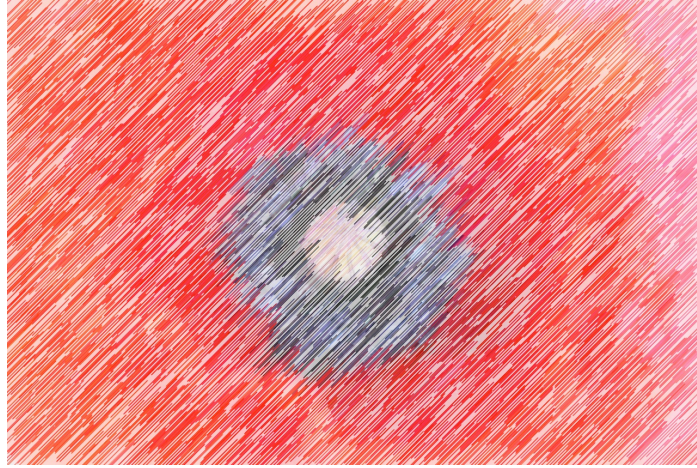


The bittersweet poppy: one hundred years on



Whatever your political view of the symbolism attached to the blood red poppy, it has actually carried a shadow of death and deadly attraction since ancient times.

Like many of the WW1 soldiers whose unbearable battles ended 100 years ago today, our common poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, did not come from the fields of sorrow. Ecologically, the plant's 'roots' were not in England or northern France. It was an ancient invader; like most of us are here in the UK, should we care to check our DNA.

And just like so many young soldiers in history, poppies have forever been short lived. One day, their army of young male anthers stand arranged in an orderly ring like a regiment, then their colourful uniforms fall quickly away, leaving behind just black grit from their mother's ovaries.

The seeds fall from a lifeless wand, which looks rather poignantly like a withered baby's rattle, topped by a bonnet. Botanically speaking this is a capsule, with a hundred thousand sleeping black seeds to the ounce. Each individual is so small and apparently insignificant. I see analogies with how those poor soldiers might have felt, in the First World War, but also in all the victims of all wars.



Our poppy is itself a victim of persecution, a humble arable weed that farmers have tried to eradicate with herbicides. And yet this sentinel of the war-dead just keeps on coming back, as if to remind us we must not forget, whilst humans perpetually try to wipe it out along with all the lessons we should have learned.

Throughout history, poppies have been referred to as the daughters of the fields, springing to life wherever crops grew. Where are the sons of the fields?

In bloom, our poppy is a bittersweet beauty. She offers barely even an aura of opiate pain relief compared to the opium poppy *Papaver somniferum*; perhaps a cruel irony given her place in Flanders Fields.

And she gives no sweet nectar, instead confounding her poor bee visitors, who fall about inside the flower cup having their own little war, furiously vibrating flight muscles at high speed until the flower and anthers shake and the pollen drops all over them. This is called buzz pollination.

Then the bees squirm around in a seemingly frenzied state, deep in the red trench that forms the belly of the flower, briefly buried under the fused female stigma disc, after sliding down the steep sepal walls. Finally she offers mercy and they fly free.

Various wild poppies marched to England and northern Europe with early farmers and Roman invaders, their culinary value and the opiate traits of some being renowned by cooks and medics. Tinctures such as laudanum were made from their seeds and prescribed by quacks to athletes to give them strength, to children to stop them crying and to the sick, to numb pain.

Even earlier, they were used as decorations in ancient Egyptian tombs. In Greek mythology, they were worn in crowns by Morpheus, god of dreams; by Hypnos, god of sleep; and Thanatos, god of death. Demeter, goddess of war, chose the poppy to help her sleep. And to Ceres, the Roman goddess of farming, she was sacred.

Such a short-lived but everlasting and conflicting wild flower, to so many people. Invader and coloniser, soother and confuser, nourisher and destroyer, in times of both war and peace.

#ArmisticeDay #RemembranceDay

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