How were changing attitudes to the First World War reflected in its poetry?

The First World War officially ended with the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919, over one hundred years ago now, but its relevance lives on as an example of the futility of war and because of the suffering so evocatively recorded by the war poets.

The book, ‘Ghosts of War’ by Andrew Ferguson, tells the story of World War One through the eyes of the poets who were soldiers. It provides a Scottish perspective featuring the poetry not just of the well-known war poets such as Owen, Graves and Sassoon but also of Scottish poets who are largely ignored in other volumes. The First World War is uniquely defined by the number of poets who recorded their thoughts and experiences, providing a moving record of the horrors experienced by the troops. It was the first war to be so extensively chronicled and its misery so exposed. There were, of course, no television news reports to show the progress of the war and the suffering of the soldiers.

This book charts the story of the war in poetry. The early poems showed an optimistic patriotism, only later replaced by cynicism and despair. This mood was a reflection of that in the country. At the beginning of the war the chance to enlist was seen as an opportunity for excitement and adventure for many young men, who otherwise faced a life of hard work and low pay. The reality would be somewhat different.

Ghosts of War charts the war in 9 stages:

- Setting the Scene, p43 -48
- The Overture, p49 – 54
- The Curtain Rises, p55 – 67
- Act One: The opening of Hostilities, p68 - 97
- Act Two: The War in 1915, p98 – 168
- Act Three: Haig Takes Command, p183 – 213
- Act Four: The War in 1917, p214 – 251
- The Last Act: p252 – 266
- The Curtain Falls: p267 - 281

This project enables learners at level 3 to explore WW1 through the words of a number of war poets. The attitudes towards the war changed as the conflict went on, and this resource seeks to consider in what ways and why attitudes changed, and how this was reflected in the poetry. Learners add to their understanding of the war using the poetry.
Experiences and Outcomes Social studies

I can describe the factors contributing to a major social, political or economic change in the past and can assess the impact on people’s lives.
SOC 3-05a

I can discuss the motives of those involved in a significant turning point in the past and assess the consequences it had then and since.
SOC 3-06a

Through researching, I can identify possible causes of a past conflict and report on the impact it has had on the lives of people at that time.
SOC 3-06b

Social Studies Benchmarks

- Identifies at least three factors which contributed to a major social, economic or political change in the past.
- Provides at least two valid opinions about the impact on people’s lives of a major social, economic or political change in the past.
- Provides at least two valid opinions about the possible motives of those involved in a significant turning point or event in history.
- Provides a valid opinion of the impact of this significant historical event.
- Identifies at least two possible causes of past conflict, using research methods.
- Presents in an appropriate form at least two impacts on people in that time.

Resources:

**Ghosts of War** – A book of poetry by Andrew Ferguson (a copy is being distributed free to any school who requests it:
Please e-mail andrew@ghostsofwar.co.uk giving your name, position, school and the address to which the free copy is to be sent)

How were the changing attitudes to the First World War reflected in the poetry?
BBC Has war poetry distorted our view of war? - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z38rq6f](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z38rq6f)
BBC Documentary - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWkZJS6WMA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWkZJS6WMA)
Ducksters WW1 Timeline - [https://www.ducksters.com/history/world_war_i/timeline.php](https://www.ducksters.com/history/world_war_i/timeline.php)
Also see ‘Background notes’ document
Suggested Learning Activities

1. Use both the book and the notes. Choose one of the Scottish war poets featured in the book ‘Ghosts of War’. Ewart Alan Mackintosh, WD Cocker, Charles Murray, JB Salmond, Walter Lyon or Charles Hamilton Sorley. Research your chosen poet. Try to find out where he came from, what age he was when he went to war, what battalion he served with and in which battles he fought. What were his most famous poems? What kind of mood did they reflect?

2. Consider four of the poems of Ewart Alan Mackintosh, ‘Recruiting’, ‘Ode to a French Regiment’, ‘To Sylvia’ and ‘Death’. When were these poems written and how would you describe the progress of the war at each point? Look specifically at ‘Recruiting’. What motivated Mackintosh to write this poem? Why was recruitment such an issue at this stage in the war? In what ways do you think the lack of information about the war affected the recruitment? How did propaganda affect recruitment? How would this differ from today, with increased media coverage? Is ‘fake news’ really a new thing? Compare the idea of fake news to propaganda, what are the similarities and differences? How did the British government use propaganda during the war?

3. ‘Twenty Years Ago’ by JB Salmond, was written in 1934. Research this poet and his role in WW1. This poem was written twenty years after the outbreak of WW1, but only seven years before the beginning of WW2. Can you tell the story of the war through this poem? Ultimately what is the view of the poet of WW1? Do you think at this stage that Salmond expected another war? When World War two broke out, what do you think Salmond’s view would have been of fighting in that war?