, this symbol nevertheless appears to be, at least superficially, an object with a complete and finalised story.

The origin of the poppy is tied with the poem *In Flanders Fields*. Written in 1915 on the battlefield at the Second Battle of Ypres by a Canadian physician, Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, the poem 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.



Scholars disagree over the true meaning of McCrae's prose. Initially however, it was viewed as a call to keep faith and brotherhood with the dead, and the purpose of the war (Harrison 2012). Published anonymously in December of 1915, the poem gained notoriety both on the battlefield and the home front. Although viewed as a quintessentially British tradition, it was in fact across the Atlantic that the poppy was first worn as a symbol of this brotherhood in arms. After reading the poem, an American woman, Moina Belle Michael, bought and distributed as many living poppies as she could find. Spreading the ideas found in the poem, she eventually ran out of living flowers and began making and wearing silk poppies. Thus, it was in America that the symbol of the poppy and its position on the lapels and hearts of those grieving and remembering at home first began (Harrison 2012).

Despite maintaining its ties to McCrae's poem, the meaning and even the use of the poppy has not remained constant throughout time. By focusing on stories and storytelling, Tim Ingold demonstrates an approach to material things, such as the poppy, that attempts to capture this dynamic movement. Using the example of sawing wood, where each stroke is unique, yet each movement building on the one before, Ingold argues that to describe things is to place them in relation to other things within a field of things. Thus, the "meanings of stories are recognised through the alignment of present circumstances with the conjunctions of the past" (2011: 57). Stated in a different manner, every story becomes a relationship in which the present is cast through the lens of the past. Hence, no story remains the same through time. Additionally, Ingold emphasises the importance of the properties of materials over the materials of objects. Materials therefore, become not about atoms or molecules, but about qualities such as hardness, opacity, durability and so forth (2011: 30). Subsequently, stories and their meaning are interconnected with the qualities of materials as they move through networks of relations through and between

time. Applying Ingold's theories to understand the meaning and the use of the symbol of the poppy, therefore requires an analysis of both the properties of the poppy and their expressions through time.

### The Poppy as an Object of Nature

Perhaps the most basic property of the poppy to be analysed in relation to meaning is its classification as an object of nature. An herbaceous annual with delicate and short-lived flowers, the red poppy or more specifically the *Papaver rhoeas*, is a common flower that grows throughout Europe (Iles 2008). With weed like characteristics, the poppy was one of the first plants to grow on the war torn battlefields of the Western Front. An object of nature in a landscape of industrialised warfare, the natural and seasonal qualities of the flower were first emphasised in relation to harvesting. For example, the war was viewed as a process that removed life from the landscape. In spring, it was the flowers that signalled the first signs of new life and new beginnings. Thus, it was the poppy that signalled a return of life to a land dominated by death (Harrison 2012). This was further emphasised by the timing of the Armistice. Falling on November 11<sup>th</sup>, the end of the war would have coincided not only with the season to remember, such as All Hallows' Day, but also with the end of the harvesting season.

Flowers have more generally been used not only as markers of grief but also as markers of the irreversible flow of time. It is suggested for instance, that flowers, like flesh, are "destined to decay" (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 74). Here, the flower stands for both a life and death that is inevitable; it naturally has a season to live and a season to die. Subsequently, it could be argued that the qualities of the poppy as a flower, or as a symbol of nature, emphasise a cycle of life and death—a balance between remembering death and returning to life. Finally, the natural qualities

of the flower were significant when contrasted with a war that was deemed modern and industrialised. Viewing the countryside with nostalgia and a symbol of life before war, the natural and perhaps even simplistic qualities of the poppy sharply contrasted the cultural destruction of mass warfare (Winter 2006). It was a sign of hope for the return of normalcy (Harrison 2012). Thus, with its emphasis on returning to life, particularly a life before war, it is once again the natural qualities of the poppy that are emphasised.

Nevertheless, the above properties do not alone explain why the poppy became the symbol of remembrance. For instance, whilst the poppy may have been one of the first flowers to grow on the war torn landscape it was not the only flower to do so. Picardy roses, a flower that also resonates with a British identity, grew alongside the poppy. Additional flowers included the yellow charlock, white camomile, and the blue cornflower which was later adopted by the French as their symbol of remembrance (Iles 2008). Even the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the body responsible for the identification and burial of the dead, did not incorporate the poppy into their English garden themed cemeteries. The wild poppy was considered to be inappropriate for the neat and ordered arrangements and was overlooked for other annuals such as pinks, lupins and nasturtiums (Iles 2008). Hence, although as mentioned above the weed like natural properties of the poppy aided its association with new life and harvesting, the same properties also damaged its potential to function in a rational and controllable English cemetery.

Perhaps more importantly, the poppy's association with sleep, opiates and oblivion also complicated its worthiness as a flower of remembrance. For example, since prehistoric times the poppy has been valued as a medicinal plant that was commonly used as a painkiller and sedative. Shakespeare commented on the sleep inducing qualities of the poppy in *Othello* when he wrote:

. . . Not poppy, nor mandragora,  
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,  
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep  
Which though owedst yesterday  
(Othello, 3 Scene III).

Other species of the poppy, particularly the white poppy or the *Papaver somniferum* have also been cultivated for opium and later heroin. For some, the sedative qualities of the poppy could be seen as enhancing the meaning of the poppy because it resonated with the metaphor of death as an eternal rest or a deep sleep. At the ceremony to bury the Unknown Warrior, for instance, the line “Tranquil you lie, your knightly virtue proved” was sung in the hymn *O Valiant Hearts* (Goebel 2004: 497). Additionally, the medicinal nature of the poppy could be seen as releasing the soldiers from the bodily pain suffered at the hands of artillery. However, the sedative nature of the poppy can also be seen as emphasising a death that was not necessarily peaceful, or natural. Death did not occur at the end of life, it was induced. At one memorial service in Old Windsor, Lieutenant General Sir G. M. Macdonagh publically declared that the poppy was “a pagan flower, it was the emblem of oblivion” for its use as a symbol of remembrance he was “sorry” (Iles 2008: 205). Consequently, although the poppy can be associated with a sleeping dead, it is important to note that the poppy was not always associated with remembering the dead. It has ancient and conflicting associations to forgetting (Iles 2008).

Today however, the properties outlined above, those that perhaps make the poppy an unsuitable symbol of remembrance, are but mere anecdotes. They no longer seem to detract from the meaning or the poignancy of the symbol of the poppy. This is despite the fact that further wars, such as those fought in Afghanistan, have had to confront the loss of soldiers that died trying to rid the nation of the poppy and subsequent heroin production (Harrison 2012). Such a process of purification, in which objects become separated and portray ideas independently from

processes of production, was proposed by Bruno Latour in his critique of modernism (1993). Latour reminds us that the properties of materials become distant from human subjects that determine or utilise such properties to produce meaning. For the poppy and its association with sleeping, forgetting and narcotics, the process of purification may have led to a more provocative and seemingly bounded symbol. Yet, through sublimating these undesirable properties the other more recognisably meaningful properties associated with remembrance had to be augmented. Thus, instead of outright forgetting the dead in a state of oblivion, today we honour the dead in a service of remembrance.

#### The Poppy as a Commodified Product

One way in which purification may have occurred is through the commercialisation of the symbol of the poppy by the Royal British Legion. Moving from a flower to a crafted and moulded consumer product, the properties of the poppy have been hand selected to achieve certain ideals. In 1922, the Royal British Legion formally adopted the poppy as its official symbol. On the advice of Madame Guerin, the founder of an organisation known as “The American and French Children’s League” that had been using the now artificial flowers promoted by Moina Belle Michael, the legion ordered one and a half million poppies to go on sale on November 11<sup>th</sup> (Iles 2008). A charitable organisation, the legion hoped that the poppy would provide both tangible support for the living and resonate with a sense of loss for the dead. Through their promotions the legion intentionally attempted to change the significance of the flower from forgetting to remembering (Iles 2008). Their efforts proved financially successful, and in the first year alone the new Poppy Appeal raised £106,000, which is today’s equivalent of £30 million (Iles 2008: 205 and Royal British Legion “The Story of the Poppy”).



**Figure 6: An example of the Royal British Legion's Poppy Appeal (“Birmingham enlists for the Poppy Appeal” 2014).**

The Royal British Legion continues to thrive. Alongside the iconic paper poppies which are sold often on street corners by volunteers, today the legion also has an online shop where objects such as dog leads, umbrellas that change colour, diaries, reusable shopping bags, a music single, and spitfire poppy cufflinks costing £79.99 on sale can be bought (Royal British Legion “The Official Royal British Legion Shop”). Additionally, from the website anyone can download literature and audio-visual materials to host their own memorial service (Royal British Legion “Your Service of Remembrance”). Thus, no longer a simple charitable organisation the legion has flourished into a booming and branded business with multiple factories producing consumer goods. In fact, in 2014 the legion’s website boasted that according to a recent survey the poppy was the “UK’s most trusted brand” (Andrews 2014: 5). The success of the legion has been further augmented by the fact that as a business organisation it has very little, if no true competition. Help for Heroes, a charity that also aims to help wounded or injured servicemen and women launched in 2007. Endorsed by figures such as Prince Harry, the charity is doing

respectably well. Yet, it still poses no real competition for the well-established Poppy Appeal. After all, it is the Royal British Legion that hand produces the wreaths laid at the cenotaph every year by the Queen. And as the only producer of memorial poppies, it could even be stated that the legion dominates, if not monopolises, the market. Although of course personal experience and even familial experience with war will affect the importance of the poppy to an individual consumer, it is only really the Royal British Legion that shapes or has any control over the production and distribution of the poppy at the national scale.

### The Poppy as a Symbol of Politics

The Royal British Legion has perhaps been so successful in its crafting of the poppy symbol due its use of nationalism. The very image of the poppy and of remembering the war dead is shaped next to the image of the British nation. Here, considering the construction of national identities in relation to the biographies of the dead, it is pertinent to remember Katherine Verdery's analysis of statues in post socialist Eastern Europe (1999). Verdery suggests that statues, and their perceived permanence, act to draw group boundaries and legitimise or even overthrow political authority (1999). It is ultimately around bodies and the multiple vantage points of the narratives of the dead that statues gain this authority to legitimise collective identities. Thus, it is through bodies, both real and figurative, that the past is capable of transcending time and becomes a narrative in the present (Verdery 2004: 303). Although the poppy is not a statue and is located in a different time period to post socialist Eastern Europe, Verdery's analysis offers insights into the ability of material objects, such as the poppy, to create and sustain group identities. As a national object of remembrance, the poppy draws on the biographies of the war dead to create and sustain the boundaries of the British identity. Most

prominently, the poppy remembers and honours British deaths, and of course the Commonwealth. It identifies the dead and those that remember the dead as British. Soldiers both in the past and the present die for the integrity of the nation. As the phrase goes “they died so that we might live in freedom” (Harrison 2012: 49). Consequently, alongside honouring the dead, the poppy is worn as a sign of patriotism, of belonging to the British identity (Harrison 2012).

In the above paragraphs, I outlined some properties of the poppy in relation to nature that heighten its use as a symbol of remembrance. Most of these properties however have to do with the passing of time, with new life and with new beginnings; few are directly related to the dead. The property that most directly established the poppies link to the dead is its blood red colouring. The image of blood has for centuries been associated with bodily suffering. Linked to Jesus Christ’s wounds, blood is also associated with duty, sacrifice, and honour (Harrison 2012). More importantly, blood is linked to fictive kinship, the binding of a nation, and as Iles suggests the blood of soldiers “creates a nation from the flesh of its citizens” (2008: 211). It is pertinent to note however, that the legion’s website adamantly declares that the poppy “is NOT red to reflect the colour of blood” (Royal British Legion “The Story of the Poppy”). Instead, they suggest that the colour is red simply because that is the natural colour of the poppy; a mere coincidence perhaps. Nevertheless, tied to the construction of the national body and a national duty, the poppy cannot escape an association with bodily sacrifice. After all, without death, without spilt blood, perhaps there would be no nation. Such an evocative red creates an almost undeniable bodily association between the living and the dead, the past and the present.

Along a similar thread, the legion’s website also declares that the poppy “is NOT a reflection of politics or religion” (Royal British Legion “The Story of the Poppy”). However,



besides theorists such as Verdery who may claim that politics can never be ignored, events that occur around Remembrance Day would seem to contradict this statement, especially in relation to minorities. For example, Dr Abdul Wahid has published several times on the role of the Muslim population to the British identity. Referencing more recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Dr Wahid suggests that he finds it impossible to

partake in a commemoration that is largely a patriotic celebration . . . Patriotic ceremonies build a collective spirit amongst people. But it can be a spirit that unites a small number, hides them from the reality of what is done in their name, and cuts them off from the real suffering of the policies enacted by successive governments (2014).

Ultimately, Dr Wahid's writings pushed for a debate surrounding the complexity of the British identity and the role of patriotism in the context of commemoration.



**Figure 7: Political Cartoon of the poppy's relationship to wars in Afghanistan (Blakeley 2012).**

Alternatively, the role of the Irish identity has also had a troubled relationship to Remembrance Day. In 1987, for example, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) coordinated a bomb

to coincide with memorial events. Titled the “Poppy Day Massacre” by the media, the bomb ultimately killed eleven people and injured another sixty-three. This event drew further attention to the tensions between the British and Irish. In 1998, at the inaugural event hosted to commemorate the Catholic participation on the British side, the Irish President Mary McAleese chose not to wear a poppy and at the base of the memorial laid a wreath of laurel instead of the traditional poppy. Such an act highlighted the controversial and inherently political nature of the symbol of the poppy (Iles 2008). Moreover, the use or misuse of the poppy by celebrities has also gained publicity with mass media. In 2015, for example, Downing Street used Photo Shop to edit a poppy onto an old image of David Cameron. The photo was highly criticised by the public and was later removed (Tweedy 2015). Other public figures such as Sienna Miller and the Irish footballer James McClean have been heavily criticised for not wearing the poppy (Snowdon 2015). Their refusals and the dominant role that the poppy plays in the media today has further emphasised the political controversy surrounding the symbol. These examples hope to demonstrate that despite the denial of the Royal British Legion, the poppy was and continues to be a highly politicised and nationalised symbol. Perhaps not directly reflecting politics, the symbol is nevertheless entwined in its web.

## Chapter 4

### Making the Poppy

Commemorative poppies are often valued solely as a finished product. The physical construction of these objects is therefore a process that is regularly overlooked. However, it is in the production of the poppy that its properties and their relationship to the war, to remembrance, to the living and the dead can be seen changing through time. Beginning as a process of therapy, intended to create both whole individuals and a complete flower, the poppy first gained poignancy through its proximity to the touch of veterans. But, after the horror of war was depicted too realistically when the poppy's red dye, soluble in the rain, stained clothes like blood, the production of the poppy began to incorporate industrial technologies. Purifying the symbol from its relationship to blood and bodily suffering, the poppy became a more generalised even sterilised symbol of the war dead. With the passing of the millennium and the eventual approach of the centenary of World War I, the poppy's manufacturing again represented a new stage in its depiction of war. Broken into parts and emphasising the individuality of the dead, the new construction of the poppy—still tied to its past—brought blood and the experiences of soldiers to the forefront. Through reflecting on this process, it becomes evident that although a seemingly timeless emblem of the war, the symbol of the poppy, its very construction, has changed with the demands of time. These changes can be summarised by viewing the poppy first as an embodied practice, then as a purified process and finally as a whole broken apart.

### The Poppy as Embodied Practice

The manufacturing of poppies, in Britain, began in 1922 with the establishment of the Disabled Society. Founded by Major George Howson MC, an engineer who also served on the Western Front, the society hoped to provide a source of employment for disabled veterans returning from the war. After receiving a grant for £2,000, Howson began the factory employing only five ex-service men. In a letter to his parents, he stated “I do not think it [the factory] 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” (“History of the Poppy Factory”). So, it was in a small building located on Old Kent Road, London that the poppy was first made by British men on British soil. Before the factory was established, poppies as previously mentioned, were made by women, in both France and America. In 1925, due to an ever increasing demand for poppies, the society moved to Richmond, London where it now employed over fifty veterans. At this time, the society also changed its name and became known as the Royal British Legion Poppy Factory. Today, it remains on the same site in Richmond and is known more colloquially (and shall be referred to for the rest of the chapter) as the Richmond Poppy Factory.

The factory was from its conception associated with notions of charity and masculinity. In particular, the factory was part of a larger movement that believed labour was an appropriate form of therapy for men returning from war. Labour therapy, at this time, was used extensively in poor houses and institutes for the mentally ill across Britain, but also America (Phillips 2003). Its goals were to create normalised individuals that followed the capitalist ideal of society—productivity. For veterans dismembered and traumatised by modern artillery, labour therapy became both the means and the end of recovery (Linker 2011). Entangled with labour therapy, disabled veterans were also portrayed as the most deserving of charity. For example, the man

physically injured in battle was often seen as pursuing a “manly accomplishment”, whereas veterans that returned from war with less visible injuries such as an infection, or shell shock, would more likely be associated with passivity and were often accorded less respect than those who returned dismembered (Bourke 1996: 37). Thus, it was the patriotic power of absent body parts that helped to secure the status of disabled veterans as the worthiest of the nation’s support (Bourke 1996). At the Richmond Poppy Factory, veterans would ultimately hope to transition back into society and a life of normalcy through asserting their labour capacity and productivity by assembling the poppy.



**Figure 8: Preparing foliage for wreaths at the Poppy Factory in the 1920s (Ledgard 2011).**





Figure 9: Major Howson (front centre) outside the Richmond Poppy Factory (Ledgard 2011).

More than simply productivity, however, the tactile process of constructing the poppy helped to emphasise its poignancy as a symbol of remembrance and its undeniable relationship to the war. Contrasting the industrialised nature of warfare, it was not a machine that pieced together the parts of a poppy. It was an individual—a veteran no less—with an intimate and personal experience of the war. The poppy itself had not remained static even in the few short years after the war. In fact, its design had been adapted for the Richmond Poppy Factory so that it could be assembled with the use of only one arm (“History of the Poppy Factory”). Instead of having many intricate layers of silk fabric, the design was simplified so that each part of the whole could be layered one on top of the other (see Figure 9). This process required a routinized movement of the body, suggesting that constructing the poppy was an embodied practice.



**Figure 10:** An example of a wooden block that would have enabled soldiers with one arm to assemble the poppy (Mower 2009; photo courtesy of Getty Images).

The ways in which material objects acquire meaning through embodied practices, is demonstrated by Elizabeth Hallam. She depicts the actions of an anatomist who carefully and skilfully articulates individual bones to form a complete skeleton. Through the example of the anatomist, Hallam pushes the theory of embodied practices further to suggest that it is a reciprocal act that results in the mutual shaping of the human body and the material (2010). In a similar manner to the skeleton constructed from parts, the poppy is pieced together to form a whole through the actions of the veteran. The reciprocity suggested by Hallam is evident in the benefits that both the poppy and the veteran received through the action of construction. Through his labour, the veteran reinforces his wholeness and his normalcy. Conversely, through the intimate association to the touch of the veteran marked by the experiences of war, the poppy gains legitimacy, meaning and even power as a symbol of remembrance. Both subject and object are mutually shaped. Stated in a different manner, broken into pieces and adapted for veterans, the properties of the poppy reflected the effects of mass warfare on the human body. Therefore, the poppy also gained legitimacy, beyond its association to the landscape of the battlefields, by establishing an intimate connection to the bodies of soldiers marked by war.

Furthermore, the emphasis on wholeness, or the combining of parts to form the whole, was reflected in the use of the poppy in commemorative services. In 1928, Major Howson alongside his workers began a tradition in the Churchyard of St Margaret's at West Minster Abbey. Grouped around a battlefield cross, a symbol all too familiar with those that served in Flanders and the Western Front, Howson and his employees invited onlookers to plant a poppy in the grass next to the cross. Known as the Field of Remembrance, the practice continues to be an event orchestrated by the Richmond Poppy Factory to this day ("History of the Poppy Factory"). What is pertinent to my story is that it was not the individual identities of the soldiers



that were emphasised, but the collective identity of the war dead; it was the whole and not the parts that were important. It was the combination of the poppies, the field of flowers around the cross, and not their individuality, that resulted in the spectacle of the event. Of course, each onlooker most probably planted a poppy with an individual in mind. But, like the mass, classless war itself, the individual was not important. Instead, it was the individuals within the collective, fighting and dying for the nation as a whole, which proved most powerful. Subsequently, whilst the poppy gained an authenticity by the touch of an individual deeply associated with warfare, it was not intended to symbolise individuals, but a collective and honourable dead.

### The Poppy Purified

In 1978, after a traumatic experience in 1977 with silk poppies that shall be described below, the manufacturing of poppies began to incorporate machinery and became a partly mechanised process. This process, unlike the tactile one before it, would focus on certain parts of the poppy, most notably the dye that produces its red colouring, over its construction as a whole. Mirroring capitalist production techniques, such as the division of labour, efficiency and increased specialisation, the Royal British Legion reached out to a luxury paper mill to produce paper, particularly red and green paper, for the poppy (White 2014). 1977 marked the end of the use of fabric for poppy production. The process of producing the paper is described by one newspaper as follows:

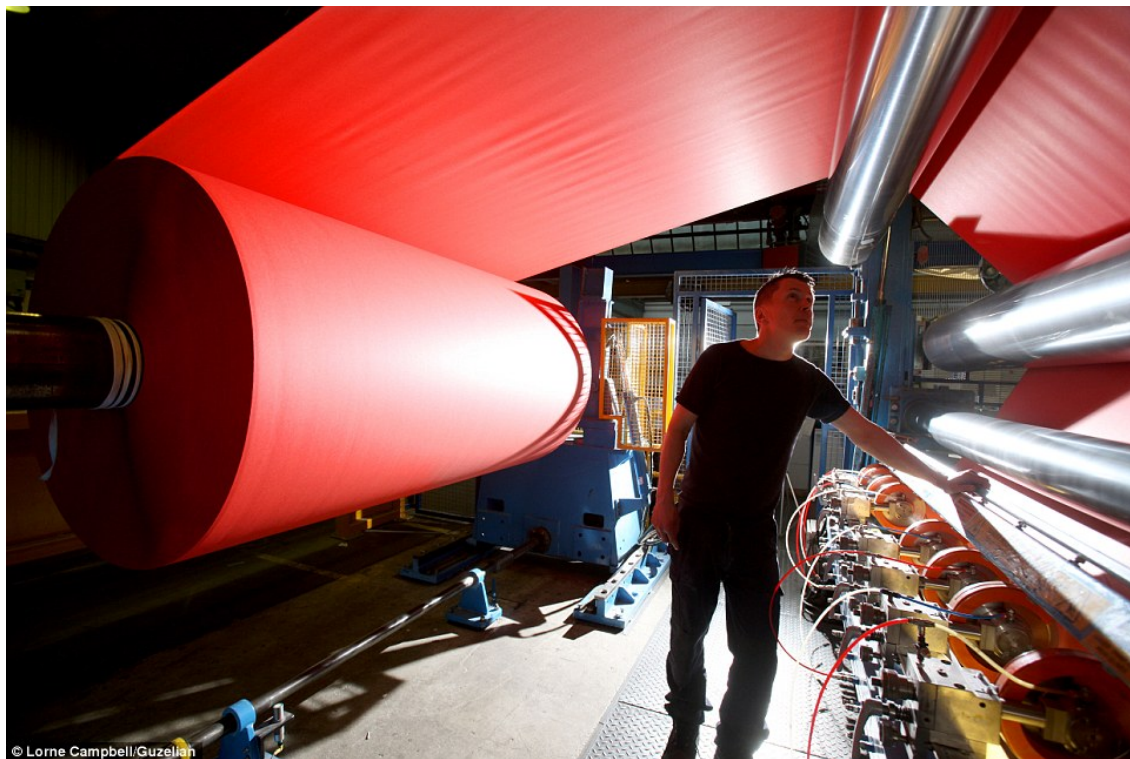
The small Remembrance Sunday emblem begins life as wood pulp, shipped to Cumbria from Scandinavia in bails, before being mashed and mixed into a porridge-like consistency in huge vats called blenders. At this point the bleeding of the poppy begins; a process where the red dye seeps through the mixtures, turning all the mulch red. Chemicals are added before the load is injected on to a fast-moving sieve. The fibres are drained, steamed and pressed through big wheels (White 2014).



Figure 11: The vat of red dye and paper mulch at James Cropper's factory (Duell 2014; photo courtesy of Lorne Campbell).



Figure 12: The 'wet' beginning of the paper process (Duell 2014; photo courtesy of Lorne Campbell).



**Figure 13: The final rolls of red paper (Duell 2014; photo courtesy of Lorne Campbell).**

Of course, the process in the 1970s may have been slightly less mechanised than the more recent process described above. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that when James Cropper was approached by the Royal British Legion to make the paper for the poppy they were a brand with a renowned reputation for altering the chemical properties of paper in the laboratory (“Paper Poppy Production Begins”). Therefore, as well as creating bespoke paper, the brand was valued for its high-tech knowledge and the ability to manipulate the properties of paper to achieve specific aims.

So, what was the traumatic event that triggered such a change in a process that had remained remarkably constant for over fifty years? On the Remembrance Sunday of 1977, the Royal Marines Guard Band performed as per usual during the memorial service led by the Queen. In their uniforms, with a red silk poppy above the heart, the band played to the public even when the rain began to pour. As the performance continued and as the rain fell, the crowd

began to notice a bright red staining on the pristine white of the band members' uniforms. Beginning at the heart, this staining flowed down the bodies of the performers like blood gushing from an open wound (Cooper 2014). For the public, trying to honour and remember the dead, rather than grieve for their losses, the visibility of such an evocative even macabre spectacle proved too much. The image of war, of blood and of death was too close; its portrayal too realistic. Hence, the fundamental flaw of a soluble dye particularly in a country known for its rain could no longer be ignored. For the solution, the Royal British Legion, perhaps no longer traumatised by an image of industrialisation intertwined with war and mass killings, turned to science, to engineering and to industry to create an artificial and most importantly an insoluble, but still blood red dye. Today, the James Cropper website boasts that:

The paper colour does not run in the rain or rub off onto clothing, it retains its vibrant colour and holds its shape. The diverse technical chemistry required to achieve this ensures the paper poppy is worn with confidence the world over as a symbol of respect and remembrance (“Paper Poppy Production Begins”).

To achieve the confidence that James Cropper and the Royal British Legion desired, the most significant natural quality of the poppy, its colouring, had to be transformed and controlled by the power of science. Whilst no longer a natural property, James Cropper do state that their scientists have taken “samples from real poppy petals to ensure the paper is the closest possible colour match to the real thing” (“Paper Poppy Production Begins”).

Subsequently, with the introduction of industry and science the poppy's intimate relationship to veterans, to death, and embodied experience, began to slip from sight. The process of purification in Latour's (1993) sense, although perhaps never fully complete, signalled a generational gap and a movement away from the visibility of the horrors of war. Industry instead of the enemy became the solution. With its capitalist undertones, industry added an even



more seasonal and temporary connection to the poppy. The paper for instance, although ensuring the permanence of the dye, was designed to be biodegradable; it was destined to decay (White 2014, and Hallam and Hockey 2001). Unlike the silk fabric therefore, a material naturally able to resist some erosion and perhaps in a similar manner to plastic convey the notion of the “ever-lasting”, the biodegradable poppy further highlighted the contained and temporary qualities of the remembrance period (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 210).

The transition to paper and the emphasis placed on the properties of the pieces of the poppy consequently signalled a move away from the war to a focus on the future. It is pertinent to note that in the 1970s, new generations were increasingly alienated from the experiences of the war (Iles 2008). Unlike previous generations, even previous veterans who could make the poppy with the touch of experience, younger generations often lacked such intimacy at least with World War I. The poppy’s imbued relationship with suffering, embedded into its very production, was purified into a more seemingly sterilised, generalised and mass-produced commodity; its meaning no longer tied to a personal relationship with the dead. Instead, like the product itself, the dead were generalised into a more generic, a more distant war dead without tangible faces and names.

Ties to veterans were not completely severed. To do so, would have perhaps been too extreme. Most prominently, it would have denied veterans and their families the welfare that they still publically deserved. Hence, the Richmond Poppy Factory continued to operate and still exists even to this day. However, it focuses less on producing the individual poppy and more so on manufacturing specialised wreaths and crosses. The Queen, herself a specialised individual, still lays an entirely handmade wreath at the cenotaph each year (“History of the Poppy Factory”). As the leader of the nation, and of a generation that at least would have been

connected with World War II, the Queen is perhaps an exception to the rule. Her specialised position as the symbolic head of state almost demands a respect for the dead that extends beyond the average citizen. It is after all under her family's name that battles are fought. Thus, it is not surprising that the Queen maintains a more personalised and intimate relationship both to the poppy and to the war dead.

Additionally, James Cropper, the luxury paper brand, although not directly employing veterans to make the poppy, also has ties with World War I. The Great Grandfather of the current owner was a veteran of World War I and wrote extensive diaries outlining his hellish experiences of the war. It was the mill in Cumbria that the Great Grandfather returned to his life as a labourer after the war ended. Similarly, to other companies around the nation, James Cropper has a commemorative plaque on the outside of its factory that lists 23 names of men that were lost in battle ("Paper Poppy Production Begins"). Consequently, whilst most workers today do not have a direct relationship with World War I and although it is not unique for companies throughout Britain to have lost and commemorated their men of war, James Cropper's apparent connection to the war, does nevertheless aid its legitimacy in creating a poppy that is not simply another sheet of meaningless paper.

However, since the introduction of machinery and of course since the passing of time, the use of the poppy, in a similar manner to the pre-set tasks of machines, has become enthralled in routinized memorial services that often follow a standard procedure from year to year. This very procedure for example, as previously mentioned, can be downloaded from the website of the Royal British Legion. Under the section entitled "How We Remember", the legion lists the sections of the service and its requirements. The service should be in essence as follows:

### The Exhortation

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

Response: We will remember them.

[2 MINUTES SILENCE]

When you go home tell them of us and say –  
 For your tomorrow we gave our today.

There is also a standard list of phrases such as “Lest we forget” and “Live on”, repeated at services across that nation and written on wreaths of poppies. From the beginning of November, sometimes even October, poppies are expected to be worn on all major television channels such as the BBC, and are expected to be worn on the lapels of all politicians. And over the years as the use of the poppy has become more mundane, the role of industry has increased. Factories in the South East of England, for instance, using 250km of paper produced by James Cropper 300 miles away, make over 50 million poppies each year (Duell 2014 and “Paper Poppy Production Beings”). Thus, like most consumer products, the poppy, its production and use, was standardised. Through the adaptation of its properties and through the script of events, the poppy, a national and seasonal symbol, was firmly distanced from the realities and even the horror of warfare. As other scholars have often noted, it is through such processes that the contents of war—injury, pain and suffering—slip from view (Moriarty 1995).

### The Poppy Apart

With the passing of the millennium and the approach of the centenary anniversary of the beginning of the war, an extraordinary twist of events once again occurred. The poppies, their

use and of course their production, began to emphasise individuals and a more personal connection with the war dead. Most prominently, whereas once desired for its wholeness, in recent years the poppy has gained notoriety for its parts, or more specifically for its petals. In England the use of petals began at the Royal Albert Hall, London, in the early 2000s during the annual Festival of Remembrance. During the two-minute silence, part of the festival's grand finale, heart-shaped petals fell from the ceiling and landed on audience members (Iles 2008). These petals, like the specific names of the dead engraved on memorials, hoped to resonate with the biographies of the dead and have a more emotive power than the flower as a whole (Iles 2008). Thus, unlike the collective identity of the dead symbolised by the poppy, the petals of the flower drew attention to the singularity, or the individuality of the dead (Iles 2008). Although each petal represented roughly 16 soldiers, it was commonly assumed that "for each petal a life remembered" (Iles 2008: 215).

Later events and other nations also capitalised on the use of individualised petals. In 2004 for example, three million petals were dropped from World War II planes over the River Thames. Describing the event, one newspaper suggested that the Thames "ran blood red" (Davies 2004). What is interesting in this case is the event's similarity with the Royal Marines Guard Band's blood stained clothing. Floating over and eventually in the water, the poppies' association with blood was more than apparent—a river of red quite literally ran through the centre of London. For one veteran the event mirrored the horrors of war and was a step too far. He stated for instance, that "it was like dropping dead people over the Thames" (Iles 2008: 217). For the younger generations however, those that understand the poppy solely as a symbol purified from the horror of war, the petals falling into in the river Thames were a welcomed and honourable spectacle. So much so, that other remembrance events, such as the art installation in



2014 at the Tower of London (an event that shall be analysed in the following chapter), have directly featured images and references to blood. The title of this event for instance, was “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red”. The image of blood and the poppy in parts, perhaps disassociated with the bodily suffering of disabled and amputee men, has therefore resurfaced as a reoccurring theme in the memorial services of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The experienced touch of the veteran, an embodied practice removed by industry and science, has also reappeared—spurred no doubt by the poignancy of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war. This time, it has found a more symbolic incorporation perhaps more congruent with industrial production. At the James Cropper paper mill, for example, Mr David Horsman, a former weapons engineer and ships driver in the Royal Navy, was invited to ceremonially pour the now iconic red dye into the first batch of paper for 2014 (“Paper Poppy Production Begins”). Eventually turning a deep crimson, the paper mixture was in essence symbolically blessed with the touch and by extension the experience of the veteran.

The manufacturing of the poppy is a process marked by a series of transitions. First, a form of labour therapy, intertwined with charity, the poppy was made as a means for disabled veterans to transition back to civilian life. Through assembling the parts of the poppy into a whole product, veterans would reassert their own identities as complete, whole and productive individuals. After the blood red dye, washed by the rain, stained the hearts of the Royal Marines Guard Band, the legion turned to industry and science to remove the horror of bodily suffering naturally associated with the crimson flower. As generations passed, the poppy purified of pain, became a seasonal symbol used in standardised services around the nation. Yet, as the generations continued to grow distant and as the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary approached, the engineering of the poppy began to emphasise, rather than shy away from, the symbol’s blood red colouring.

Recent uses of the poppy also suggest a shift to a more individualised dead rather than a collective and distant war dead. Ultimately, this process illuminates how the symbol of the poppy, its manufacturing, its properties and its uses have changed through time. Changing with the passing of generations, with the advances of new technology, and with the needs of citizens, the poppy is a story with a history. This history involves social and material practices, properties and parts, transience and persistence. And whilst attempting to transcend the flow of time, the poppy is enthralled in a web deeply rooted in the unravelling of history.

## Chapter 5

### Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red

2014 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the beginning of World War I. It was a year dominated by intense commemoration and a renewed investment in the meaning and the relevance of the war. These commemorations extended far beyond the traditional autumnal period of remembrance and, with a more creative and imaginative flare than usual, looked to capture the interest of the nation, especially its younger generations. The most prominent exhibit utilised a new material for the poppy. Simultaneously fragile and permanent, unique yet still an individual within a whole, ceramic poppies portray a new and changing relationship to the role of industry, the individual and the nation. Ultimately, analysing several aspects of the Tower of London art exhibit *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, this chapter will look at how the construction of a ceramic poppy and its ability to move interplay with notions of identity and nationalism.

Although there were several spectacular events held throughout the nation, it was an art exhibit at the Tower of London that captivated the nation's gaze. Created by the ceramic artist Paul Cummins and a theatrical designer Tom Piper, the installation involved the gradual placement of exactly 888,246 ceramic poppies into the moat surrounding the tower. Beginning on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July and ending at the eleventh hour on November 11<sup>th</sup>, the evolving placement of the poppies, each symbolising a British or colonial fatality, provided a visual and monumental depiction of the accumulating death toll of the war. The title of the exhibit was inspired by the line "The Blood Swept lands and seas of red, where angels fear to tread," written by a

Derbyshire soldier who died at Flanders surrounded by blood. As well as the poppies, members of the public were invited to submit names to be called in the nightly Roll of Honour. Roughly commemorating 180 soldiers every night at sunset, the Roll of Honour lasted from August all the way to Remembrance Day in November. The exhibit's location, the Tower of London, also had ties to the history of the war. Most prominently, it was used both as a training facility where men would pledge their allegiance before leaving the home soil, and as a site of execution for war spies arrested and tried by Britain (Historic Royal Palaces "About the Installation").

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the project was its scale. Simply to place the poppies throughout the sixteen acres of land that the exhibit incorporated required the help of 21,688 volunteers. Becoming not only a must see national, but also an international attraction, the exhibit had over five million tourist visitors. Among the visitors were many members of the Royal family, such as Prince William, the Duchess of Cambridge and the Queen, all of which personally planted a poppy within the moat. Eventually, as the exhibit drew to a close, and its charitable purpose took over, the majority of the poppies were individually sold for £25 to members of the public. The millions of pounds raised by the event were divided between six service charities including the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes. However, the installation did not completely end. Two iconic sculptures within the exhibit, titled *Wave* and *Weeping Window*, bought by charitable foundations, will tour the country for the five-year duration of the war, until finding a permanent home in the Imperial War Museum. It is hoped that the tour of the nation will enable those unable to visit London a chance to not only see the sculptures but to also connect to the national reinvestment in remembrance (Historic Royal Palaces "About the Installation").



Figure 14: The Tower of London moat filled with ceramic poppies (Nicholls 2014; photo courtesy of John McLellan).



Figure 15: Roll of Honour at the Tower of London (Campbell and Symons 2014; photo courtesy of Geoff Pugh).

Ceramic is an unusual choice of material for the poppy. Made first from silk and then paper, the ceramic poppies at the Tower of London not only marked a change in production, but also a turn away from the role of industry. The biodegradable paper made by James Cropper for the paper poppy is designed to degrade and decay; it has a limited permanence. It is designed to last in the rain, but perhaps only for a day and is most probably not suitable for planting outside for five months against the elements of nature. Silk too would not be an appropriate material for the outdoors. Both appear to be too fragile against the elements. Ceramic on the other hand is a material that is both fragile and permanent. Its waterproof properties, especially with the red glaze, make it appropriate to use outside. The use of wire, a material that with sharp, even dangerous edges associates itself with the peril and realities of warfare, further reinforced the flower acting not only as its stem but also as its anchor in the moat. Nevertheless, like the human body and its divisible parts, ceramic can be fractured and shattered into pieces. In fact, this proved to be particularly evident as the poppies were sold and distributed around the nation. Damaged in transport, several poppies arrived to their owners in pieces—the petals broken apart from the stem (Crockroft and Crossley 2014). For one woman, who ordered the poppy to remember her fallen uncle, the broken poppy provided so much distress that she simply threw the pieces away (Crockroft and Crossley 2014). Symbolising individuals, the absence of wholeness and the division of the poppy into its parts appeared once again to be a traumatic experience.

Beyond material properties, the construction of the ceramic poppies proved significant in the production of meaning. Unlike the paper poppies that drew on modern industry, the artist Paul Cummins was adamant that the ceramic poppies should not only be handmade, but that industrial technology should be avoided wherever possible (Historic Royal Palaces “Making the poppies”). Consequently, although located in Derby, an area dominated by its industrial

development, the production of the poppies mimicked the ceramic techniques available over one hundred years ago. An example of such a technique would be hand stamping the petals instead of them being identically cut by a machine. To complete the immense work load of hand making 888,246 poppies, the production line worked non-stop, 24 hours a day in three shifts. Commenting on the lack of industry, Paul Cummins stated that “people should get physically involved in making something, so that it means something more” (Historic Royal Palaces “Making the poppies”). Further reflecting pre-industrial techniques of making the poppy, every worker or every person that touched a poppy in its making had a direct link with a member of the armed forces or someone that had died during the war. Thus, like veterans in the Richmond Poppy Factory that touched poppies with the knowledge and experience of war, the makers of the ceramic poppies had a shared and intimate experience of war and even death at the hands of warfare. Subsequently, by rejecting industry and by drawing on the bodily experience of the worker, the centenary production of the poppy returned to its roots as an embodied practice moulding both the product and the producer.

Whilst the embodied practice of making ceramic poppies mirrors that of the Richmond Poppy Factory and the origin of the poppy, the use of the poppy in the centenary celebrations demonstrates a marked difference. As discussed earlier, commemoration after the war, particularly following the ruling that the bodies of soldiers were not to return to England, concentrated on the dead as a collective identity. The Unknown Warrior, for example, was a symbol not of a singular son or father, but a symbol of all that died under the British banner (Macleod 2013). Individual identities, most simply due to the sheer scale of such a mass war, were not nationally emphasised. The poppy at this time, a complete and whole flower, further





**Figure 16: Hand making the ceramic poppies (Hardman 2014).**



**Figure 17: A ceramic poppy broken in the post (Crockroft and Crossley 2014; photo courtesy of Stewart Hamilton).**



symbolised the collective dead. As industry began to play a role in the production of the poppy and with the passing of generations linked to the war, the poppy now a standardised product further depicted a collective and unknown dead. However, such an unknowable dead seemed to promote disconnect between current generations and the importance of the war. No longer personally tied to the war, its relevance to the nation and to the lives of its younger citizens became routinized. Thus, for the centenary celebrations, an event that due to its significance had to be extraordinary, there was an increased investment in personalising remembrance. By this, I mean that, focusing especially on the involvement of both the elderly and the young, events encouraged personal and active engagement with the war, its history and its dead (14-18-NOW “FAQs”). No longer focusing solely on the war as a historic narrative, remembrance events instead, turned to personal stories, memories and experiences of the war. For instance, writing letters to an Unknown Soldier statue on the platform of Paddington Station, the public was encouraged to identify with individuals and with their own family stories. In one letter published online, Emma Dolman, writes the story of her grandma whose fiancée died at war. For her, the Unknown Soldier becomes known and knowable through the narrative and personal stories of her grandma (14-18-NOW “Letter to an Unknown Soldier”). Through this more personalised investment, the importance of the war to the nation hopes to bridge generations seemingly far removed from its consequences.

Beyond personalised reflection such as letters, art is another method used to bridge distant experiences of loss and the passing of generations. As both Hirsch and later Renshaw remind us, material objects can act as a form of postmemory, that through both an imaginative and creative investment can “fill the gap between losses endured in the past, but not experienced directly by the present” (Renshaw 2010: 452). Simultaneously creative and imaginative, the art

at the Tower of London can therefore be viewed as a material object of postmemory. But, how does the art personalise the dead? I believe it does so through its physical construction. Hand-made and imprinted with the touch of a familial experience with war, every single poppy planted in the moat was unique. Unlike the mass produced commodity of the paper poppy which hopes to achieve a systematic homogeneity, the hand-made method that produced the ceramic could not ensure uniformity. As one worker commented “Not one flower in this entire building is the same, because they are all hand-made. They are special” (Historic Royal Palaces “Making the poppies”).

Additionally, the Tower of London exhibit represented a further adapted use for the poppy. By this time, the poppy had been divided from a whole into pieces, such as the petals that stressed an individual association with the biographies of the dead. However, before this exhibit the poppy had rarely, if ever at such a large scale other than the battlefields of World War I, been used as a piece within a whole. In other words, the unique ceramic flowers gained an evocative meaning through their placement in the mass of flowers throughout the moat. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the difference between images that show a singular flower in comparison to the entirety of the exhibit as it covered sixteen acres of land (see Figure 18 and 19). Therefore, it is the focus on the loss of individual lives—those of sons, brothers, and fathers—at such a large scale that added drama and an emotive impact to the spectacle. As the General Lord Richard Dannatt, the Constable of the Tower of London suggested “they fought in mass armies, but they were individual soldiers—a life lost and a family shattered” (Historic Royal Palaces “The Tower of London Poppies”). Thus, as unique parts within a whole, the Tower of London exhibit powerfully depicts the scope of individuals lost during World War I.

No longer simply a mass, the dead, symbolised by the poppy, become as unique as their construction.

Yet, the exhibit does more than simply encaptivate generations; it simultaneously acts as a uniting force for the nation as a whole. As Deborah Shaw, the Head of Creative Programming at the Historic Royal Palaces commented, with its national focus the art exhibit “started us asking questions about who we are, what we are doing when we are commemorating and how war like we are as a nation” (Historic Royal Palaces “The Tower of London Poppies”). Consequently, whilst the production of the ceramic poppy and its use within the mass exhibit of the moat, helps to personalise the dead, it also has the effect of collectivising the spectators. Like the individual poppies, the personal identities of the visitors become subsumed by the scale and the magnitude of the event. Incorporated into the crowd, the visitor’s personal and family history becomes intertwined with the nation. Rather than an individual, the spectator becomes a member of the “we”.

More importantly, it is the ability of parts of the exhibit to move beyond London that has perhaps created the most lasting effect on the nation. Two sculptures *Wave* and *Weeping Window* have enabled the exhibit to tour the nation. Coinciding, quite deliberately, with the dates of the war and the seasons of remembrance, the sculptures will move separately every year for five years until concluding in 2019 to mark one hundred years since the end of World War I. Arching above the heads of spectators at the Tower of London and later cascading from a bridge into a river at its first destination in Yorkshire Sculpture Park, *Wave* consists of the bright red poppy heads suspended on a meshwork of towering stalks. Its counterpart, *Weeping Window*, initially consisted of several thousand ceramic poppies cascading from a window on the side of the Tower of London. At its first tour site, the sculpture was adapted to flow between the columns of

Liverpool's historic St George's Hall (14-18-NOW "Poppies: Wave and Weeping Window Touring").

On a practical level, the tour of the sculptures has enabled those who were unable to visit London to experience a part of the exhibit. Liverpool, Yorkshire and other locations that have been named as one of the first tour sites, are located in the north of England. Removed from London, these locations may have felt isolated from the national fever of remembrance. Of course they would have had their own ceremonies, but the sculpture tour enables a shared participation in an event that was one of the main highlights of the year—it enables a national experience. Furthermore, the sculpture tour mirrors the experiences of living soldiers as they prepared for war. St George's Hall for example, in Liverpool, was famous for its World War I recruitment rallies that encouraged men to sign up in "Pals battalions" ("Tower of London Poppies Tour" 2015). Additionally, Northumberland, another location that hosted *Weeping Window* was famous for its mining contribution, both in terms of coal and miners, for the war effort ("Tower of London Poppies Tour" 2015). Consequently, through moving beyond London, and through mirroring the movement of soldiers as they departed from home to the battlefield, the exhibit embraces the various regional identities that unite and united under the British flag. It could even be argued that regional identities, as various uniforms in the war may have signalled regional battalions, are expressed in the adaptations of the sculptures to their regional locations (Moriarty 1995). For example, the sculptures are not exactly replicated but are moulded to suit their locations. Columns for instance, were used at St George's instead of the famous window. Thus, whilst the sculptures enable the scope of the national experience to spread beyond London, they more importantly enable the confirmation of diverging regional identities within the British identity.



Figure 18: Weeping Window at the Tower of London (Lambert 2014; photo courtesy of Rex Features).



Figure 19: An individual ceramic poppy (Webb and Smith 2014; photo courtesy of Reuters).





**Figure 10: Wave at the Tower of London (“Tower of London Poppies Tour” 2015).**



**Figure 11: Wave at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (“Poppies: Wave Sculpture Park” 2015; photo courtesy of Getty Images).**





**Figure 12: 12,000 men paraded outside St George's Hall, Liverpool in 1915. This is the same hall that would later host the Weeping Window exhibit (below) where poppies cascaded between the columns (“Tower of London Poppies Tour” 2015; photo courtesy of Getty Images).**



**Figure 13: Weeping Window at St George's Hall Liverpool (Lockhart 2015: photo courtesy of Andy Shukie).**

Nevertheless, the movement of the poppies may in fact not mirror the living, but instead may be a reflection of the missing dead. Therefore, rather than viewing the movement solely as a journey to the battlefields, it could be argued that it also represents the soldiers and their bodies. This is demonstrated most evidently, in the individual sales of the ceramic poppies to members of the public. In the hopes of raising money for armed forces service charities, such as the Royal British Legion, all of the poppies not incorporated into the two sculptures mentioned above were sold online to members of the public. Raising a total of £9 million, the poppies removed from their wire stems by many of the same volunteers that had planted them, were cleaned, packaged and mailed to their owners around the country (Crossley 2014). As they were removed, the sea of red, the sea of blood, like the battlefields themselves, became once again dominated by the lush green of grass and the remembrance period closed for the season.

Directly symbolising one war fatality and marked since production as a unique individual, the ceramic poppy had a clear association with the bodies of soldiers. Moving from an individual to a collective, from a civilian to a soldier, it is in the end ultimately the individual that dies. The nation lives on. Thus, whilst the tour enables parts of the exhibit to continue, the sheer scale of the event and its period of remembrance were always finite. In the end, like the body of the individual, it is the individual poppy that remains. As Deborah Shaw comments “send the poppies home . . . the soldiers never got to go home” (Historic Royal Palaces “The Tower of London Poppies”). Consequently, the movement of the individual poppies may reflect the journey that the soldiers and their bodies returning from war would have made. Whether viewed as the journey of the living, the dead, or even both, the movement of the ceramic poppies, of the pieces of the whole, ultimately mirrors the dispersal and congregation of



identities that form within the nation. At its core therefore, the movement of the poppies reaffirms both the individual and the nation.

Additionally, unlike the paper poppies that are designed only to be worn for one season of remembrance, the ceramic poppies were designed to be treasured after their removal from the moat. Although fragile, the ceramic had a material property more permanent than paper—their use and the meaning were intended to extend beyond the remembrance period. Like the effects of the war, and the loss of so many men, the ceramic poppies were intended to have a meaning and a significance that would outlast their duration in the moat. Hence, it can be argued that through their material permanence, the ceramic poppies signify the undying relevance of the war and the dead to the British nation.

The centenary of the beginning of World War I was an extraordinary event that called for not only a greater investment in remembrance, but also in events that drawing upon art and imagination sought to reinvigorate the British nation's relationship to the war. Utilising the material properties of ceramic and rejecting the role of industry, the art exhibit *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* at the Tower of London emphasised a need for a more personalised association with the war and with the war dead. Seemingly removed from the consequences of World War I, younger generations through art were particularly pushed to resonate with the importance of the war and the scale of its effects. Nevertheless, whilst promoting a more personal investment in the importance of the war, the exhibit and the movement of the ceramic poppies acted to reaffirm a British national identity. Mirroring the movement of troops, and reflecting the regional identities that contributed to the war effort, parts of the exhibit, including the individual poppies and the two sculptures *Wave* and *Weeping Window*, were able to make the event a shared national experience. Relating these experiences in the present to the experiences

of the past, the ceramic poppies demonstrate the ways in which material objects and their properties act to create a story of the war that has meaning for the nation as a whole. As Ingold suggests, it is after all at these conjunctions between the past and the present that the meanings of stories are revealed (2011).

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

For over 100 years, the poppy has been the British nation's symbol of remembrance. With its blood red petals and wild almost uncontrollable nature, the poppy has been worn on the lapels and hearts of numerous British generations. Throughout its life course, however, the poppy has not remained a static and unchanging symbol of remembrance. In fact, it has been transformed in surprising and sometimes unpredictable ways. These changes are most observable in the construction and the properties of the poppy as well as in its association to the bodies of the living and the dead.

World War I drastically altered the landscape of both life and death throughout the British Empire. Slaughtered in killing fields by industrialised war machines, the bodies of British soldiers were banned from returning home by the British War Office in 1915. Eventually buried at commissioned sites, surrounded by English flowers, and removed from the obscurity of barbaric anonymity, these graves did little to satisfy the grief of those left behind. Attempting to symbolically replace and honour their heroic dead, communities around the nation built memorials as material objects of mourning. Cast in bronze, and formed from clay statues of masculine and knightly soldiers, these monuments served as sites of grief, national identity building, and education. With the passing of generations, the meaning of memorials and their poignancy as symbols of grief and sites of memory have perhaps slipped from view. To counteract this generational divide, an increased investment in education and art developed.

In a similar manner to monuments, the poppy grew out of World War I as a material object of national mourning. Eternalised in Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*, the poppy, like statues, gained an intimate connection to death and the bodies of soldiers. The poppy, however, is more than simply a flower. Its story, its material properties and how they relate to the construction of meaning have changed through time. As a symbol of nature, linked to harvesting, to new life and to the inevitable flow of seasons and time, the poppy symbolised a return to normalcy; to a life before the war. Yet, the poppy also has properties that would seem to negate its efficacy as a symbol of eternal remembrance. Its connection to opiates, to sleep and to oblivion, as depicted by Shakespeare in *Othello* for instance, associates the image of the poppy with forgetting. Nevertheless, through the purifying process of commercialisation, undertaken by the Royal British Legion, these negative connotations become less apparent. Moving from a wild object of nature to a finished commodified product, the poppy begins to tell its story independently from the hands that created it. A similar purification is evident in the poppy's association to blood, death, pain and the national identity.

To truly understand how the properties and the meaning of the poppy have changed, or perhaps more specifically, have been manipulated and cast into the spotlight at different moments in time, one must analyse its physical construction. The poppy was initially made and distributed by French and Canadian women. Soon it was transferred to British soil. Seen as a form of therapeutic labour that could transform dismembered soldiers into productive and whole civilians, the poppy became intimately associated with the bodies of veterans. At the Richmond Poppy Factory, veterans would hand assemble the parts of the poppy into a whole. The embodied practice of constructing the poppy rejected machinery and an image of industry intertwined with

the mass death and suffering of war. Hence, through the touch of experienced soldiers, the poppy gained legitimacy as a symbol of remembrance, charity and hope.

However, in 1977 there was a dramatic change. Pouring like blood from an open wound, the poppy's crimson red dye, soluble in the rain, stained the porcelain white uniforms of the Royal Marines Guard Band. Such a visceral image highlighted the poppy's intimate ties to pain, suffering and to the bodies of war. It proved too much for new generations. Thus, at this crucial turning point, industry and the technologies of science were introduced to purify the poppy of pain and the visibility of war. The following year, the poppy's natural property, its crimson red colouring, was transformed into an insoluble chemical dye.

Our story is not yet complete. With the approach of another extraordinary event, the millennium and the centenary of the beginning of the war, the poppy once again began to change, both in terms of its properties and its use. Moving from a complete commodity that stressed wholeness (such as the body as a whole and the dead as a collective whole), the poppy was broken into parts that stressed both individuals and a more personalised connection with the war dead. Petals cascading from the roof of the Royal Albert Hall, for example, gained a more emotive power that resonated with the individual biographies of the dead. As evident by the description of a veteran who vividly saw dead bodies dropping over the Thames rather than abstract petals floating from the sky, the emotive power of the poppy apart was perhaps too personal for members of an older generation. Subsequently, the series of marked transitions in the manufacturing of the poppy clearly demonstrate how the properties of the poppy and their relationship to the war are dynamic. The silk poppy of the 1920s is not the same poppy as the paper pin of the 1980s or the petals of the 2000s. These changes have occurred across

generations and reveal changing relationships with the memory of the war and identification with the dead.

The significance of the poppy's changing properties are perhaps most vivid when considering the Tower of London art exhibit *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*. Coinciding with the one hundredth anniversary since the start of World War I, the poppies in the moat were made from yet another new material—ceramic. Retaining some fragility as well as the permanence to resist the rain, the ceramic poppies represent a further transition in construction that reincorporated pre-industrial techniques and the touch of the craftsman. Unlike the paper poppies assembled by a machine, the ceramic poppy was unique and it symbolically represented the loss of an individual soldier. In contrast to the petals—a piece of the whole—the individual poppies were part of a collective. Similar to a soldier in an army, or a citizen in nation, a singular ceramic poppy stood in a sea of poppies. Through art, the event collectivised the identities of the old and young, the soldier and civilian, the dead and the living.

Furthermore, mirroring the dispersal of identities within the nation, the event moved. Individual poppies were sold and distributed around the country. But, more importantly, the two most prominent sculptures of the exhibit, *Wave and Weeping Window*, are touring the nation and recreating the iconic event in new locations each with their own historic ties to the war. This movement enabled not only a greater participation in events by those removed from London, but it also emphasised the various regional identities that gather together and are united under the British flag. *Blood Swept Land and Seas of Red* therefore succinctly demonstrates the importance of art to unite generations, the importance of material properties to communicate different narratives, and the importance of remembrance to the British nation. All of these points have

punctuated the life course of the symbol of the poppy, and demonstrate how a narrative of history, war and remembrance can change in time.

History is a powerful tool. It has the power to shape the past, the present and the future. Intertwined with history are material objects. Purified from the processes that developed their narrative, material objects gain an objectivity and an authority to legitimise the past. Through practice, material objects also act to unite distant memories with experiences in the present. Nevertheless, history and material objects are not stable. In single moments, or extended periods of time, narratives can shift, material objects can be altered and the perception of the past can change. Through historicising the poppy, I hope to have demonstrated that its narrative is not timeless. It has a context rooted in history. Its construction has been adapted, changed and moulded by human hands. Mirroring these changes is a dynamic relationship to the memories of World War I, to the biographies of the dead, and to the boundaries of the British identity. Thus, the poppy is not an eternal and everlasting symbol of remembrance. For, what it means to remember, how we remember and why we remember is never the same. Rather, such processes are an entanglement of relationships between material objects, human bodies, and time.

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