

The 3Ds Blog

The 3-Ds Blog: Diplomacy, Defence, Development

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J.L. Granatstein - Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day

As we come close to Remembrance Day, most Canadians probably assume that November 11, the day the Great War armistice took effect, was always marked. This entry from the just-published *Oxford Companions to Canadian Military History* (2010) tells a story that few Canadians know.

Remembrance Day. World War 1 ended on 11 November 1918 at 11:00 a.m., the date and time the armistice came into effect. Ceremonies to mark the end of hostilities, at first generally known as Armistice Day for the day the fighting on the Western Front ended, have been held in many combatant nations ever since, usually on or near 11 November. In Canada, the first Armistice Day was commemorated on 11 November 1920, but the Armistice Day Act of May 1921 linked wartime commemoration with Thanksgiving Day, then a floating holiday.

The two events were held together for the first time on 7 November 1921, the Monday of the week in which 11 November fell. The odd linkage of a holiday long weekend with sombre meditation on war and military sacrifice was never popular with veterans who suspected, accurately, the hand of business interests in emphasizing the long weekend's commercial as opposed to commemorative connotations.

Gatherings continued on 11 November at 11 a.m. nevertheless, and veterans' organizations pressed strongly for the primacy of that date from at least 1925, when the Canadian Legion began a campaign to have Parliament separate Armistice Day from Thanksgiving Day and establish national commemorations on the 11th. The campaign proved successful, a parliamentary amendment to the proposed legislation also changing the event's name to Remembrance Day, reflecting the date's growing significance as a reflection on war, loss, and sacrifice instead of simply the end of World War 1.

On 11 November 1931, after a decade of Armistice Day/Thanksgiving weekends, Canada held its first formal Remembrance Day. The day's events now remember the dead of all Canada's wars and peace enforcement missions with a ceremony at the National War Memorial in Ottawa and at cenotaphs across the country, accompanied by two minutes of silence, poems, fly-pasts, and widespread media coverage.

Remembrance Day now occurs amidst Remembrance Week, and is marked with the wearing of red poppies, offered by the Royal Canadian Legion for voluntary donations, harking back to John McCrae's poem, "In Flanders Fields." The wearing of poppies originated in New York City in November 1918, was recognized by the American Legion