Flags and Poppies: Charity Tokens of the Early Twentieth Century

The next two chapters explore the historical background to the awareness ribbon campaigns of the 1990s. Before we look at the specific origins of the yellow, red, and pink ribbons, we must consider possible historical precedents to these charity symbols. To this end, this chapter examines flag days and the Armistice Day poppy.

Flag days

Flag days are charity campaigns in which lapel pins (initially flags, but later, badges, flowers, and stickers) are given out in return for a donation. These tokens are an important fundraising tool for charities: poppies continue to be sold and worn to remember war veterans, many charities’ street collectors give away stickers, and the Marie Curie Daffodil Day has become increasingly popular.1 Whilst these tokens are widely worn today in the UK, it was at the point of their emergence, at the start of the First World War, that flag days were particularly prominent. It seems that flag days were peculiarly British events, though they were adopted by allied countries during the war. Mass-produced and worn on the lapel, early flag day tokens were, in a certain respect, the precursors to the awareness ribbon campaigns in today’s society. Before we can consider this proposition more deeply, though, we need to examine the origins and objectives of early flag days.

In a publication for The Voluntary Action History Society, Fowler suggests that flag days may have been based on earlier fundraising events in the UK, known as Hospital Saturdays. These events date...
back to 1870, and continued to be a source of funding for charities until the mid-twentieth century (Cherry, 2000, p. 461; Gregory, 1994, p. 96). They consisted of ‘house to house and street collections’ for local voluntary hospitals (Cherry, 2000, p. 471) in which tokens were sometimes given out in return for donations (Fowler, The Voluntary Action History Society). The cost of running hospitals rose significantly from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and Hospital Saturdays were a response to the need for extra funds (Cherry, 1997, p. 306). These events were not only meant as fundraising exercises – in fact they contributed very little to the income of voluntary hospitals – but also served to encourage the working class to subsidise the services they used, a goal that was in keeping with the Victorian ethos of self-help (Cherry, 2000, p. 471; Gregory, 1994, p. 96).

According to Fowler, the first official flag day occurred a month after the declaration of war, on 5 September 1914, and was organised by the Bristol branch of the Red Cross and the Glasgow branch of the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Families Association (Fowler, a publication for The Voluntary Action History Society).2 ‘The first flag days seem to have been held for the 162,000 Belgian refugees who were flooding into Britain as the Germans moved through Belgium’, Fowler notes. ‘The arrival of these refugees offered the first real chance for ordinary men and women who were not able to enlist to become involved in the war effort’ (ibid.). Subsequent flag days were aimed at helping war victims in France, Russia and Serbia:3 ‘By 1916, each ally had its own day on the national anniversary – for example, the French had theirs on Bastille Day – and the monies collected were shared between the appropriate organisations’ (ibid.). These flag days helped to create support for the allied forces. ‘The [flag day] movement has ... the object of stimulating appreciation of the work done by our Eastern Allies’, The Times reported in an article about the Russian Flag Day, in 1915 (The Times, 11 May 1915, p. 5). The day included educational lessons about Russia and patriotic songs performed at the London Opera House. The appreciation was mutual: Russia, The Times reported, was holding an English Flag Day on the same day (ibid.).

There are several explanations for the emergence and popularity of flag days during the First World War. Fowler suggests that the success of these events lay in their appeal for all sections of society, not just the traditionally philanthropic upper and upper-middle classes.