

The British Legion and the Control of Remembrance

by Rod Tweedy



**Veterans for Peace UK
November 2015**

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

From *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen 1917-18

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori - it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country

This article may be copied and distributed freely.

Citation: Tweedy, R. (2015), *My Name is Legion: The British Legion and the Control of Remembrance* (London: Veterans for Peace UK).

<http://veteransforpeace.org.uk>

MY NAME IS LEGION

The British Legion and the Control of Remembrance

by Rod Tweedy

Published by Veterans for Peace UK, November 2015



With its links to the arms trade, increasingly militarised presentation of Remembrance, and growing commercialization and corporatisation of the poppy “brand”, it’s time to reconsider whether the Royal British Legion is still suitable to be the “national custodian of Remembrance”.

In 1917 the English poet and soldier Wilfred Owen was struggling to find an image that would capture both the reality of modern industrial warfare and how this might be remembered by future generations. The line that he finally wrote came to haunt the imaginations of subsequent generations and sent a shiver down the spine of the twentieth-century: “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” He originally called the poem ‘Anthem for Dead Youth.’¹ Owen had experienced first-hand the nature of the slaughter: the bodies of fellow soldiers hung over barbed wire like rotting horses, cowering in a muddy hole for several days covered with the dismembered remains of a fellow-officer, being blown into the air by a mortar shell, witnessing the slow deaths and “froth-corrupted lungs” of those caught in the mustard gas attacks that the war had introduced to the world, along with flamethrowers, armoured tanks, and mass death.

Almost a century later, in 2013, the British Legion decided to launch its Remembrance Day poppy appeal to commemorate the dead with another striking image: the girl band The Saturdays, dressed in patent leather mini skirts singing “I’m a bad girl, I’m a bad girl, I’m notorious” while a cloud of fake poppies cascaded from the ceiling.² The band’s hallmark “sexy Secretary look” had already been used for corporate purposes to sell hair removal products, nail varnish, and a popular deodorant. They seem to have been employed by the Legion for a similar purpose: to sanitise, glamorise, anaesthetise and generally remove the stink from the unpleasant and brutal reality of modern warfare. But it remains a surprising and problematic choice of “collective remembrance” from our self-appointed “national custodians of Remembrance.”

1 Owen, W. (1975). *War Poems and Others* (ed. D. Hibberd), p. 76, p. 148.

2 ‘It’s a paint spill! The Saturdays wear abstract art-infused outfits with patent leather to Poppy Appeal 2013 launch’, by Hanna Flint (*The Daily Mail*, 2013). <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2475416/The-Saturdays-wear-art-infused-outfits-Poppy-Appeal-2013-launch.html>

How could they have got things so wrong? And what exactly is going on these days in the British Legion, with its links to the arms trade, its trivialising of war - the “selfie” poppy campaigns, the ‘Poppy Rocks’ discos, the girl-band requiems - its corporate re-branding of itself (as we’ll see, the Legion recently trademarked the poppy as a “corporate logo”), and its increasingly coercive and militarised presentation of remembrance, which has led to civil liberties groups and public figures to challenge its infringements of liberty, heavy-handed coerciveness, and, speak, as Jon Snow, the respected Channel 4 News presenter has, of “poppy fascism”.

Poppy Bling: the Corporatisation of the Legion



The recent “poppification”³ of remembrance is part of a growing commercialisation and corporatisation of remembrance that is being increasingly pushed by the Royal British Legion. On the main page of their recently re-vamped website, for example, there are two main choices: “donate” or “shop”. There are thirty pages of “The Poppy Shop”, selling you everything from poppy ceramic stud earrings and poppy swing dresses, to poppy golfing umbrellas, poppy dog name tags, poppy beanies, poppy iPhone covers, “I Love Poppy” t-shirts, and poppy sports bottles. Remembrance is big business.

As journalist Ryan Kiesel noted in the *Daily Mail*, “If you feel that paper and plastic is a little bit last year, there is plenty of scope to update your poppy before Remembrance Day.”⁴ He wasn’t being facetious. “Updating your poppy” - or “pimping your poppy” (‘Pimp my poppy: a charity symbol reinvented’, *The Independent*)⁵ - is encouraged by the British Legion, whose Poppy Shop also now provides a whole range of designer and bespoke poppies, including limited edition gold-plated Buckley Brooches and Swarovski Poppy Crochets. As Kiesel adds, “celebrities including Simon Cowell”, Cheryl Cole, Victoria Beckham and Danii Minogue have all been seen endorsing the new sparkly British Legion poppy brand, or “corporate logo”, as it now styles itself.

If froth-corrupted lungs and designer jewellery seem rather odd and incongruous bedfellows, they are not so to the modern “lighter and cleaner” British Legion, which has whole-heartedly endorsed this massive extension of its trademarked franchise: “We own the rights to the poppy image so you can almost be certain that the proceeds of a sale go to us anyway”, it helpfully informs us.⁶ Owning the “rights” to the “poppy image” or “logo”, is exactly what this new commercialisation is all about. You may think that you are wearing a shared, collective symbol of remembrance and mourning, but if you do you’re living in the analogue past: welcome to Legion “Brand Poppy”, twenty-first century style.

As the “Our Brand” page on the Legion’s website proudly states: “With 97% awareness of our poppy brand in the UK, we are uniquely placed to create a mutually beneficial partnership that meets your business needs. By working with us you can ... differentiate your brand to increase sales and competitive

3 ‘The Problem of the Poppy: How People and Institutions Wear Symbols of Remembrance’ by Catherine Baker (2014). <http://balkanist.net/the-problem-of-the-poppy-how-people-and-institutions-wear-symbols-ofremembrance/>

4 ‘Wear your crystal-encrusted poppy with pride! X-Factor judges lead the way with designer emblems’, by Ryan Kiesel (*The Daily Mail*, 2010). <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1325714/X-Factor-judges-wear-crystal-encrusted-Remembrance-Day-poppies-pride.html>

5 ‘Pimp my poppy: a charity symbol reinvented’, by Kevin Rawlinson (*The Independent*, 2011). <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/pimp-my-poppy-a-charity-symbol-reinvented-2122620.html>

6 Ryan Kiesel, op.cit.

advantage”.⁷ The Legion has learned the lessons of military campaigns and have applied them to marketing. Moreover, the new corporate Legion observes, “linking a brand or a product to The Royal British Legion can help increase sales, build customer loyalty, retain or recruit customers, and differentiate your brand in a competitive marketplace.” Having The Saturdays singing in their patent leather skirts and “paint-spill style tops” while wearing Swarovski-encrusted poppies and singing about being gangsters on the dance-floor makes a bit more sense now. As Hayley Quinn, the managing director for Swarovski UK, commented about their “jewellery brand driving product placement” by the corporate-friendly girl band: “We are very excited to be working with The Saturdays this season. They perfectly epitomise our brand in terms of glamour, fashion and fun.”⁸

A bit of “glamour, fashion and fun” is clearly what the Legion are hoping the band will bring to their Poppy Appeal. Poppy T-shirts, poppy scarves, caps, ties, cufflinks and tie-slides, poppy lapel badges - these days Remembrance is as much about selling us something - selling us a “brand” - as it is about “the past”. You can even choose to sport the “retro” poppy look this year, by wearing one of the original, old-school poppies made of paper and plastic, for that “authentic” brand look. But remember: “The red poppy is a registered trademark of the Royal British Legion” so what you are wearing is now a corporate logo, and no other organisation can profit from its sale.

Except perhaps if you’re Swarovski, Sainsbury’s, Kleshna, or Hovis, who have all profited from lucrative partnerships with the new corporate-friendly Legion. By linking their own brand products - sliced bread, chocolate, badges and bling - to the Royal British Legion they are simply availing themselves of the Legion’s “pimping” out of the poppy in order to “increase sales, build customer loyalty, retain or recruit customers, and differentiate their brand in a competitive marketplace”.



The Legion calls this “Cause Related Marketing”, or CRM - i.e. using a “cause” that people care about in order to co-opt it to sell frozen goods, ketchup, or jewellery. However, such overt commercial sales pitches and corporate re-branding inevitably leads to the quiet, personal, and collective ritual of remembrance, and in particular the image of the original Flanders poppy, being both compromised and cheapened. As Mary Reader observed of last year’s controversial Sainsbury’s Christmas advert, made in conjunction with the British Legion, and featuring a bar of chocolate: “Using a war that killed forty million people in order to trump John Lewis’ sale of Christmas paraphernalia is almost as insensitive as Tesco’s ‘Poppy Pepperoni Pizzas’”:

On one level, the advert is beautifully crafted and emotionally touching. But, despite its sentimentality, it is important to remember Sainsbury’s are not trying to change the world with this advert: they are trying to sell turkeys at Christmas. The advert sent a shiver down my spine, not because it was emotionally engaging (which it was), but because it reinforced how we have become the emotional puppets of a cold and calculating corporate sector.⁹

Selling us turkeys, of one sort or another, seems to be exactly what the Legion is interested in these days: their choice of Joss Stone’s rendition of ‘No Man’s Land (Green Fields of France)’ for their Official Poppy Appeal Single last year was met with widespread criticism for sentimentalising a song which once

7 ‘Our Brand’, Royal British Legion. <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/about-us/our-brand/>

8 ‘The Saturdays get Swarovski fever in new video’ (2013). <http://www.professionaljeweller.com/the-saturdays-get-swarovski-fever-in-new-video/>

9 ‘The insensitivity of the Sainsbury’s Christmas advert’, by Mary Reader (Cherwell, 2014). <http://www.cherwell.org/comment/opinion/2014/11/28/the-insensitivity-of-the-sainsburys-christmas-advert>

had a powerful anti-war sentiment. The song's original composer, Eric Bogle, commented that the British Legion had somehow managed to "negate that intention," by removing half of the lyrics and airbrushing the rest: he referred to the Legion's version as "trivialising" and "sentimentalising".¹⁰ Indeed, a petition was launched asking the Royal British Legion to apologise for their version, which many critics called "syrupy" and "jingoistic", and requesting them to print the full, uncensored lyrics on its website. Perhaps hiring a director (Rupert Bryan) who had previously shot adverts for Kellogg's breakfast cereal to shoot the accompanying video didn't help: Joss Stone is pictured wafting through the Tower of London caressing the tall red ceramic poppies, her vocal orgasms curiously out of place in a song ostensibly about the "slow and obscene" poignant desiccation of warfare:

*But here in this graveyard that's still No Man's Land
The countless white crosses in mute witness stand
To man's blind indifference to his fellow man.
And a whole generation who were butchered and damned.*

*And I can't help but wonder, no Willie McBride,
Do all those who lie here know why they died?
Did you really believe them when they told you "The Cause?"
Did you really believe that this war would end wars?*

*Well the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame
The killing, the dying, it was all done in vain,
For Willie McBride, it all happened again,
And again, and again, and again, and again.*

Not surprisingly, the Royal British Legion cut these lines from their sanitised and anaesthetised version: they don't, it seems, want us to remember the reality of war, only to enjoy the "macabre piety" of the memory of war, which horrified Harry Patch so much, the last surviving British soldier from that war.¹¹ Being associated with a product in which people were "butchered and damned" in their millions is not a particularly good way to build brand loyalty or "help increase sales, or retain or recruit customers".

You will probably see more of these types of saccharine and upbeat promotional videos for their new "poppy brand" though, as the director's film company (Motion Picture House) is closely involved with the British Legion, sponsoring its annual 'Poppy Rocks Ball', and is also the team behind the Invictus Games.



Interestingly, the director's website puts the Invictus Games, along with Kellogg's Krave™ Cereal, Doc Martens, and Carlsberg, on its "Branded Content" page.¹² In other words, all of these products are being packaged and presented as exactly that: products. This perhaps helps to explain the sense you get while watching Joss Stone's ceramic-caressing 'No Man's Land' that you are being sold something, but you don't quite know what - perhaps as with so much postmodern advertising these days. What you are being sold is Poppy™. That is what the poppy has become.

10 'Eric Bogle: I don't like Joss Stone's cover of No Man's Land, but I won't sue', by Eric Bogle (*The Guardian*, 2014). <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2014/nov/12/eric-bogle-responds-to-joss-stones-cover-of-his-song-no-mans-land>

11 'Poppy Day is the opium of the people', by Laurie Penny (*New Statesman*, 2010). <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/laurie-penny/2010/11/british-war-poppy-carnage>

12 'Rupert Bryan Films: Branded Content'. <http://rupertbryanfilms.com/branded-content-2/>

The Shift: From Poppy to Product



The Legion formally applied to trademark their “Poppy Brand” in 1997, and it was about this time that a major shift seems to have occurred within the Legion’s whole approach to selling itself to the public. Many veterans, journalists, campaign groups and cultural commentators have commented on this change in tone, and the increasingly commercialised, coercive, and corporate nature of the Legion’s new take on Remembrance Day. “In the last few years,” observed Quaker Peace & Social Witness in 2014, “the tone of the Royal British Legion, which sells and markets the red poppies that are such a big feature of the day, has shifted. An example of the change in the tone of the Royal British Legion is given by troops in public places selling poppies with the cry: ‘Support our troops!’ This is a substantial departure from the Royal British Legion’s historic message of remembering the horror of war, towards supporting those involved in current war.”¹³

This shift and “change in tone” has also been noticed by a number of veterans, who have expressed concern both at the new commercialisation of Armistice Day and also the way in which this has shifted away from the sentiment of “Never Again” to a more militarised sense of “Support our Troops”: “The Poppy Appeal is once again subverting Armistice Day. A day that should be about peace and remembrance is turned into a month-long drum roll of support for current wars”:

The public are being urged to wear a poppy in support of “our Heroes”. There is nothing heroic about being blown up in a vehicle. There is nothing heroic about being shot in an ambush and there is nothing heroic about fighting in an unnecessary conflict. Remembrance should be marked with the sentiment “Never Again”.¹⁴

This concern from veterans who have witnessed the truth of warfare and the reality of its “heroism”, like Owen and Sassoon a hundred years earlier, is rooted in a deep unease about how glorification (“support our heroes”) and easy euphemisms (“noble sacrifice”) have historically been used to disguise the true nature of what happens in battle, and also to serve as recruiting rhetoric for the next generation of “cattle”.



As the veterans note, the original commemoration surrounding Armistice Day was very much a sombre commemoration of the war dead and the horrors of conflict, focussing on the conviction that such horrors should never be allowed to happen again.¹⁵ Even the original “Cenotaph” was intended as a temporary construction, made of wood, cloth, and plaster: people genuinely believed that the levels of brutality, barbarism, and destruction unleashed by modern industrial warfare meant we would never allow our governments to go to war again. From “Never Again” to “Support our Troops” is quite a volte-face, but one that efficiently and accurately indicates the new direction the British Legion is marching in.

13 ‘The new tide of militarism’, Quaker Peace & Social Witness (2014). http://lutonquakers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Militarisation-briefing-web_1.pdf

14 ‘Poppies and “Heroes”’ (*The Guardian*, 2010). <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/05/poppies-and-heroes-remembrance-day>

15 ‘Poppy appeal’s original aims being subverted, veterans complain’, by Stephen Bates (*The Guardian*, 2010). <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/05/poppy-appeal-subverted-veterans-complain>

Indeed, it's new slogan has already moved on to the next stage, from "Support our Troops" to "Live On". As the Legion explains, "We are phasing out our strapline 'Shoulder to shoulder with all who Serve' and replacing it with 'Live On – To the memory of the fallen and the future of the living'." They have even trademarked the words "Live On" - it is now officially "LIVE ON™", in case anyone was under the illusion that living on might not be a corporate exercise. As they helpfully make clear, this is all "about presenting our charity in a lighter, cleaner way." As we have seen, this new "lighter, cleaner" way to present itself was put to striking use in its Poppy Appeal song of that same year, the heavily sanitised and censored - I mean "lighter and cleaner" - Joss Stone "version" of 'No Man's Land'. You might call it the new "Remembrance-Lite" British Legion.

"Living On" also means a shift away from the past, a shift away from "just" Remembrance, as its website now tellingly puts it. "We want people to understand that the poppy is not just about Remembrance": as the Legion proceeds to clarify, "the 2014 Poppy Appeal was the first phase of the Live On journey, but we are not confining its use to the Poppy Appeal or Remembrance. It is being used as an embedded part of the Legion's work all year round, and you can join us in watching it expand and evolve." In other words, the 'Poppy' concept is not being "confined" solely to Poppy Day, it is being "embedded" all year round, and not only in cemeteries and war memorial sites, but also through a number of new initiatives such as its "new high Street presence" and its proliferating "Pop In Centres".

The British Legion's policy of "embedding" itself throughout the year, and making its sphere of activities "expand and evolve", signals a significant shift away from its traditional and more pastoral activities of remembrance and welfare for injured veterans. The Legion is right to emphasise that its current programme is not "just" about remembrance: according to its recent financial records only 4% of its substantial income actually goes towards "Remembrance" activities these days.¹⁶ Its emphasis and funds will increasingly be spent on its new "Live On™ journey" - an ambitious and far more extensive campaign of rebranding both itself and how we see war.



Poppy Fascism

"I can't remember football clubs – even in the relatively recent past – having a minute's silence unless they were actually playing on Remembrance Sunday", observed the former editor-in-chief of the *Independent*, Simon Kelner. "It has never been tradition for footballers to wear poppies on their shirts: it is a very recent development."¹⁷

As Kelner notes, in previous years - in fact for the whole of the last century - wearing poppies, whether at sporting events or



¹⁶ 'Annual Report & Accounts: Year Ending 30 September 2014' (Royal British Legion, 2104). <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/media/1955/annualreport2014.pdf>

¹⁷ 'It's Remembrance Day, not Mandatory Poppy Day', by Simon Kelner (*The Independent*, 2011). <http://www.independent.co.uk/hei-fi/views/simon-kelner-its-remembrance-day-not-mandatory-poppy-day-6259758.html>

elsewhere, was a matter of personal choice, and was left up to individuals: “one of the freedoms our soldiers fought for all those years ago is the freedom to do as we choose and not be dictated to by a superior power.” In 2011 the FA released a statement in the run-up to Remembrance Day, noting that they “have been working closely with the Royal British Legion” to confirm a number of remarkable new procedures and policies to intensify the presence of the poppy symbol at their matches:

We can confirm that:

- The FA will place a poppy wreath on the pitch during the national anthems
- There will be a one-minute silence ahead of kick-off
- Players will wear training tops with embroidered poppies on match day
- Players will wear poppy-embossed anthem jackets during the national anthems
- The poppy will be visible around Wembley on Saturday, on the scoreboards and advertising boards, and poppy sellers will be in the stadium to allow supporters to donate to the poppy fund and show their support
- On Thursday, England Under 21s play Iceland in Colchester and England U19s play Denmark in Brighton. All players and staff will be wearing poppies pre- and post-match
- Both the Under-21s and U19s will observe a one-minute silence, too, at their games – the Under 21s will do so alongside troops from Colchester barracks.¹⁸

This is clearly a very regimented and coherent strategy for the ubiquitous placement and endorsement of the Poppy - as well as for the explicit inclusion of “military representatives” at public events, compulsory wearing of black armbands in stadiums, high visibility of the poppy logo “on the scoreboards and advertising boards” surrounding this public space, the mandatory wearing of the poppy logo by all players, and the stationing of actual troops at the games. As the Director General of the Royal British Legion, Chris Simpkins, noted, “The FA has helped us explore every alternative available and we are satisfied that England will enter the competition knowing they have shown proper respect for our Armed Forces.” This whole exercise, in other words, is about showing “proper respect for our Armed Forces”. The poppy is no longer a signifier of remembrance, but a potent symbol of the Armed Forces, and of showing due respect for the military.

Interestingly, the FA only released their statement following Fifa’s earlier opposition to the new proposals for the British Legion poppy to be worn for an international match, since their guidelines prohibit any “political symbols” to be worn. The British Legion and British Government responded angrily that the poppy was not a “political” symbol, while simultaneously declaring that it symbolised “respect for the Armed Forces”, nationalism (“wearing a poppy is an act of huge respect and national pride”, as David Cameron declared), and that the Government itself would provide political backing “if the FA were to defy the FIFA Mandate”. It’s hard to know in what ways nationalism, militarism, and official government-backing aren’t “political”.



The modern pressures to confirm to Poppy-wearing are becoming considerable. When the footballer James McClean chose not to wear one on his shirt for a football game he received extensive abuse, booing on the pitch by his own club’s supporters, and even death threats. McClean was originally from

¹⁸ ‘Cameron gives England players green light to defy FIFA ruling on poppies for Wembley clash’ (*The Daily Mail*, 2011). <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-2059467/FIFA-poppy-ban-David-Cameron-happy-defy-ban.html>

Derry, where British soldiers had shot dead 14 unarmed civil rights demonstrators on Bloody Sunday, and had perhaps understandably ambivalent feelings about a symbol connected so strongly with the British Army.

In recent years Jon Snow, the presenter of Channel 4 News, has also spoken out against what he calls “poppy fascism”¹⁹ and the tacit obligation for all TV presenters to be seen supporting the Royal British Legion in the run-up to Remembrance Day: “compelling people to wear poppies because you think they ought to is precisely the poppy fascism, or intolerance, that I have complained of in the past,” he explained.²⁰

Any broadcaster opting not to wear the Legion Poppy can expect similar “intolerance”: in 2013 ITV news presenter Charlene White received extensive racist and sexist abuse for not succumbing to the pressures to wear the Poppy: she finally released a statement explaining her decision - that she privately supports a number of charities but is not comfortable singling out one charity in preference to others. Having to defend one’s decision not to be compelled to wear a symbol that is ostensibly meant to commemorate our freedoms seems ironic to say the least, but is indicative of the much more ‘in-your-face’ campaigning style and presence of the Legion in recent years.

As Catherine Baker, lecturer in 20th Century History at the University of Hull, noted, “The sentiment is summed up in this 2012 billboard from the Royal British Legion, which towered over a nearby parade of shops for several weeks: a poppyless suit lapel with the slogan ‘Something missing?’ Even if this coerciveness was always inherent in the Poppy Appeal, the explicitness of coercion in this image was new. In me, it induced a level of discomfort that I haven’t felt about this symbol before. I’d bought a poppy in most recent years, and worn it or not worn it depending on whether it will stay on my coat. At least, I hadn’t made the conscious decision not to buy one; until that year, when on thinking about it I decided not to.”²¹

Similar disaffection with the aggressive, “Something Missing?” approach to the Legion’s new coercive and corporate presence has also caused a number of veterans and journalists to no longer feel comfortable wearing this symbol: the respected war correspondent Robert Fisk has written movingly about how both he and his father, who had fought in the Great War, had grown increasingly disillusioned and angered at how the symbol of the death of so many men “had been turned into a fashion appendage”: “this obscene fashion appendage – inspired by a pro-war poem, for God’s sake, which demands yet further human sacrifice.”²²

Fisk is right to note that the poem from which the Legion poppy was originally drawn, ‘In Flanders Fields’ by John McCrae, is actually fiercely “pro-war”: “Take up our quarrel with the foe”, it exhorts us, “To you from failing hands we throw /The torch”. The poppies that blow “in Flanders field” are there to remind us to continue the battle, and the poem ends with a magnificent piece of rhetorical guilt-tripping: “If ye break faith with us who die/We shall not sleep, though poppies grow/In Flanders fields.” This is the poppy, and the sentiment, that the British Legion’s “Live On” is embodying and carrying forward into another



19 'Why I don't wear a poppy on air', by Jon Snow (Channel 4 News, Snowblog, 2006).
<http://blogs.channel4.com/snowblog/wear-poppy-air/16514>

20 'No one should be obliged to wear a poppy', by Guy Walters (*The Telegraph*, 2010).
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/8109510/No-one-should-be-obliged-to-wear-a-poppy.html>

21 Catherine Baker, op. cit.

22 'Poppycock – or why remembrance rituals make me see red', by Robert Fisk (*The Independent*, 2013).
<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/poppycock-or-why-remembrance-rituals-make-me-see-red-8927751.html>

century. As their website notes, McCrae's poem "inspired" the manufacture of the original "red silk poppies": the Poppy symbol was always rooted in the verses of 'In Flanders Fields'. Its vengeful and inappropriate imperative to "take up our quarrel with the foe" and to carry on the fight was therefore written into the bloody roots of the poppy from the start. A CD of the poem is available on the Legion's Poppy Shop website.

Crimes against the poppy

This new shift towards a more aggressive and coercive style of campaigning is not only embodied in the corporate "brand" status of the poppy itself but also in the Legion's new litigious heavy-handed stance towards anyone deemed to be "infringing its trademark", as its website page makes abundantly clear. "The Legion's 2-petal poppy is a registered trademark and should not be used without permission."²³ After reminding us that the national symbol of remembrance is in fact owned by them, it continues: "Additionally, as the national custodian of Remembrance the Legion will take action against companies who are deemed to be infringing its trademark. To prevent being in breach it is essential to enter into a commercial partnership agreement with the Legion to obtain a licence. Please call our contact centre regarding licensed use of our property or to report any infringements."

The Legion has not been slow in "taking action" against anyone deemed to be "infringing its trademark" - and not only against other commercial "companies". A Wiltshire charity worker, Lynda Beaven, found herself accused by the Legion of "unlicensed use" of the trademarked symbol after making personalised "teardrop" poppies to raise money for charity. The Royal British Legion national spokesman, Robert Lee, declared that its trademark rights had been "violated" and that using the poppy in this way was "in clear violation of our trademark rights": "The red poppy is our registered mark and its only lawful use is to raise funds for the Poppy Appeal." In 2012 another charity fundraiser, Cath Fearn, was banned from selling her hand-knitted versions of the poppy by the Legion, for breaching its "intellectual property rights". The Legion later apologised to Mrs Fearn, with the equally revealing explanation: "To protect our donors and the iconic poppy brand there is the need to monitor activities and challenge any unauthorised products."²⁴ In other words, the Legion is there to protect a "brand": transforming the remembrance poppy into a "product", an "iconic brand", may be a way of ensuring that the Legion gets more money but it also places the Poppy firmly in the world of the corporate logo, like the Nike Swoosh, or Coca-Cola.

Equally indicative of this move towards a more commercial and coercive style of campaigning by the Legion are its increasingly aggressive billboard posters - 'For their sake, wear a poppy', 'For his family's sake, wear a poppy', 'Something Missing?' At least with Coca-Cola you are not harangued for choosing not to consume its iconic brand.

More disturbing than the Big Brother billboards however, are the arrests in relation to cases of young people apparently not



23 'Our Brand', Royal British Legion. <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/about-us/our-brand/>

24 'Edgware woman who knitted poppies in aid of Royal British Legion accused of breaching copyright', by Natalie O'Neill (Hendon & Finchley Times, 2012). <http://www.times-series.co.uk/news/10068425.display/>

showing sufficient respect for the Poppy. In recent years, several people have actually been arrested for crimes against the poppy: in 2011 a Royal British Legion member rang the police after spotting on Facebook a picture of “two youths burning a poppy”. Police in Coleraine later confirmed that “a number of people have been arrested” in relation to the Facebook incident.

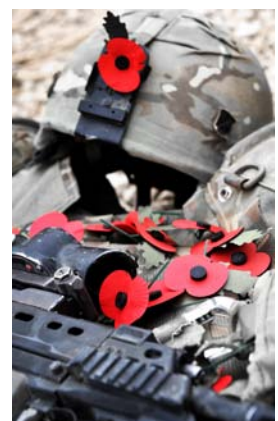
The next year another teenager was arrested for posting a picture of a burning poppy online, when he was drunk. The arrest, made under the Malicious Communications Act, led to widespread condemnation by online users and civil liberties organisations, amid growing concerns about threats to freedom of speech. Nick Pickles, the director of civil rights group Big Brother Watch, called the police action “utterly ridiculous”: “It is not illegal to offend people and, however idiotic or insensitive the picture may have been, it is certainly not worthy of arrest. The case highlights the urgent need to reform a law that poses a serious risk to freedom of speech.”²⁵ Pdraig Rediy, of Index on Censorship, remarked that news of the arrest was “worrying”, while leading human rights lawyer John Cooper QC offered to represent the teenager free of charge should the matter come to court. He told the *Independent* that “to arrest him is disproportionate and dangerous to the very fundamental freedom of speech”:

There seems to be a growing intolerance and a particular intolerance to comments made on social media. It is almost as if certain sections of society ... are trying to send out unwarranted heavy-handed signals which are an affront to the very rights that we hold dear.²⁶

The teenager was apparently questioned by detectives for several hours and spent two nights behind bars. The arrest was met with incredulity on Twitter, where people mounted a fierce discussion over civil liberties, prompting the hashtag 'Poppycock' as many on the site criticised Kent Police. The irony of the self-appointed “custodians of national Remembrance” encouraging the arrest of people for expressing their political freedoms was not lost, and indeed lies behind Jon Snow’s well-publicised “poppy fascism” comment. The treatment towards the new Poppy brand as some sort of “sacred symbol”, as one commentator observed, is indicative of a disturbing change in tone that the Legion is seeking to introduce. As history lecturer Catherine Baker remarked, “Is the poppy now so sacred and unquestionable that depicting its burning on a social network must be considered a crime? If so, that too must feed into my choices in future years about whether or not to display one, as it will feed into the choices of other people’s. And sacred symbols are not really something I like to display.”²⁷

The British Legion and the 'new militarism'

The shift in both the presentation and significance of the ‘poppy’, and its increasing use by the Legion not “just” to remember past wars but to be actively co-opted in order to advocate support for current and future wars - “support for our troops”, “proper respect for the Armed Forces” - is part of a much wider shift towards militarism in this country, as many commentators and organisations have noticed. Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW), in their remarkable document ‘The New Tide of Militarism’, have documented this new presentation of militarism, and how it is being developed: “there is a new and different tide of militarisation that has developed over the last five years. The general public do not seem to be aware of it, and it is not being



²⁵ “Poppycock”: man’s arrest for posting image of burning poppy on Facebook is condemned by civil liberties activists’, by Kevin Rawlinson (*The Independent*, 2012). <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/poppycock-mans-arrest-for-posting-image-of-burning-poppy-on-facebook-is-condemned-by-civil-liberties-8306784.html>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Catherine Baker, op. cit.

discussed or scrutinised.”²⁸ As they suggest, our general lack of awareness of this “new and different tide of militarism” is due to the subtlety and care with which it is being introduced, and the unexpected forms it takes.

As QPSW note, “The involvement of the military in the Royal British Legion’s campaign has also increased. Whereas in the past the role was mainly to participate in the ceremonies around Remembrance Day, now troops and cadets sell poppies”, often with the cry of “Support our troops!”. As they observe, this is a “substantial departure” from their original remit “of remembering the horror of war, towards those involved in current war,” and, as such, it chimes with current government policies that promote the interests of the military, such as the Armed Forces Community Covenant and Corporate Covenant. The 2008 Government report ‘National Recognition of our Armed Forces’ aimed to eliminate the “separation of the Armed Forces from civilian life”, which it seeks to do through such means as: encouraging “a greater relationship between the military and the media”; fostering “greater engagement between Parliament and the military”; increasing the presence of the military in schools through expansion of the Combined Cadet Forces (CCF); “to do everything possible to encourage more comprehensive Schools and City Academies to apply for their own CCF”; to encourage “the strengthening of links between leading sportsmen and the women and the military”; and to intensify the presence of the military at public events, including “the London 2012 Games”, “the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games”, “the Premier League”, and “Wimbledon”.²⁹

In this new ‘proper-respect-for-the-Armed-Forces’ climate of militarisation, the Royal British Legion, the government report notes, can play a significant role: “the Ministry of Defence is grateful for an offer from the Royal British Legion for use of its branches and professional staff to work with units locally making the arrangements”, and in encouraging “the public to show its appreciation for the work of our Armed Forces.” This new development within the Legion has also been noticed by David Gee, author and co-founder of ForcesWatch, which campaigns against the increasing involvement of the armed forces in education and against unethical military recruitment practices: “After the First World War, a committed sentiment of ‘Never Again’ percolated through the population, which coloured the meaning of the poppy when it was first introduced. Today, poppies are sold on railway stations by current forces personnel calling, ‘Support the troops?’ Surely the poppy cannot carry both meanings without contradiction” (Gee, *Spectacle, Reality, Resistance: Confronting a culture of militarism*).³⁰ These contradictions only deepen when you start to investigate the extensive links between the British Legion and contemporary arms companies.

Selling poppies, selling arms

One striking manifestation of the new “involvement of the military in the Royal British Legion’s campaign” is the Legion’s increasingly close relationship with contemporary arms companies, who now sponsor their events. BAE Systems, for example, one of the world’s leading arms traders, not only funded sales of cutting-edge weapons to Saudi Arabia, Libya, and the Middle East in 2002, but also the British Legion’s



28 ‘The new tide of militarism’, Quaker Peace & Social Witness (2014). http://lutonquakers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Militarisation-briefing-web_1.pdf

29 ‘The Government’s Response to the Report of Inquiry into National Recognition of our Armed Forces’ (Ministry of Defence, 2008). https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/28287/govt_response_recognition_armed_forces.pdf

30 Gee, D. (2014). *Spectacle, Reality, Resistance: Confronting a culture of militarism*. London: ForcesWatch. <http://www.forceswatch.net/resources/spectacle-reality-resistance-confronting-culture-militarism>

Remembrance Day events that year. As the *Telegraph* reported, “A decision by British defence manufacturer BAE Systems to sponsor this year's Poppy Day has been likened to ‘King Herod sponsoring a special day reserved to prevent child cruelty’”.³¹ Richard Bingley, the spokesman for the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT), added that:

BAE is the country's largest arms exporter. Its weapons recently have ended up in Israel, Zimbabwe, India, Pakistan. But its main function is to produce massive weapons systems which are designed to kill, often as many people as possible. I think that just contradicts completely the aims of Remembrance Sunday.³²

Taking money from those profiting from war does not seem to be a “contradiction” to the new British Legion though, who have massively extended their collaborations with arms traders over recent years. In 2003 Richard Coltart, head of news at BAE Systems, disclosed that the arms company had a “three-year, £100,000 sponsorship of the British Legion”. He proudly added that “the extent of the arms manufacturer's support meant it was a platinum corporate member of the British Legion.”³³

The Legion's new “platinum corporate member”, BAE Systems, is however not only one of the world's most successful and profitable arms companies, but also one of its most controversial. As the world's third largest arms producer,³⁴ its revenue in 2013 was \$26.82 billion, 94% of which was earned from arms sales.³⁵ One of its main markets is Saudi Arabia, which the British Intelligence Unit ranked 163rd out of 167 countries in its “democracy index” - just above North Korea and Syria.

A recent article in the *Independent* described Saudi Arabia as “the nerve-centre of international terrorism” (most of the 9/11 killers were Saudi, so was the al-Qaeda hierarchy).³⁶ Amnesty International has called Saudi Arabia “a major violator of human rights” (it lists “torture used as a punishment”, “no free speech”, discrimination against women, torture in police custody, and being “among the world's top executions, many of them public beheadings”).³⁷

Many of these policies are enabled by the weaponry that BAE Systems, the platinum sponsor of the British Legion Poppy Appeal, supplies. As CAAT research shows, “Saudi Arabia is the largest buyer of UK weapons in the world.” It adds, “It is also one of the worst human rights abusers.”³⁸ BAE Systems armoured vehicles were used by Saudi troops to suppress pro-democracy protests in Bahrain in 2011; in 1995, a Channel 4 ‘Dispatches’ documentary revealed that BAE (then British Aerospace) tried to sell electric shock batons to Saudi Arabia, which could be used for the torture of prisoners.³⁹

31 ‘BAE sponsorship of poppy day is “like King Herod”’ (*The Telegraph*, 2002). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1412567/BAE-sponsorship-of-poppy-day-is-like-King-Herod.html>

32 ‘Legion defends arms maker's gift’, by Neil Tweedie (*The Telegraph*, 2002). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1412617/Legion-defends-arms-makers-gift.html>

33 ‘British Legion denies BAE funds’, by Dominic Wood (*Third Sector*, 2003). <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/british-legion-denies-bae-funds/article/615387>

34 ‘BAE Systems: Inspired Work’ (BAE Systems, 2014). <http://investors.baesystems.com/%7E/media/Files/B/Bae-Systems-Investor-Relations-V3/Annual%20Reports/bae-annual-report-2014.pdf>

35 Peter Kennard, *Unofficial War Artist* (Imperial War Museum, 2015). ‘Conflict Art: Creation in the Face of destruction’, by Phoebe Stubbs. <http://www.artslant.com/la/articles/show/43460>

36 ‘The evil empire of Saudi Arabia is the West's real enemy’, by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (*The Independent*, 2015). <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-evil-empire-of-saudi-arabia-is-the-west-s-real-enemy-a6669531.html>

37 ‘Ten ways that Saudi Arabia violates human rights’ (Amnesty International, 2015). <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/saudi-arabia-human-rights-raif-badawi-king-salman#.VjOA42ThCS5>

38 ‘UK must end arms sales to Saudi Arabia – if not now, then when?’ (CAAT, 2015). <https://www.caat.org.uk/media/press-releases/2015-06-10>

39 See ‘The Arabian Connection: The UK Arms Trade to Saudi Arabia’, by Chrissie Hirst (CAAT). <https://www.caat.org.uk/resources/countries/saudi-arabia/arabian-connection>

Indeed, BAE has had an extensive history of sales involvement with the Saudi dictatorships and was at the centre of one of the biggest arms trade scandals ever: the notorious £43billion 'Al-Yamamah' (the word means 'dove' - arms traders, it seems, are not without a sense of irony) deal with Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. In the words of the *Financial Times*, this arms deal was "the biggest [UK] sale ever of anything to anyone."⁴⁰ It included not only sales of extensive weaponry but also training and advice for the Saudi military. Indeed, this was pursued to such an extent that *The Economist* suggested that "the company not only supplies Saudi Arabia with fighter aircraft, but virtually runs its entire airforce."⁴¹

The deal eventually led to BAE Systems being sentenced to pay a \$400 million criminal fine, one of the largest criminal fines in the history of the international arms trade. As the *Guardian* noted, "BAE admitted to false accounting and making misleading statements. The company ran a global money-laundering system: a network of secret cash payments amounting to billions of pounds that went on for years with the connivance of the British government."⁴² Andrew Feinstein, former ANC politician and respected founder of Corruption Watch, described the BAE deal as "arguably the most corrupt transaction in trading history."⁴³ In 2003, the Royal British Legion chose this company to be their major financial sponsor for their Festival of Remembrance.

Despite the "King Herod" associations, the Legion has continued and even strengthened its relations with arms traders. This year (2015), for example, the British Legion's annual 'Poppy Rocks Ball' is being sponsored by Lockheed Martin UK, the subsidiary of the world's largest arms supplier, Lockheed Martin. Sponsoring the event, as the Legion's marketing page helpfully informs us, allows you to put your company logo on the Legion website and your company's name on the dinner programme. While you are eating your Poppy Rocks dinner you can therefore reflect on the role that your corporate sponsors have played in the numerous veteran disabilities that proceeds from the Ball go to bandage.



Sophie Orr, Chair of the Poppy Rocks Ball, remarked: "We are delighted to be working with such an influential and well known company as Lockheed Martin UK. Their input has been vital in making the event happen."⁴⁴ If the British Legion are "delighted" with the input of the world's largest arms supplier into their dinner, Lockheed Martin are equally "thrilled" to be "the main sponsor for the Poppy Rocks Ball", whose aim - as its website announces - is to "celebrate our heroes". Again, this signals a dramatic shift away from the historical tone of remembrance, towards one of "celebration". Similarly, the slightly grander Poppy Ball that the Legion holds every year, not to be outdone by Lockheed Martin's colonisation of the Poppy Rocks Ball, is sponsored by a whole array of military and arms-related companies, including Sphinx (who manufacture handguns and pistols), Close Brothers Modern Merchant Bank (whose "commitment and loyalty to the military" are evident in their 'Specialist Military Financial Services', aimed directly at "serving or retired UK personnel"), Lord Ashcroft (who before the "pig-gate"

40 *Financial Times*, 9 July 1988, cited in C. Hirst, op. cit.

41 'BAE Systems: Corporate Crimes' (Corporate Watch, 2002). <https://corporatewatch.org/company-profiles/bae-systems-corporate-crimes>

42 'The Saudi-GPT deal inquiry must not be another whitewash', by Andrew Feinstein (*The Guardian*, 2012). <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/16/serious-fraud-office-arms-trade>

43 'The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade' by Andrew Feinstein (*The Telegraph*, 2011). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8848716/The-Shadow-World-Inside-theGlobal-Arms-Trade-by-Andrew-Feinstein-review.html>

44 'Lockheed Martin UK Announced Headline Sponsors of The Poppy Rocks Ball' (Lockheed Martin, 2014). <http://www.lockheedmartin.com/uk/news/press-releases/2014-press-releases/lockheed-martin-uk-announced-headline-sponsors-of-poppy-rocks-ball.html>

revelations earlier this year was mainly known for being one of the wealthiest 'non-dom' tax avoiders in the country and the donator of £1million towards the controversial Bomber Command Memorial in Green Park), and Motion Picture House, whose artistic work with Joss Stone and Kellogg's Krave breakfast cereal has already been noticed.⁴⁵

All of its sponsors, in other words, are key players in the re-habilitation of the "new militarism", working in symbiosis with the newly corporate, re-militarised "celebrate our heroes", "support our troops" ethos of the Legion itself. Embedding corporations who profit from selling arms, and selling arms to countries with appalling human rights abuses, is clearly a major part of the British Legion's "proud" new sense of itself. This synergy helps to explain its eagerness to embrace companies such as BAE Systems, who still sponsor the annual "poppy drop" during the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall - perhaps appropriately since BAE are clearly used to dropping things on people.

The conscious coupling of Remembrance Day and the arms trade leaves a nasty taste in the mouth, and raises troubling questions about the suitability of the Legion to remain as "national custodians of Remembrance." *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot was one of many to express discomfort with the Legion's choice of sponsor. "It turns out that @PoppyLegion strongly linked to arms trade. Until now I've bought a poppy every year. No longer".⁴⁶

The Triumvirate: British arms trade, British Legion, British Government



The reciprocal incorporation of the Legion's corporate poppy logo into BAE Systems advertisements for its armaments, and the close involvement of Lockheed Martin, Thales, Sphinx handguns, and BAE Systems in every tentacle of the Legion's current operations, is indicative of the very close relationships and shared agenda of the British Legion, the British arms trade, and the British Government.

The British Government - the world's second largest arms exporter⁴⁷ - encourages and facilitates the trade of arms directly through MoD contracts, and indirectly through its aggressive promotion of the British arms industry overseas: the famous 2007 Tony Blair handshake with Colonel Gaddafi, cementing lucrative BAE deals with Libya for a £200million contract for missile systems, is but one of the more striking, and public, manifestations of a long history of collaboration and collusion between the British arms trade and overseas markets, facilitated by British politicians.



As one of the world's largest arms manufacturers, and owner of a large majority of the UK's ship-building industry and recipient of billions of pounds worth of MoD contracts, BAE is in particular able to exert a considerable amount of pressure on the government. The influence of BAE on Tony Blair's New Labour government was particularly noticeable, with Sir Richard Evans (Chairman of BAE) being described as

⁴⁵ 'The Poppy Ball' (The Royal British Legion, 2015). <http://www.thepoppyball.org.uk/sponsors.php>

⁴⁶ 'Remembrance charity ball sponsored by Lockheed, veterans and activists outraged' (RT TV, 2014). <https://www.rt.com/uk/203311-uk-royal-legion-lockheed/>

⁴⁷ Scrutiny of Arms Exports Controls (House of Commons, 2012). Page 143 https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Scrutiny_of_Arms_Export_Controls_2012.html?id=w6j26agaz2YC

“one of the few businessmen who could see Blair on request.”⁴⁸ Robin Cook, then Foreign Secretary, recorded bitterly in his diary that Evans seemed to have “the key to the garden door of No 10 [Downing St]... I never once knew Number 10 to come up with any decision that would be incommensurate to British Aerospace”. Andrew Feinstein, in his comprehensive analysis of the global arms trade and the collusion between arms companies and British politicians, added that “BAE doesn’t have just the keys to the back door of 10 Downing Street, but those to the front door, the alarm code and a comfortable spot in the Prime Minister’s bedroom.”⁴⁹

Indeed, such is the reach of BAE Systems into the centres of political power in Britain that the *Guardian* reported that “the chief lobbyist of Britain’s biggest arms company [BAE Systems] was given an official security pass allowing him to wander freely around the Ministry of Defence”.⁵⁰ In return, Tony Blair’s government abruptly halted a Serious Fraud Office investigation⁵¹ into allegations that BAE made huge illicit payments to Saudi royals⁵² in order to land the notorious Al-Yamamah/Dove contract, following pressure from the Saudis and the firm.⁵³ In 2001, Blair overruled Clare Short and Gordon Brown to grant an export licence for BAE’s sale of a military air-traffic control system to one of the world’s poorest countries, Tanzania. Tanzania, which has no air force, bought the military air defence radar from BAE for £28m - a deal that even the World Bank and the IMF objected to, on the grounds that the contract was ridiculously expensive. As CorporateWatch observed, this was simply “another case of BAE selling an expensive product to a country unable even to feed its own citizens”.⁵⁴ In 2007 the *Guardian* revealed that BAE Systems allegedly paid a \$12m (£6.2m) “commission” to an agent who brokered the deal (‘The parallel universe of BAE: covert, dangerous and beyond the rule of law’).⁵⁵ The *Guardian* reported three years later that “every individual involved in the BAE scandal in Britain and Tanzania has escaped prosecution.”⁵⁶

British arms dealers have always enjoyed intimate relations with politicians. In 1914 one Labour MP, Philip Snowden, told the House of Commons that with so many MPs being shareholders of arms companies, “it is not possible to throw a stone at the benches opposite without hitting one.”⁵⁷ At that time, one of Britain’s most successful arms traders and munitions companies was Vickers, who had developed a brilliant strategy of not only stimulating conflicts through insidious scare-mongering that your competitor is re-arming, but also of arming both sides when



48 ‘A gun at the MoD’s head’ (*The Observer*, 2001).

<http://www.theguardian.com/business/2001/mar/18/theobserver.observerbusiness17>

49 Feinstein, A (2012). *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*. London: Penguin Books.

50 ‘BAE man was free to roam MoD offices’, by Rob Evans and David Leigh (*The Guardian*, 2007).

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/mar/20/bae.armstrade>

51 ‘“National interest” halts arms corruption inquiry’, by David Leigh and Rob Evans (*The Guardian*, 2006).

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/dec/15/saudi-arabia.armstrade>

52 ‘BAE faces criminal inquiry in US over £1bn payments’, by David Leigh and Rob Evans (*The Guardian*, 2007).

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/14/bae>

53 ‘Scale of pressure to drop BAE inquiry revealed by ministers’, by David Leigh and Rob Evans (*The Guardian*, 2007).

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/23/bae.saudi-arabia>

54 ‘BAE Systems: Corporate Crimes’ (Corporate Watch, 2005). <https://corporatewatch.org/company-profiles/bae-systems-corporate-crimes>

55 ‘The parallel universe of BAE: covert, dangerous and beyond the rule of law’, by George Monbiot (*The Guardian*, 2007).

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/feb/13/bae.foreignpolicy>

56 ‘WikiLeaks cables: Tanzania official investigating BAE “fears for his life”’, by David Leigh (*The Guardian*, 2010).

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/19/wikileaks-cables-tanzania-bae-fears>

57 ‘How Arms Companies Fuelled and Exacerbated the First World War’, by Andrew Smith (*Huffington Post*, 2014).

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/andrew-smith/first-world-war_b_6263032.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

conflict does break out. This strategy became known as the ‘Zaharoff System’, after the remarkable director and sales agent of Vickers, Basil Zaharoff (described by Feinstein as “godfather of the modern BAE”),⁵⁸ who once boasted to a London paper, “I made wars so that I could sell arms to both sides. I must have sold more arms than anyone else in the world.” True to form, he also held large holdings in other arms companies such as Škoda and Krupp, the major Austrian-Hungarian and German arms manufacturers. As historian Donald J. Stocker notes, Vickers managed to win many of the major armament contracts in the years leading up to the Great War: “Vickers won the lion’s share of these major contracts. Vickers’ Russian sales amounted to £7,000,000 in 1911 with a further £1,000,000 worth of artillery orders annually starting in 1913. Similar victories followed in Turkey, where Vickers beat back the Germans to win Turkish contracts for £2,000,000 in 1911 and £5,000,000 in 1913”.⁵⁹ Such “victories” were what these wars were all about for Zaharoff, who became one of the richest men in the world, while also earning the title of “merchant of death”.

The Zaharoff System of promoting strategies to encourage conflict, celebrating the armed forces, selling arms to regions which aggravate tension but which are highly profitable, fomenting international unrest and distrust of other nations, involving politicians in arms trading deals, sales, and negotiations, and even providing arms for both sides of a conflict, are a sad and continuing hallmark of the contemporary arms trade. This perhaps should not be a cause of surprise: Vickers arms company eventually become the arms company we know today as BAE Systems, the lucrative, billion-dollar sponsor of Poppy Day Balls.

The Cenotaph: A “tremendous networking opportunity”



The ‘revolving door’ nature of the intimate working relationship between the British Legion, the British Army, the British Arms Trade, and the British Government was brought to the fore in 2012, when the President of the Royal British Legion, Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely, was forced to resign after boasting that he could use the Legion to help firms lobby for arms deals.⁶⁰ He also claimed that through the Legion he could help defence companies lobby ministers and senior figures in the UK military, and to push his clients’ agenda with the prime minister and other senior figures at

Remembrance Day events. Kiszely had told reporters posing as representatives of a South Korean arms company that his role at the Legion gave him access to important figures in defence, and described the annual Remembrance Day events as a “tremendous networking opportunity”.⁶¹

The *Sunday Times* claimed that Kiszley “boasted he knew the 10 currently serving generals that he regarded as worth talking to with regard to procurement.”⁶² The paper also noted that Kiszely described having a “close relationship” with the new armed forces minister, Andrew Robathan, and claimed that his ceremonial roles for the Legion gave him access to Philip Hammond (the Defence Secretary), General Sir David Richards (Chief of the Defence Staff), and the Prime Minister, whom he stands next to at the annual Festival of Remembrance.

58 A. Feinstein, op. cit.

59 Stocker, D. J. and Grant, J. A. (2003). *Girding for Battle: The Arms Trade in a Global Perspective, 1815-1940*, p. 38.

60 ‘Royal British Legion president quits in wake of lobbying claims’, by Nick Hopkins (*The Guardian*, 2012). <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/oct/15/royal-british-legion-president-quits>

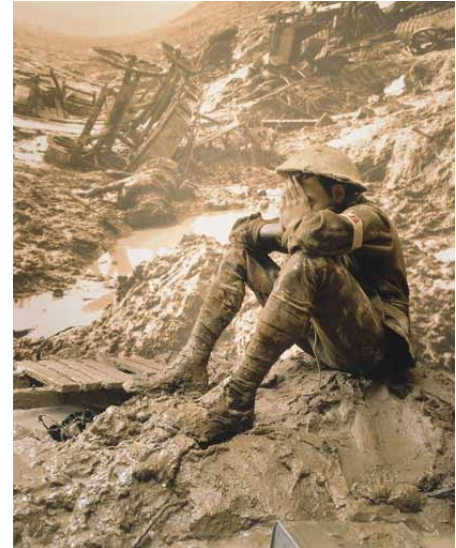
61 ‘Good for the killing business: How world’s biggest arms dealers exploit poppy day’, by Andrew Smith and Matthew Burnett-Stuart, Stop the War Coalition, (2014). <http://stopwar.org.uk/index.php/news/good-for-the-killing-business-how-the-world-s-biggest-arms-dealers-exploit-remembrance-day>

62 ‘Top general quits Legion after being filmed boasting he could use his position to help arms dealers win contracts’, by Ian Drury (*The Daily Mail*, 2012). <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2218305/Top-general-quits-Legion-filmed-boasting-use-position-help-arms-dealers-win-contracts.html>

The close, symbiotic relationship between the arms trade and the government has been researched by Andrew Smith, who has also observed that politicians routinely work for arms companies when they leave politics: “One of the most striking examples of recent years is that of former Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, who awarded a £1.7 billion contract to arms company AgustaWestland while in office, only to start working for them after he left.”⁶³

As the *Guardian* reported in 2012, “Senior military officers and Ministry of Defence officials have taken up more than 3,500 jobs in arms companies over the past 16 years, according to figures that reveal the extent of the ‘revolving door’ between the public and private sector.” They pertinently note that this disclosure “comes in the aftermath of the ‘jobs for generals’ scandal that led to the resignation of the president of the Royal British Legion, Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely, who was embarrassed in a newspaper lobbying sting”.⁶⁴

The Royal British Legion’s choice of Lt General Kiszely as president is itself indicative of its close connections with the military (he was Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff at the MoD, Deputy Commander of NATO Forces in Bosnia, Commander of Regional Forces in the UK, and Deputy Commander of Coalition Forces in Iraq), and also with the arms trade: whilst President of the Royal British Legion he was also military advisor to Babcock International, the world’s 26th largest arms-producing and military services company.⁶⁵ Babcock’s services help equip armies throughout the world, including South Korea, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East, providing launch systems, helicopters, nuclear-armed submarines, aircraft, armoured vehicles, and warships. The soldiers blown up, bombed, maimed, or disabled, that we remember on Armistice Day, may well therefore have been on the receiving end of the products that the President of the British Legion helped advise on.



Poppies to Remember, Poppies to Forget



As Mary Reader remarks, one of the ironies of our “remembrance” is that, despite our sentimentality, we are forgetting one of the major drivers of the First World War, and indeed of all wars: the arms market. “The British arms company Vickers-Armstrong, later to become BAE, sold arms to the Ottoman Empire that were used later against British troops,” she notes.⁶⁶ This points us again to the curious process through which poppies are worn to commemorate soldiers

killed by weapons made by arms companies which sponsor the manufacture of poppies which are worn to commemorate.... Crucial to the continuation of this production line, as Reader points out, is the process of “forgetting” - cleverly transmuting the original impulse and meaning behind the poppy (a profound, shocked, and poignant sense of “Never Again” following the mind-numbing abattoirs of the

⁶³ Andrew Smith, op. cit.

⁶⁴ 'MoD staff and thousands of military officers join arms firms', by Nick Hopkins, Rob Evans and Richard Norton-Taylor (*The Guardian*, 2012). <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/oct/15/mod-military-arms-firms>

⁶⁵ 'Babcock International Group' (CAAT). <https://www.caat.org.uk/resources/mapping/organisation/3978>

⁶⁶ Mary Reader, op. cit.

Somme, Passchendaele and Gallipoli) into a symbol of continuation and even of celebration of the military - to “celebrate our troops”, as the Legion’s website tellingly puts it.

The meaning of the poppy, and of Remembrance today, is to ensure that the military “Lives ON” - “For Now, For Ever”, as its latest recruitment posters - I mean, corporate remembrance adverts - proclaim. As Reader observes, this disturbing psychological manoeuvre “encapsulates one of the biggest problems of the whole Poppy Appeal. While the campaign claims to honour the lives lost in past wars, it also legitimises the wars of the present. The cloak of remembrance disguises a multitude of sins. It is hardly surprising that the Royal British Legion derives a great deal of its funding and sponsorship from arms companies, including BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, and Thales, all of which have provided arms to dictatorships the world over.”

Drawing together the newly militarised connotations of the poppy and its newly re-branded corporate identity, she adds that, “We are crafting how we choose to remember the horrors of previous wars according to a narrative that is created and sustained by this corporate elite.” The intrusion of this corporate element into remembrance has turned the poppy into a trademarked “logo”, a way of selling us something, and has thereby cheapened and trivialised what it stands for. As war veteran and founder of Veterans for Peace UK Ben Griffin notes: “The Royal British Legion would say they are modernising and appealing to a younger generation. I disagree. I think that their stunts trivialise, normalise and sanitise war.”⁶⁷

The Legion has co-opted the language of marketing and branding to sell its Swarovski crystal poppies, its Hovis bread, its Poppy ketchup, and its supermarket chocolate, effectively using the slaughter of eight million people to sell us golfing umbrellas, dog name tags, iPhone covers, and “I Love Poppy” t-shirts. As Reader concludes, “Remembrance by donating to the Royal British Legion is not, therefore, a statement of nationalism or solidarity.” It is a statement of complicity in a system of coercive control and commercialisation, a system whose sponsorship by the leading arms traders of the day is therefore in one sense entirely appropriate. By taking money from the leading global arms traders and lending credence to their activities through their selling of the national symbol of remembrance for the dead, the Legion is thereby sanctioning the business of war itself, which as Harry Patch memorably put it, is “organised murder”.

Sacrifice, The Fallen, Heroes™



The words we use to describe warfare and killing profoundly shape how we think about them. This is why governments, arms companies, and the media have become skilled in how they speak about war. As Orwell noted, we must be wary of their lexicons of doublethink: “Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” We are all familiar with this duplicitous language of making murder respectable: “collateral damage” (the slaughter of innocents), “friendly fire” (having a fellow-soldier accidentally blow your face off), “extraordinary rendition” (illegal torture), “dynamic room entries” (blowing up your front door in the middle of the night).

But equally insidious and sanitising are the words routinely marched out on Armistice Day to cover the shocking and often unnecessary slaughter of men and women in the armed forces today: “sacrifice”, “heroes”, “the fallen”. As one veteran noted, “Why do we call them “the fallen”? It’s not as if they just

⁶⁷ 'Ex-SAS soldier blasts Poppy Appeal as a “political tool”' (Wales Online, 2010). <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/ex-sas-soldier-blats-poppy-appeal-1884260>

fell over.”⁶⁸ Soldiers who actually witness first-hand the nature of this “falling” seldom describe it in these terms. One of the reasons why Wilfred Owen’s poetry is so compelling is precisely because of its refusal to submit to these toxic euphemisms, and his courageous re-writing of the comfortable myths and clichés about heroes, falling, and sacrifice.

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

Owen, like many soldiers transformed by the experience of modern industrial warfare, recognised that sentiments such as “noble sacrifice” and “dulce et decorum est” were not only wholly inappropriate and disrespectful to the dead, but were also precisely the sorts of words that recruited these soldiers to their fate. The traditional appeal to “Queen and Country” - that “it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country”, is strikingly called by Owen “The old Lie”, and these old Lies are still with us today, propagating and compounding, in the anaesthetising, sentimentalising, and misleading talk about “heroes” and “sacrifice”.

As one veteran and former SAS soldier commented, “The use of the word ‘hero’ glorifies war and glosses over the ugly reality. War is nothing like a John Wayne movie. There is nothing heroic about being blown up in a vehicle, there is nothing heroic about being shot in an ambush and there is nothing heroic about the deaths of countless civilians.”⁶⁹ The alchemy of words such as “hero” and “the fallen” transmutes our way of thinking about how soldiers do actually die, and why they die, and turns a possible revulsion and rejection of warfare into its mirror opposite: into a business that needs to be supported and glorified.

Referring to all soldiers as “heroes” not only dramatically devalues the currency of actual bravery (if everyone is a hero then effectively no one is), but also serves to conceal the reality of the nature of combat and death in contemporary conflicts: the vast majority of those who die in modern wars are civilians: are they “heroes”? Drone planes are increasingly being used as a form of military engagement: are drone pilots, safely ensconced in airforce bases many thousands of miles away, “heroes”? Are those soldiers involved in extraordinary rendition and torture of detainees “heroes”? As Keith Hebden notes, “The jingoist ‘Help for heroes’ approach to remembering, favoured by the British Legion and much of our media, is getting harder to maintain in the face of repeated allegations of war crimes committed by both UK and US troops, news that class is the biggest indicator of chance of death in combat, the effect of armed drones on civilian populations, and the increased risk of psychological trauma or even suicide among returning veterans.”⁷⁰

The word “hero”, like the word “sacrifice,” and indeed like the poppy symbol itself, has become a prime example of an empty signifier, as David Gee, observes: “The poppy is a good example of an *empty signifier*: a symbol that only gains meaning from the story we give to it.”⁷¹ It is perhaps appropriate therefore that the “poppy” symbol in classical mythology was always associated with sleep, with forgetting: in Greek mythology, the goddess Demeter created the poppy so that she could sleep, and its

68 Cited in ‘The Poppy’, by David Gee (ForcesWatch, 2013). <http://www.forceswatch.net/blog/poppy>

69 Ben Griffin, op. cit.

70 ‘Shoulder to shoulder with all those who serve’, by Keith Hebden (Veterans for Peace UK, 2013). <http://veteransforpeace.org.uk/2013/shoulder-to-shoulder-with-all-who-serve-by-keith-hebden/>

71 David Gee, op. cit.

narcotic properties have always been well-known. The poppy was also associated with Morpheus, the god of sleep and dreaming: there was a garden of poppies at the entrance of his palace (the modern drug morphine is named after him). The modern poppy and its associated euphemisms of 'the fallen', and 'sacrifice', seem to play a similar role at today's Cenotaph ceremonies: as David Gee again notes, "these genteel euphemisms have more to do with forgetting than remembering."

Indeed, in the newly remilitarised, re-branded corporate poppy world of the Legion in the twenty-first century, with its arms trade sponsors and its revolving door advocates, the poppy might perhaps best be thought of not so much as a flower as a fig-leaf: as Laurie Penny observed in the *New Statesman*, "soaked in the powerful narrative of righteous heroism, the poppy of remembrance has become a fig-leaf for the overseas military interests of successive governments":

The poppy was chosen as an euphemistic symbol of the horrors of war by a generation for whom those horrors were all too immediate; it should be doubly offensive, then, that almost a century later members of the British administration wear poppies while sending young people to fight and die far from home for causes they barely comprehend.⁷²



Empty Signifier

These euphemisms, these fig-like verbal poppies, help ensure that wars go on and on: that the Legion will "Live On™", as the Legion celebrates, and that the production line will continue - to ensure that, just as for Willie McBride, it happens "again, And again, and again, and again, and again." Perhaps there is a clue in the Legion's very name, which is of course a military word (*legio*), referring to one of the basic units in the Roman military system. That's also the reason why in the famous passage in the Bible where Jesus casts out the violent spirit, or spirit of violence, that had possessed the poor Gerasene, the spirit declares that his name is "Legion: for we are many" (Mark 5:1-13). As Biblical scholar Alyce M. McKenzie comments, "this strongly suggests that Mark linked the exorcism of the evil powers occupying the demoniac with acts of Roman oppression," a connection reinforced by the location where this "casting out" of military occupation and possession took place (in Gerasa, where a famous Jewish revolt was brutally put down by the Roman army). As McKenzie adds, "here possession is a symbol of the oppression of one culture by another," an experience perhaps familiar to many people in the world today living under similar military occupation and imperialistic control.⁷³

The Legion has trademarked the poppy and the words "Live On", but perhaps they should also trademark the word "Sacrifice", to make explicit the connection between this word and the corporate and military world which sponsors its current usage. Sacrifice™ might remind us that in the context of militarism and corporations it is actually being used as a marketing term, as a way of controlling remembrance.

References to those killed in combat as "Sacrifice" are ubiquitous and anaesthetising, and as routine now as the deaths they point to: Tony Blair, who committed British forces to be sacrificed more than any other recent leader (five times while in office), referred piously to the "enormous sacrifice" the forces make - while also donating the £5million book advance from his memoirs chronicling his role in the manufacture of these "sacrifices" to the British Legion, in a wonderfully synergetic illustration of how the production line works. For as Laurie Penny notes, there are two meanings to the word 'sacrifice': "One

⁷² Laurie Penny, op. cit.

⁷³ 'My Name is Legion, What's Yours? Reflections on Luke 8:26-39', by Alyce M. McKenzie (2013). <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Name-Is-Legion-Alyce-McKenzie-06-18-2013>

can sacrifice, in the sense of willingly giving one's life for a cause, or one can be a sacrifice, offered up for slaughter by one's betters in the name of God, or greed, or homeland.”⁷⁴

Expect references to ‘Sacrifice’ to increase next year: 2016 is the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, where such acts of “sacrifice” took place on an industrial scale. Wilfred Owen’s haunting poem ‘The Parable of the Old Man and the Young’ rests on the ambivalence of this act of sacrifice, cleverly updating the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac in order to relocate its central metaphor to the killing fields of Flanders and the altar of Europe. The fact that the British Legion, one hundred years on, is still trundling out “the old Lies” about “the fallen” and “noble sacrifice” would have saddened, but perhaps not surprised, Owen: in 1917 he changed the title of his most famous war poem from ‘Anthem for Dead Youth’, to ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’.



Conclusion: Never Again



“The safer we are,” notes Hebden in a striking phrase, “the less money is made by the British Legion’s backers.”⁷⁵ The appalling collusion of the Legion in the arms trade, in the rise of the “new militarism”, and its increasingly crass, commercialised, and corporate co-option of Remembrance Day, surely demonstrate that they are no longer suitable or fit to be “national custodians of Remembrance”. If they are to continue and have any credibility, they urgently need to ‘de-brand’ themselves and return the poppy to us as a symbol both of personal

remembrance and shared ritual. The Royal British Legion also needs to apologise, I think, for the extraordinarily crude and inappropriate Poppy Day appeals of recent years - its trivialising and absurd Poppy Balls and Poppy Rocks Balls, and the demeaning and disrespectful way they have depicted the “remembrance” of war - the girl bands, the Swarovski crystal poppies, the miniskirts, the dancing poppy-men, the Poppy ketchup, the dog name tags, the “I Love Poppy” t-shirts. As the former vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, H.R.L. (‘Dick’) Sheppard rightly observed of similar trivialising and inappropriate commemorations, the Legion’s activities are “not so much irreligious as indecent”. Thirdly, they must immediately cut all links with the global arms trade and end their sponsorship by BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Thales, and Sphinx.

But do we really need the Legion at all? Is it really appropriate that the welfare of veterans and those affected by war is left to the work of a charity in the first place? Surely this is a collective responsibility, just as remembrance should be a collective act of acknowledgement of the death and suffering that wars inevitably generate. The original charity was set up precisely because of the irresponsibility and indifference of the government in meeting this need: the war widows’ pension was not enough to live on, so women started selling poppies on the streets of London as a desperate way of countering what the Legion’s own biographer calls the “muddles, mistakes and delays in paying widows’ pensions”.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Laurie Penny, op. cit.

⁷⁵ Keith Hebden, op cit.

⁷⁶ Harding, B. (2001). *Keeping Faith: The History of The Royal British Legion*. Barnsley: Leo Cooper.

Perhaps some of BAE's £16.6 billion annual revenue⁷⁷ - made through deals actually part-financed and underwritten by the British taxpayer⁷⁸ - could go towards the welfare and maintenance of soldiers killed, maimed, blinded, crippled, traumatised, or disabled by the wars they profit from. The British government facilitates massive sales of arms to Saudi Arabia,⁷⁹ pumps £50 million into developing a "military ethos in schools", sends troops to fight expensive, questionable and sometimes illegal wars, but does not take sufficient responsibility for looking after those seriously affected by these conflicts. As veteran Ben Griffin observes, "The government should be supporting these casualties: they are their liability, not the British Legion's."⁸⁰ For all these reasons, it is surely time for the British Legion to stand down.

Moreover, removing the Legion from Armistice Day would radically transform the activities surrounding remembrance and liberate the poppy from its heavy duty of being a corporate brand, a fig-leaf for war and arms sales, and a sacred symbol of "Respect for the Armed Forces". It would also release a debate about the nature and meaning of contemporary war, and disconnect the umbilical cord that currently connects the poppy to the arms trade - and perhaps help finally put to rest some of the "old Lies" and Orwellian doublethink that currently dominate Remembrance services. Harry Patch, the last British survivor of the 1914-18 war, referred to Remembrance Day as "just show business". He had seen the horrors and offensive futility of war first hand, and he saw through the Legion's Remembrance Day charade and all its macabre piety just as keenly.

How we choose to remember and pay respect to the civilians and soldiers killed in warfare is up to us. Some may still want to wear the Legion's corporate brand, an attractive but ambiguous logo sponsored by the world's most aggressive and profitable arms-suppliers. Some may choose not to wear the logo. Some might choose to wear a white poppy of the Peace Pledge Union. Some may remember the loss of life not with a visual image but simply with their silence. One of the most powerful and poignant commemoration events on Remembrance Sunday actually occurs when all of the TV cameras and all the "show business" - all the royals and generals and politicians and MoD officials - has gone. In the afternoon, a group of British veterans gather to remember the dead and to lay a wreath on the steps of the Cenotaph. They remember soldiers from all countries who lost their lives in conflict, and all of those killed in war including civilians and enemy soldiers. The event is organised by Veterans for Peace UK, an organisation of voluntary ex-services men and women who work to educate young people on the true nature of military service and war. In tribute to Harry Patch they wear a quotation from him on their backs: it simply says 'War is Organised Murder'. They walk to the Cenotaph under the banner 'Never Again.'



77 'BAE Systems: Inspired Work' (BAE Systems, 2014). <http://investors.baesystems.com/%7E/media/Files/B/Bae-Systems-Investor-Relations-V3/Annual%20Reports/bae-annual-report-2014.pdf>

78 'From Westminster to Riyadh, British arms deals stink of corruption', by Alastair Sloan (Middle East Monitor, 2015). <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/europe/16441-from-westminster-to-riyadh-british-arms-deals-stink-of-corruption>

79 'How £1bn was lost when Thatcher propped up Saddam', by David Leigh and Rob Evans (*The Guardian*, 2003). <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/28/iraq.politics1>

80 'Poppy appeal's original aims being subverted, veterans complain', by Stephen Bates (*The Guardian*, 2010). <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/05/poppy-appeal-subverted-veterans-complain>