The historical meaning of the Reserve Bank’s Armistice Day coin

Matthew Wright

This year the Reserve Bank is releasing a coloured circulating fifty cent coin to mark Armistice Day, the effective end of the First World War. This follows a similar coin issued in 2015 to mark the Gallipoli campaign. Both coins feature new-technology minting processes, and both were especially commissioned to mark these events as the Reserve Bank of New Zealand’s contribution to the government First World War centenary celebrations.

This article outlines the historical meaning of the armistice and gives a particular context for the Armistice Day coin. It also describes the special design of the coin, which is one of only two coloured circulating coins issued in New Zealand.

1 The historical importance of the Armistice

1.1 What was the Armistice?

The Armistice Day coin recognises the historical, social and cultural importance of the armistice signed on 11 November 1918, just over four years after the First World War began. During those years around forty million people were killed or wounded, worldwide; and national populations were drawn, one way or another, into the conflict.

This armistice was not the only such arrangement of the war: in mid-December 1917, for example, the central powers and Russia signed an armistice, leading to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that ended the eastern war. In late 1918, as the Central Powers collapsed, other armistices were signed, notably the Armistice Salonica of 29 September between

---

1 I am grateful to Sonia Speedy and the Speedy family for their comments on the relevant sections of this article.

2 These are co-ordinated by the WW100 office, part of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage https://ww100.govt.nz/

By late 1918 the Allied armies were advancing, but the German army remained intact and able to fight, although US General John Pershing thought another week might have broken them.\textsuperscript{4} The armistice was pushed, instead, by the collapse of the German Government from late October 1918, a crisis triggered by a Bolshevik revolt in the navy, but fundamentally reflecting general unrest in the face of war shortages after four years of Allied blockade. By early November there was open talk of negotiations. The German armistice party finally signed at 5am on 11 November 1918, agreeing to end hostilities in six hours’ time.\textsuperscript{5}

This armistice was not a peace treaty: that had to wait until mid-1919. However, the First World War was of such scale and impact that, for all practical purposes, the moment when fighting with Germany stopped became the point of remembrance. Outside New Zealand and Australia, 11 November is memorial day for many former Allied powers.

1.2 How the First World War impacts us today

The First World War remains important to world and New Zealand history for a variety of reasons. Many of the economic concepts and systems that exist today can be traced to the way this war drove trends and forced new developments. They include the move away from the gold standard to fiat (legally based) currency, undertaken by Britain in 1914, largely as an expedient to enable the war to be paid for. However, efforts to reinstate the gold system after 1918 were erratic and largely unsuccessful, and today all major currencies, including New Zealand’s, are fiat.\textsuperscript{6}

Another economic outcome of the First World War was the rise of Keynesianism, an approach developed by British economist John Maynard Keynes in part to help address the socio-economic challenges that Britain, in particular, faced after that war,\textsuperscript{7} with which New Zealand’s own fortunes were entwined.\textsuperscript{8} These challenges were significant,\textsuperscript{9} not least because the war had to be paid for; estimates of British war costs range from 11 to 14.9 percent of total pre-war wealth.\textsuperscript{10} The economic outcomes of the war also led the Bank of England to urge that the Dominions within the British Commonwealth should set up their own central banks. The Reserve Bank of New Zealand emerged from this push in 1933–34.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{6} This will be detailed in a Bulletin article, forthcoming.

\textsuperscript{4} Gilbert, p. 503.
Lifestyles were also influenced by the war, not least through the way the conflict threw focus on a safe, comfortable home life. It also transformed home amenities. The ‘Second Industrial Revolution’ was well under way by the early 20th century. The First World War accelerated the process and added newly devised management techniques, which were developed to enable more efficient production of war materiel. The uptake of motor vehicles and domestic appliances in the 1920s, notably in New Zealand, was facilitated by availability and falling prices on the back of these industrial methods and management approaches.

The requirement to maximise economic output and manage the way populations were harnessed for the war effort also accelerated the growth of government bureaucracy and power, leading to the dominating state structures that characterised 20th century government across the industrialised world.

There were also long-term international outcomes. The war accelerated the decline of the ‘old’ European order. The new world of the 1920s and 1930s was divided between western democracies and new totalitarian powers, the latter variously fascist or communist. The historical consensus is that the Second World War was part of the broad cycle of socio-political change begun in 1918. Indeed, the historian Eric Hobsbawm has argued that, because the Cold War reflected ongoing state-level conflict between communism and capitalism—an opposition that also emerged in 1914–18—this broad social, economic and political cycle on a world scale did not end until the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed.

The world today has been broadly shaped by these developments on all these levels, most of which had their origins variously in the way the First World War accelerated existing trends of that period, and in the outcomes of that war. The armistice of 11 November 1918 is therefore a symbolic anchor point, marking the moment when the fighting that accelerated and intensified so many of these trends and developments ended.

---

1.3 Why the Armistice carried emotional power

In a human sense armistice had huge meaning at the time, largely a product of the fact that the war was of unprecedented scale and lethality. This was new. Traditionally, warfare had been framed by economic constraints, transport technology, and disease. These acted as limiting factors, including during the globe-spanning European wars of the 18th and early 19th centuries.¹⁴

"The whole thing seems too big to realise and too sad to understand."
- Fanny Speedy, 11 November 1918

By the turn of the 20th century, industrial society was capable of mobilising large numbers of people, of transporting them to battlefields – often via ship and train – and of supplying them thanks to those same transport systems and the industrialisation of food production. Vaccines reduced the incidence of disease.¹⁵ Wars could be fought with a speed, scale and endurance never previously seen.

Industrial technology also transformed warfare itself. By 1914 weapons could produce far higher volumes of fire over vastly greater ranges than a century earlier. Mines and barbed wire offered new obstacles to infantry. As John Terraine pointed out, the outcome was that the industrial nations could rapidly move men to this expanded battlefield in unprecedented numbers; but could not move them on it.¹⁶

14 These included the Anglo-French wars of 1702-13, 1744-63, 1778-83, 1793-1802, 1803-14 and 1815; the Anglo-Dutch war of 1780-84 and the American Revolutionary War 1775-1783, among others.

The problem was that although Germany fought a mostly defensive war in the west between early 1915 and early 1918, Allied commanders were under political pressure to find ways through.¹⁷ Contrary to mythology, tactics were carefully considered; but defences of trench, barbed wire, mines and machine guns were almost impossible to defeat with infantry and artillery alone. Nor was there any way of exploiting a break-through other than with cavalry, who were vulnerable to the new weaponry.

The result was a lethal deadlock that lasted on the Western Front from December 1914 until March-June 1918, when the Germans launched a major offensive and broke the Allied lines. But they were unable to exploit the advantage; and in August 1918 the Allied ‘hundred day’ offensive began, using new tactics and technologies, notably tanks and close-support aircraft.¹⁸

These factors gave the war a deep and poignant human side, and it is from this that the Armistice draws much of its emotional power today.

1.4 New Zealand’s scale of involvement in the First World War

The New Zealand experience was typical of that of all nations involved, drawing in virtually the whole population, either through direct participation, war-related work and activities at home, or through family connections. Many New Zealand families, today, have close connections with those who served in that war, particularly at Gallipoli and the Western Front.

17 German offensives included that at Verdun, but until early 1918, when the eastern war ended, were not of the scale of their operations in the east. See, e.g. Paddy Griffiths, Battle Tactics of the Western Front, Yale, University Press, New Haven, 1994, pp. 96-98.
Curiously, the precise figures for direct New Zealand participation, wounding and death remain unknown, in part because they have been accounted for in multiple ways; but also because full figures were not always collected. This has been a particular problem in terms of discovering the Gallipoli participation rate.  

The main official document, the ‘Provision and Maintenance’ record, indicates that some 92,860 officers and men had been despatched to the war from its outbreak up until 12 November 1918. Another 9,578 were enlisted but still in New Zealand when war ended, totalling 102,438. However, that was subject to further revision, and the official Roll of Honour published at the end of 1924 put the numbers at 100,444. More than 550 nurses and many other women also served.

Irrespective of variations in the statistics, the net total who went overseas to the war, either to fight or in support of the effort, was about nine percent of New Zealand’s entire wartime population. Of those participants, more than 58,000 were killed or wounded. This rate of roughly sixty percent was typical of that war: New Zealand, despite the historical mythology, did not suffer more than other nations. The total number of dead stands at around 16,500, but cannot be determined with precision because some former soldiers died from the effects of gas poisoning after December 1923, when the army stopped collecting those statistics.

The outcome was that the war touched every family in the country, one way or another. It was also an emotionally intense experience. Indeed, the act of going to war was, itself, often traumatic for New Zealanders. Although it was initially seen as a great adventure, that paled after a while, particularly as casualty rates climbed. Jesse Stayte (1875–1918) left New Zealand in July 1916 and felt “as though I had left all the world behind me”. He was killed in action on 1 October 1918.

That scale and style of experience gave the Armistice the same social and emotional power here and among the New Zealand forces overseas.
that it had elsewhere at the time. The social place of the Armistice, afterwards, was also shared with other nations to a significant extent, although both in New Zealand and Australia had a more significant cultural focus on 25 April, the day of the Gallipoli landings.

Alfred Olsson’s Armistice story

Alfred Olsson (1887–1968) who, in civilian life had been a grocer in Woodville,1 was at Hornchurch military camp when the armistice came. That evening he walked to nearby Romford to see how it looked “on the first evening of peace”.2

There was also a certain amount of mild excitement in London and expectation of the important news coming through any minute. However it was not until 11 o’clock this morning that the news reached us in Camp and the first intimation of it was various noises in the street outside such as the firing maroons [small powder rockets] or something, which made a noise like guns fired, cheering and so forth. At the mess-room just before dinner [lunch] we were officially told by some of our officers that the armistice was signed and that we were free for the day, and that free beer would be served at the wet canteen tomorrow. …On coming down to Romford tonight the most noticeable thing is the amount of light showing from the shops and houses, which up till now have had to keep all lights concealed because of possible air-raids.3

1 Archives New Zealand, OLSSON, Alfred - WW1 41873 – Army, accessed 23 July 2018.
3 Ibid.
‘Peace blessed peace’ – the Armistice story of Fanny Speedy

New Zealand nurse Fanny Helena Speedy (1873–1942) was brought up on a farm in southern Hawke’s Bay, Woodbank. She trained as a nurse in Wellington and qualified in 1905.¹ When war came she joined the New Zealand Auxiliary Nursing Service, leaving New Zealand in April 1915 as one of the first 50 nurses to leave the country for war, and working at the General Hospital in Alexandria, then on the hospital ships Assaye, Gascon and Glengorn. In October 1916 she went to England, where she nursed for the rest of the war.² She recorded the moment of armistice in her diary.

PEACE BLESSED PEACE. The bells rang at 11 a.m. and soon we knew the Armistice had been signed. Yesterday we knew the Kaiser and the Crown Prince had abdicated and fled to Holland, the latter giving up all right to the Throne, and Germany forming a republic. Insurrection everywhere and all the small states proclaiming Republics and their Kings Fleeing [sic]. The streets are thronged here and flags and bunting in all directions with shouting and singing. Thanksgiving services in the churches. The whole thing seems too big to realise and too sad to understand.³

² Archives New Zealand, SPEEDY, Fanny Helena - WW1 22/10 – Army, R7820143.
³ W Tu MS-Papers, Speedy, Fanny Helena, d. 1942: Diaries, entry 11 November 1918.
2  How people experienced the armistice

For all the reasons outlined above – scale, industrial and economic impact, human intensity and endurance – the armistice with Germany had immense personal impact. However, those at the front, particularly, were so numbed by their experience that the fact that it was over was hard to take in. Even those behind the lines, in training camps or in hospitals, had trouble emotionally accepting the fact that fighting had ended.

New Zealand’s main ground force, the New Zealand Division, had already been rotated out of the front and was at Beauvois, ‘more or less ... wilting away on leave’, as New Zealand’s divisional commanding officer, Major-General Andrew Russell (1868–1960) put it. But the men were too stunned by what they had been through to react. Hugh Stewart thought they were emotionless. Another soldier, N. E. Hassall, recalled that ‘we just wandered aimlessly about doing nothing’.

After a few days Russell became worried. ‘There has been little, if any, exuberant display of enthusiasm over the armistice here,’ he remarked. ‘I am only exercised as to how to keep the men amused, interested and occupied.’ His worry was that Russia and Germany had both collapsed to Bolshevik revolution, and a meeting by former ‘Red Feds’ among his own forces alarmed him.

Not every New Zealander had such a quiet end to the war. The Armistice was not a peace treaty, and the British wanted to end the fighting in the best tactical position, just in case combat resumed. One New Zealander caught in the rush was former Wellingtonian Bernard Freyberg, then a Brigadier-General commanding the British 88 Brigade. He was ordered to secure a bridge over the river Dendre near Lessines, but was some 16 km away when the order came, and had just 90 minutes before the Armistice took effect. He took horses and a detachment of 7 Dragoon Guards into action at the gallop. They came under sniper fire but, at what Freyberg always insisted was 10.59am, secured the bridge. The Germans protested, but were ignored, and Freyberg was awarded his second DSO.

Things were different away from the Western Front. In Egypt, which remained a main base for New Zealand operations in Palestine, there was celebration. “Great rejoicing in camp,” James Hislop (1897–1980) wrote in his diary for 11 November. “All beer canteens raided”. That was followed, a little later, by rioting in Cairo.

27  WTU MS-Papers-2295, Hassell, N. E., ‘Memories of 1914’
28  Gambrill (ed.), Russell to family, 13 November 1918.
30  WTU MS-Papers 11690, Parker, James Hislop, 1897-1890, Soldiers’ Diary, typescript, 11 November 1918.
Harry Glass (1872–1959), was serving in New Zealand’s main base camp on the Salisbury Plains in England. He was overjoyed. “The good news has just been announced,” he wrote home at noon on 11 November, “All drill has been cut out for the afternoon… a thanksgiving service is to take place at 2 o’clock… They are taking things a bit quieter than I expected, but they are all beastly glad.” Cyril Coxhead of the Canterbury Infantry Regiment was in London, and wrote a short entry in his diary, “At 11 a.m. ‘Joy Bells’ ring out the Armistice. Great time on the Strand.”

3 The coin

The Armistice Day coin incorporates the official Returned and Services Association poppy, surrounded by a remembrance wreath which features the silver fern and koru. The poppy symbol has long been associated both with the First World War and with war remembrance in general. The flower grew on and around the First World War battlefields – for New Zealanders, both at Gallipoli and on the Western Front – and was generally adopted by the former Allied powers to symbolise that war during the early 1920s.

The three silver ferns represent both past, present and future; and the three armed forces of New Zealand. The Korus pattern represents new beginnings. The silver fern reflects New Zealand’s national identity. A portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is on the obverse.

Two million fifty cent coins were minted, of which 1.6 million were released into general circulation.
4 Conclusion

In 1918 the Armistice had profound meaning for the people involved in the First World War, and it has remained a symbol of the ending of that war – and the poppy a symbol of all war remembrance – since. The Armistice itself remains a pivotal and significant moment in the social, political and economic trends given shape and pace by the First World War, which in turn gave shape to the broad patterns of the twentieth century. This history, and particularly the personal stories of some of those involved, gives both historical context and human meaning to the circulating fifty cent coin issued to mark the centenary.

5 Bibliography

Alexander Turnbull Library

MS-Papers 11690, Parker, James Hislop, 1897-1890, Soldiers’ Diary, typescript
MS-Papers-8983, Glass, Henry, 1872-1959: Letters
Ms-Papers-7899-2, ‘Letters from Alfred Olsson to his family’
MS-Papers-1703, Speedy, Fanny Helena, d. 1942: Diaries
MS-Papers-2295, Hassell, N. E., ‘Memories of 1914’
MS-Papers-7198, Stayte, Jesse William, rough notes from my diary
MSX-7829, War diary / transcribed by Ruth Gerson, Coxhead, Cyril Henderson, 1895-1968: War diary

Archives New Zealand

AABK Series 18805
OLSSON, Alfred - WW1 41873 – Army, R21382398
SPEEDY, Fanny Helena - WW1 22/10 – Army, R7820143
STAYTE, Jesse William - WW1 31444 – Army, R7820830
**Speedy family**

Papers, photographs and correspondence

**Books, reports and articles**


Gambrill, R. F. (ed.), *The Russell Family Saga*, MS.


