

Book

Why the poppy remains all the rage

In the 17th century, Britain's most respected physician, Thomas Sydenham, was a strong advocate of opium from poppies for treating coughs and, especially, dysentery and diarrhoea: "Among the remedies which it has pleased Almighty God to give man to relieve his sufferings, none is so universal and efficacious as opium." In the 18th century, opium in dilute form was prescribed for children, mainly to keep them quiet, despite the fact that it caused many deaths. Governments treated opium as a medicine and did not tax it, unlike alcohol. And in the mid-19th century, Oliver Wendell Holmes—physician, poet, and academic—sang opium's praises to the Massachusetts Medical Society, while advocating the ditching of most drugs and medications: "We can make an exception for opium, which the Creator himself seems to prescribe...A little opium, it helps the imagination."

Across the globe, the poppy is a symbol with astonishing international potency. In November, 2010, the then British Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues on a visit to Beijing wore poppies in their buttonholes while toasting the signature of a contract with China. For the British, these splashes of red on their dark suits remembered the armistice at the end of World War 1. But for their Chinese hosts, the poppies were reminders of China's humiliation at British hands during the two opium wars in 1839–42 and 1856–60. The defeat led to China's legalisation of opium. By the turn of the 20th century, about a quarter of the Chinese population was estimated to be regular users of the drug and opium dens were rife, especially in Shanghai.

In this political example—as so often, too, in folklore, literature, and the public imagination—two very different species of poppy were conflated into one: the corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) and the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). The first is the scarlet agricultural weed that now symbolises remembrance of war; the second comes in many colours (including red) and has strong narcotic properties. Although the corn poppy "contains small quantities of rhoeadine, which does have mild sedative qualities and has been used in pain relief and insomnia", notes biologist Andrew Lack in his gorgeously illustrated *Poppy*, it "comes nowhere near opium in effectiveness".

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The opium wars were inglorious episodes in the history of western colonialism. Yet it is worth remembering how widespread was the legal use of opium in Europe and the USA until the drawing up in 1912–19 of the International Opium Convention. 19th-century writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Alexandre Dumas, and, most famously, Thomas de Quincey, openly celebrated their use of opium. Queen Victoria used it to ease menstrual cramps.

Indeed, the narcotic properties of the opium poppy have been known since at least 4500 BC, notes Lack. The Sumerians and Assyrians of ancient Mesopotamia, the ancient Egyptians, Indians, Minoans, and others all used opium. A Sumerian tablet from the third millennium BC mentions opium "as part of what was, in effect, a pharmacopeia". An

Assyrian document refers to what is probably poppy juice as *pa pa*, while the Latin word for the latex may have been *pappa*, meaning soft food or baby food—which seems to be related to the Latin word for poppy, *papaver*.

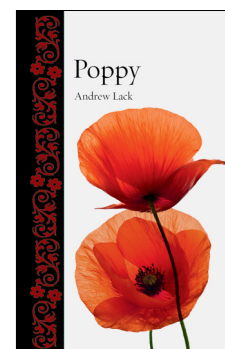
Poppy ranges widely in both period and subject, from Assyrian carvings of poppy capsules and Claude Monet's impressionist paintings of poppy fields to the use of poppy seed in modern cooking, and the grim ironies of the 21st-century Afghan opium trade. Whereas British and American users of heroin have made the farming of Afghan poppies highly profitable, this profit has fuelled the warfare that killed British and American soldiers in Afghanistan.

But the book is probably at its strongest with the science of poppies, particularly their botany. How fascinating to know that as the corn poppy spread from its presumed origin in the eastern Mediterranean northwards into Europe, it changed both its method of pollination—from beetles to bees—and its colour: and that these two facts are interrelated by natural selection. Corn poppies in northern Europe reflect light in the near-ultraviolet, unlike those in the eastern Mediterranean. As Lack explains: "Bees are sensitive to the near-ultraviolet that we cannot see but, unlike beetles, cannot discriminate red colours clearly. The result is that we see poppies as bright scarlet, as we cannot see any of the ultraviolet reflectance; bees see them as ultraviolet with perhaps a tinge from the red."

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Poppy
Andrew Lack. Reaktion Books,
2016. Pp 199. £16.00
ISBN 978178023653 7