

Workers, youth comment on World War I installation: “Young people must oppose war”

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Of some 15 visitors to artist Paul Cummins's *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* I interviewed, nearly all said they had attended because they opposed war.

A West London office worker, Eileen, said she had heard about the artwork on social media. Her father and grandfather had fought in wars although they did not speak about them. “I am not coming here out of patriotism”, she insisted, “just to remember them and those who were involved”.

“It is amazing to see all these poppies here and realise that each of them is someone who died. It really makes you think how terrible war is.”

Janet, a retired hotel and school cleaner, explained, “It’s my birthday tomorrow. I was born the day after the Second World War ended in 1945. My father spent years fighting in the war in India and other places, only to come home and die in an accident at work a few years later. My mother had to bring us children up on her own. So I am here to remember my dad and it is sad I did not get to know him or what he did in the war.

“The display is really beautiful, magnificent, well beyond what I expected. There aren’t any flags. No patriotism. It is good to see a lot of young people here. Everyone getting on together with each other.”

Janet’s friend Alan added, “The trouble is there are wars everywhere today. Nobody likes them. This scene is very peaceful. That is the world we want: Something hopeful.”

James, a recent ancient history graduate, told us, “I came along today because it is a very poignant reminder of things that happened in the last century, but are so relevant today. It is beautiful the way the poppies bleed out of the window and form an unbridled sea of red.

“I think we are all aware that there is horror in war and people died in terrible circumstances. This is much

more evocative. The mood is quite sombre, but people are chatting about it. I don’t think you would get that with barbed wire and mud. To me, its being bright and colourful is a good way to remember people who thought they were fighting for equality.

“The causes of war involve vast social, economic and political factors. Most of the young men then, people of my age, would not have understood that and thought they were fighting for freedom. Most of the units were made up from men in the same town who knew each other and were looking out for each other.

“Of course, they would have wanted to live their lives peacefully with their families and friends, with their hopes and aspirations. These poppies represent the people behind the statistics. Each poppy is a life snuffed out, a family ruined. There are 800,000 poppies here. Who knows what each of these men would have gone on to do in their lives.

“I think the political elite should not even be allowed here. If they want to come individually, then OK, but they should not be allowed to ride on the popularity of this and use it to boost their own political agendas. It’s a crime the way they jostle to be conspicuous. It’s so transparent the way they behave.”

Former serviceman, Simon, said he had left the Army early because of what was happening in the Middle East: “I’ve come here specifically to remember one of my close mates who was killed. There’s been about 450 from here who have died in Afghanistan. Also, all the soldiers from other countries and all the locals who have seen their lives destroyed. So for me it is very personal and constantly in my mind.

“It’s strange, but the poppies remind me of the countryside in Afghanistan. About the only thing we have managed to do is increase the amount of opium being grown there.

“I think there are millions of people opposed to war, but the government doesn’t listen to them. There were the big demonstrations against the Iraq war. They still went ahead even though we now know they lied about the weapons of mass destruction.

“I think Parliament voted against bombing Syria last year because people didn’t want it. Again, they ignored the people’s will and are trying to do it by the back door.

“One thing I hate about the whole poppy thing is the fact that it is all about charity. Injured servicemen and women shouldn’t have to rely on charity. The government should pay for it... They are the ones who send people to their deaths.

“Of course, there shouldn’t be wars at all. It was terrible the way that young cadet [13-year old Harry Hayes] was used to plant the last poppy today. It took me a long time and terrible experiences to understand the error of my ways. I hope other young people don’t fall into the same trap.”



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