

Teacher's notes

Synopsis

A poppy petal is caught by the wind and blown from the fields around the French town of Villers-Bretonneux in to the town itself, passing over cemeteries of soldiers from the First World War. It lands in a school rebuilt by donations from Australians after the war, and then is blown away again, with two young girls, one French, one Australian, chasing it. The petal comes to land at the Australian National Memorial, but the children are unaware of its significance as a cemetery, and find it a beautiful place to sit and watch the sunset together. The petal is finally blown skyward as the view pulls back to reveal the extent of the cemetery, the Memorial, and then the killing fields of the Somme battleground.

The Poppy is a form of allegory, conveying a message through the symbol of the poppy petal, although the setting in a real location with a specific history is not typical of most allegories. It could possibly be considered a fable, with the 'character' of the petal leading the girls to the Memorial.

The Silent Poppy: a class activity

Before reading *The Poppy* to students, teachers may wish to show them the attached textless version of the book (To download, click here:

http://www.fordstreetpublishing.com/ford/images/stories/teachers_notes/The%20Poppy%20Textless%20Version.pdf). This is the format in which the book was originally intended to be presented. The text was added when I realised that, to properly tell the full story, illustrations alone were not sufficient.

As an exercise, show *The Silent Poppy* to the class, without telling them what the story is about. Allow the students to draw their own conclusions. What is the story about? Where is it set? What does the poppy petal represent? Why do the two girls speak French and English? What is the Memorial all about? Older students may wish to write the story down, as they perceive it.

Then, read the final version of *The Poppy* to the class. Compare and contrast their interpretations of the actual story. What was the same, and what was different? Did they notice that six of the original paintings did not appear in the final version? Why do they think these paintings were omitted? Which version of the book tells the story more effectively? Which one do they prefer?

Discussion questions for the students: the story structure

- What is an allegory?
- Why do you think a poppy petal was used as a way of tracing the journey around Villers-Bretonneux?
- The only words spoken in *The Poppy* are very brief, and most are French. What was the author trying to tell you in this short conversation? Why are the girls introduced here?
- There are less than 400 words in the text of *The Poppy* (not counting the historical notes at the end.) Several of the illustrations have no text at all. Why do you think the author wanted to tell the story this way? Do you think that relying on the illustrations so much is an effective way of telling the story?

- Repetition occurs in the story in two forms. One relates to the soldiers not being forgotten, the other to the French and Australian flags being side by side. Why has the author deliberately repeated phrases or ideas? What effect does it have on the story?
- Black is an unusual colour to be so dominant in a children's picture book. Why do you think the author chose black as the page backgrounds? Is it effective? What if it he had chosen yellow or pink, or just plain white? Would this change the mood of the book?
- Many of the illustrations are 'cut off'; objects are partially obscured or beyond the edge of the picture. Why do you think the author chose to do this?
- Many of the illustrations are from unusual angles – high overhead, or extremely close up. What do you think the author was trying to achieve with these perspectives, which are very different to how you usually see the world?
- In the last pages, the view pulls further back and back in the cemetery. What do you feel as the number of graves in the cemetery is slowly revealed? Why didn't the author simply show how large it was at the start?
- In these last pages, the colour slowly bleeds out of the illustrations. Why did the author do this?
- The final double page spread shows an aerial view of part of the Somme. The Australian National Memorial is in the lower right-hand corner. What is the author trying to say by using just black and red? Are the fields simply all covered in poppies, or does the red symbolise something else? How do you feel as you look at this picture?

Discussion questions for the students: history

- Why was Australia fighting in a war in France?
- Discuss what life would have been like for soldiers in the trenches. Use photographs and diary entries as resources.
- The Germans were demonised during the war, often shown as ape-like, murderous brutes threatening women and children. Why was this done? Was this fair? Do students think the Germans and their allies did the same thing, about the British and their allies?
- Discuss how the students would feel if asked to fight in a war for England today. Points to include could be Australia's sense of individual national identity today, contrasted with Australia's sense of being part of the British Empire in the past. Would the students fight if Australia itself was directly threatened?
- How did fighting as a national force only 14 years after Federation help to establish Australia's identity as a nation?
- Australian soldiers were famous for the lack of respect they showed to their superior officers, especially British ones. Yet they were also viewed by both sides as possibly the finest soldiers in the war. All of the Australian soldiers were volunteers. How do the students think that being a volunteer force may have influenced the above points?

Student activities

- Create posters to help support the war effort. Compare these with real recruitment posters of WW1.

- Visit a local memorial. Which wars are commemorated? Discuss the design of the memorial. Does it show a woman or child, or a soldier, or perhaps just a pedestal with names? How is this different to the French memorial in Villers-Bretonneux?
- Research one of the soldiers or servicewomen named on the local memorial. The Australian War Memorial website (link below) has a wealth of information on every Australian who has served in the Armed Forces. Perhaps find a relative, or someone with the same name, or pick one at random. (The 'Plant J.' in *The Poppy* is not a relative of the author, as it turns out. Lance Corporal John Plant died at the battle of Bullecourt on May 3, 1917.)
- The student imagines they are a soldier in France before a big battle, writing a letter home to Australia. What might they say? What might they be thinking? Are they brave or scared? Do they pretend to be cheerful so that their families won't worry too much, or are they totally honest about life in the trenches?
- Read *In Flanders Fields*, by John McCrae. Discuss how the poem makes the students feel. What do they think was McCrae's attitude to the war?
- Can the students think of any other symbols that are used to represent remembrance or peace, or that could be used? Are there any Australian animals or plants that would be appropriate? Try to write a poem using these new symbols.
- *The Poppy* is, on some pages, a silent book. Using no words can be a very effective way of telling a story! Using just pictures, work in groups to tell a short story about WW1. Do not try to be too complicated – keep the story simple. It does not need to be long: two pages with a dozen pictures can work very well. Imagine the different characters that could be in the story – a new recruit, a tired old soldier, a general, an artillery man, a cook, a stretcher-bearer, a wounded soldier, a pack horse, a bird in a devastated woodland. Keep the pictures varied in size, angle, and level of detail. Use both close-ups and panoramas. Be imaginative!

The artwork

The paintings for *The Poppy* were done in acrylics on watercolour paper, with pencil added after for emphasis. The originals are about 50% larger than the size they are printed in the book. I planned the layout for the entire book in pencil sketches before visiting Villers-Bretonneux, and then, not surprisingly, changed large parts of the layout once I had spent several days there.

One aspect of the design that never changed was the black framing to the artwork, which was decided on in the first weeks of sketching in 2011. Some other colours were trialled during layout on the computer in mid-2013 but never seriously considered. I was aware that black would be considered unsuitable for a children's picture book by some editors, but I was certain that for this particular story, it was the only choice. The black serves three purposes – it immediately lends a sombre mood to the story, it focuses attention on the pictures, and it brightens the art. Many of the paintings are in fact very dark in isolation, but the colours 'pop' with the black border.

Over the two years of sketching and painting, only two original designs were unchanged: the final double-page spread of the aerial view in red and black, and the three panels on page 18, "Above the fields around the village ..." These were actually originally sketched after zooming around with Google Earth! Once in Villers-Bretonneux, the final sketches were done on the spot, and also based on my own photographs. I did notice several trees had been removed since Google had been there!

Six paintings were completed that don't appear in the printed book. I removed them as I felt they were unnecessary to the story and, more importantly, to give the story what I call 'room to breathe'. The empty spaces around some of the paintings are very important to emphasise an important idea or moment, or to slow down the pace, by encouraging the eye to linger on a single image. Strangely, we tend to scan a page more quickly when there are multiple images on it.

Another reason for removing the six paintings was that, originally, *The Poppy* was completely silent. There was to be no text at all, apart from the final "history page". So when the text had to be included, there simply wasn't room for all the art, unless some of it was made very small, which I didn't want to do. Deleting the paintings was, perhaps surprisingly, very easy, despite the days of work involved doing them. The text was written several months after the final painting was finished, and took only 25 minutes to get down. I believe that in the back of my mind, a text had always been running along as an accompaniment to the art - the narrative that I was trying to present through pictures alone. Once I had been convinced by some very good advice that text was necessary to fully tell the story, it poured out effortlessly, and remained essentially unchanged except for the cutting of about 40 words, and the addition of one.

Believe me, writing is very rarely that easy!

The Australian Curriculum: Links in *The Poppy*

The Poppy uses a combination of text and images to relate the story of a highly significant series of events in Australia's history. It aims to introduce primary students to the subject of war in Australia's past in a non-confrontational way, focusing on commemoration and remembrance, and links between the present and the past, and between Australia and other parts of the world. For secondary students, it elaborates on the themes of sacrifice, commemoration and remembrance, and the influence of specific historical events on the development of Australia as a nation.

The following information summarises specific aspects of the Australian Curriculum that are addressed in *The Poppy*. The book, however, is applicable at every year level around Anzac Day and Remembrance Day.

For the complete documents, visit www.australiancurriculum.edu.au

Australian Curriculum – History

Year 3

Year 3 Level Description

Community and Remembrance

The Year 3 curriculum provides a study of identity and diversity in both a local and broader context. Moving from the heritage of their local area, students explore the historical features and diversity of their community as represented in symbols and emblems of significance, and celebrations and commemorations, both locally and in other places around the world.

Year 3 Content Descriptions

Days and weeks celebrated or commemorated in Australia (including Australia Day, ANZAC Day, Harmony Week, National Reconciliation Week, NAIDOC week and National Sorry Day) and the importance of symbols and emblems.

Year 9

Year 9 Level Description

The Making of the Modern World

The Year 9 curriculum provides a study of the history of the making of the modern world from 1750 to 1918. It was a period of industrialisation and rapid change in the ways people lived, worked and thought. It was an era of nationalism and imperialism, and the colonisation of Australia was part of the expansion of European power. The period culminated in World War I 1914-1918, the 'war to end all wars'.

Year 9 Content Descriptions

World War I

Students investigate key aspects of World War I and the Australian experience of the war, including the nature and significance of the war in world and Australian history.

1. World War I (1914-1918)

1. An overview of the causes of World War I and the reasons why men enlisted to fight in the war.
2. The places where Australians fought and the nature of warfare during World War I, including the Gallipoli campaign.
3. The impact of World War I, with a particular emphasis on Australia (such as the use of propaganda to influence the civilian population, the changing role of women, the conscription debate).
4. The commemoration of World War I, including debates about the nature and significance of the Anzac legend.

Australian Curriculum - Geography

Year 6

Year 6 Level Description

A diverse and connected world takes a global view of geography and focuses particularly on the concepts of place and interconnections.

Year 6 Content Descriptions

1. Significant events that connect people and places throughout the world.

2. The various connections Australia has with other countries and how these connections change people and places.
3. The effects that people's connections with, and proximity to, places throughout the world have on shaping their awareness and opinion of those places.

Australian Curriculum – English

The Poppy is applicable to every year level of the Australian Curriculum, in each of its three major strands of Language, Literature and Literacy.

Historical details in *The Poppy*

All the paintings in *The Poppy* are based on photographs taken by the author in two visits to Villers-Bretonneux in 2011, where he also taught in l'Ecole Victoria and College Jacques Brel for a week. An aerial photograph was also used for the final Somme view.

The following information is linked to specific paintings in the book, or is general information pertaining to the subject. It can be used to generate discussions with students, and provides a backdrop against which the significance of the various views in the paintings can be appreciated.

The Adelaide Cemetery lies on the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux, on the road to Amiens. In 1993, the buried remains of an unidentified soldier were exhumed from his grave and returned to Australia. Taken to Canberra, he was reburied in the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier at the Australian War Memorial, on November 11, 1993. A special headstone in the Adelaide Cemetery commemorates the event. It is located in Plot III, Row M, Grave 13.

Q. Many countries have a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Why?

The headstones on the graves of all Commonwealth soldiers are exactly the same size and shape, regardless of the rank of the soldier or his nationality. All Australian headstones show the 'Sunburst' design. New Zealand's have a fern, Canada's a maple leaf, and South Africa's a springbok antelope. Different British regiments have their own designs, including horses, weapons and dragons. The Tank Corps headstones, naturally, show a tank.

Q. Why are the headstones all alike, whether for a general or for a private?

Nearly all the headstones are made from Portland stone, a limestone from the Isle of Portland, off the coast of Dorset, England. Most are between 76 and 81 cm high, and 38 cm wide. But in some cemeteries, where local conditions mean that the headstones may shift or sink over time, pedestals are used to mark the grave instead. Such cemeteries include those in Gallipoli, Thailand, and Papua New Guinea.

Q. What local conditions may cause headstones to shift?

Above the doors of Villers-Bretonneux' town hall are a pair of painted kangaroos, and the initials VB are often shown in the town as a stylised kangaroo. The Crèche is called Les Marsupiaux.

Q. Why do Australian animals feature so much in a French town?

The Ecole de Garçons (Boys School) in Villers-Bretonneux was destroyed along with much of the town on the 24th and 25th of April 1918. The school was rebuilt with donations from Australia. School children and their teachers, particularly in Victoria, collected pennies - in what was known as the Penny Drive - while the Victorian Department of Education contributed 12,000 pounds to the War Relief Fund. The school was therefore renamed the Victoria School – Ecole Victoria. It is in Rue du Victoria, which intersects with Rue de Melbourne, which is where the Town Hall can be found. The inauguration of the new school occurred on Anzac Day in 1927. “N’oublions jamais l’Australie“(Never forget Australia) is written above the blackboard in every class room, as well as in English on a large panel above the playground.

Q. Why are two of Villers-Bretonneux’ streets named after Melbourne and Victoria?

The carved wood panels in the hall of l'Ecole Victoria were carved by John E. F. Grant, the art master of Daylesford Technical School. Each one took about a month to complete. It has been reported that some of his students helped create the panels, or that some pupils' names were carved on the back of them, but neither story is actually true. The war had touched Grant deeply, as he had lost his brother, best friend, brother-in-law, and several cousins. Today, John Grant's great-grandson, Lachlan, is a historian at the Australian War Memorial.

Q. Why do you think that Australian animals and plants, rather than people and places, were used to decorate the school hall?

The porch of l'Ecole Victoria hall is made up of hundreds of inlaid broken tiles. These were salvaged from the ruins of the houses that had been destroyed in the fighting. For some of the children, these broken kitchen and bathroom tiles were the only reminders that they had of their former homes.

Q. How do you think the school children may have felt to see the remains of their old homes in their new school?

The ‘Rising Sun’ badge is the official insignia of the Australian Army. It was first designed in 1903. In the First World War, on the scroll along the base, the words ‘Australian Commonwealth Military Forces’ appeared. However, there have been several versions of the badge over the years, and the scroll now simply reads ‘The Australian Army’. Interestingly, the wording ‘Australian Imperial Forces’ has never appeared on the badge, but it is used on the carved ‘Rising Sun’ on the headstones marking the graves of Australian soldiers from the First World War.

Q. Do you think a rising sun, or sunburst, is a good symbol for Australia? Why or why not?

The Australian National Memorial was officially opened in 1938. The following year, World War II broke out. The Memorial sustained damage from tank and aircraft fire during the German occupation. The most severe damage was repaired after the war, but holes and chips from bullets and shrapnel can still be seen pitting the Memorial’s stones.

Q. Why do you think that some of the damage was left unrepaired?

Cemeteries of Australian and Commonwealth soldiers are administered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In any cemetery with over 40 graves, there is a Cross of Sacrifice, designed by the architect Sir Reginald Blomfield. It is a simple stone cross embedded with a bronze sword with the point downwards, and mounted on an octagonal base. They range in size from 4.3 m to 9.7 m tall. Cemeteries with over 1,000 burials also have a Stone of Remembrance, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. The Stone is 3.5 m long and 1.5 m high, and inscribed with the words “Their Name Liveth for Evermore”, which was selected from the Bible by the author Rudyard Kipling.

Q. What does “Their Name Liveth for Evermore” actually mean? Is it meant to be literal?

The poppies that bloom so beautifully throughout the Somme are in fact a weed, and French farmers hate them and clear them from their fields! As a result, it can be difficult today to see the fields of red flowers that were so common during the war. The poppies were often among the first plants to regrow in the churned up earth after a battle. Soldiers came to see the red blooms as a symbol of the spilled blood of their dead comrades.

Q. Poppies can be very short-lived, sometimes flowering for only a day or two in the fields before disappearing. Do you think that this makes them a powerful symbol for soldiers, as well as the colour? Why?

The poppy became a symbol of the war after the publication of the poem 'In Flanders Fields', by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae in 1915. By 1921, silk poppies made by French orphans were being sold in Australia to raise money for French charities and the welfare work of the Australian Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League, the forerunner of today's RSL.

Q. Why do you think many countries have organisations for returned military personnel?

In the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery, two graves in particular are different, those of two New Zealand airmen who died in the Second World War. All the other graves are those of WW1 Commonwealth soldiers, and none of them are from New Zealand. Why they were buried there appears to be a mystery today.

Q. Can you discover the answer to the mystery? If so, please contact the author!

Villers-Bretonneux was twinned with the city of Robinvale in 1984-5. Robinvale's link with France began in World War I, when the son of Robinvale's founding family was killed in air combat over Caix, near Villers-Bretonneux. Lieutenant George Robin Cuttle was reported missing in May 1918. After a long search, his family finally found the wreckage of his plane in 1923, in a field near Caix. In memory of their son, Lt. Cuttle's family renamed their new settlement Robinvale. The town centre is named Caix Square.

Q. What does 'vale' mean in relation to someone's death?

Colour patches are small coloured pieces of cloth worn on Australian uniforms to indicate the division, battalion and brigade of the soldier. The shape of the patch indicates the Division. In WW1, the First Division had a horizontal rectangular patch, the Second had a diamond-shaped patch, the Third had a horizontal oval patch, the Fourth had a circle, the Fifth had a vertical rectangular patch, and the Sixth Division had a vertical oval patch.

The upper colour showed the battalion and the lower colour the brigade. Infantry battalions usually had one of four upper colours: black (for the first battalion in the brigade), purple (for the second battalion in the brigade), brown (third battalion in the brigade) and white (fourth battalion in the brigade). Where the patch had a vertical design, the battalion colour was on the left side.

Victorian brigades usually had a red lower colour, New South Wales usually had green and the other states usually had a light blue lower colour. Other units such as the Light Horse, the Flying Corps and the Artillery had their own designs and colours. So the 60th Battalion, a Victorian unit, the fourth battalion in the 5th Division, had a vertical rectangular patch with the left side white, and the right side red.

Q. Research which brigades were involved in the battle to retake Villers-Bretonneux. Can you draw their colour patches?

Websites.

<http://www.awm.gov.au> The Australian War Memorial

<http://www.ww1westernfront.gov.au/> An exhaustive coverage of Australians in France and Belgium in WW1. Clear links lead to the Villers-Bretonneux sections.

<http://www.amosa.org.au/schools/milhistoryprogram.html> An excellent site by the Army Museum of South Australia. The Schools page has a wealth of links. Follow World War 1: Western Front>Villers-Bretonneux for a discussion of the battle. It includes illustrations of colour patches. Follow Remembrance>The Other ANZAC Day for an excellent overview of the Australian involvement in WW1, from the outbreak of war to Remembrance Day. It is a little haphazard in its organisation, but fascinating.

www.cwgc.org The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/somme/memorial-villers-bretonneux.htm> Australian National Memorial information.

<http://www.dva.gov.au> The Department of Veterans' Affairs.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Battle_of_Villers-Bretonneux

http://www.dva.gov.au/news_archive/Documents/villers.pdf A description of the battle, with excellent notes.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villers%E2%80%93Bretonneux_Australian_National_Memorial

<http://www.ww1battlefields.co.uk/somme/villbret.html> Description of the Australian National Memorial, the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery, and Adelaide Cemetery.

<http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/villers-bretonneux/> Photographs from the 1920's of the construction of l'Ecole Victoria.

http://www.webmatters.net/france/ww1_villers_bret.htm An excellent overall look at the Villers-Bretonneux story with many photographs.

<http://www.ambafrance-au.org/The-Somme-a-must-for-visiting> An interesting overview of the Somme area for visitors, from the French Embassy.

<http://aif-online-museum.blogspot.com.au> A very interesting photographic collection of artefacts, with excellent links.

<http://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/ww1> An excellent resource listing First World War memorials around Australia.

<http://www.dontforgetthediggers.com.au> A site dedicated to building a photographic archive of WW1 military history. Not extensive, but an ongoing project.

<http://www.greatwar.nl/> This is a very interesting and provoking site. **It is NOT SUITABLE for primary aged students** due to the very graphic nature of many of its photographs. The author also takes a very clear position on his disgust of and opposition to war, and in

particular the politics that allow it to happen. **It is not a neutral site.** It may, however, provide an excellent point of discussion for secondary students. Individual teachers are advised to explore the site in order to make an informed decision as to its suitability for their students.