

In Flanders' Fields

McCrae's 'In Flanders' Fields' remains to this day one of the most memorable war poems ever written. It is a lasting legacy of the terrible battle in the Ypres salient in the spring of 1915.



In Flanders' Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders' Fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders' Fields.



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The Red Poppy

On and around 11 November each year, the Returned Services League (RSL) sells millions of red cloth poppies for Australians to pin on their lapels. Proceeds go to RSL welfare work. Why a red poppy?

* In Flanders' Fields

Colonel John McCrae, who was Professor of Medicine at McGill University in Canada before the First World War (WW1) (joined the McGill faculty in 1900 after graduating from the University of Toronto), first described the red poppy, the Flanders' poppy, as the flower of remembrance.

Although he had been a doctor for years and had served in the Boer War as a gunner, but went to France in WW1 as a medical officer with the first Canadian contingent.

It was impossible to get used to the suffering, the screams, and the blood here, and MAJ John McCrae had seen and heard enough in his dressing station to last him a lifetime. As a surgeon attached to the 1st Field Artillery Brigade, MAJ McCrae, had spent seventeen days treating injured men -- Canadians, British, Indians, French, and Germans -- in the Ypres salient.

It had been an ordeal that he had hardly thought possible. MAJ McCrae later wrote of it: 'I wish I could embody on paper some of the varied sensations of that seventeen days ... Seventeen days of Hades! At the end of the first day if anyone had told us we had to spend seventeen days there, we would have folded our hands and said it could not have been done' ⁽¹⁾.

One death particularly affected MAJ McCrae. A young friend and former student, LT Alexis Helmer of Ottawa, had been killed by a shell burst on 2 May. LT Helmer was buried later that day in the little cemetery outside McCrae's dressing station, and McCrae had performed the funeral ceremony in the absence of the chaplain.

The next day, sitting on the back of an ambulance parked near the dressing station beside the Canal de l'Yser, just a few hundred yards north of Ypres, McCrae vented his anguish by composing a poem. At the second battle of Ypres in 1915, when in charge of a small first-aid post, he wrote in pencil on a page from his despatch book a poem that has come to be known as 'Flanders' Field' which described the poppies that marked the graves of soldiers killed fighting for their country. The major was no stranger to writing, having authored several medical texts besides dabbling in poetry. In the nearby cemetery, McCrae could see the wild poppies that sprang up in the ditches in that part of Europe, and he spent twenty minutes of precious rest time scribbling fifteen lines of verse in a notebook ⁽²⁾.

A young soldier watched him write it (written 3 May 1915 after the battle at Ypres). Cyril Allinson, a twenty-two year old sergeant major, was delivering mail that day when he spotted McCrae. The major looked up as Allinson approached, then went on writing while the sergeant major stood there quietly. 'His face was very tired but calm as we wrote,' Allinson recalled. 'He looked around from time to time, his eyes straying to Helmer's grave.' When he finished five minutes later, he took his mail from Allinson and, without saying a word, handed his pad to the young non-commissioned officer (NCO). Allinson was moved by what he read: 'The poem was exactly an exact description of the scene in front of us both. The word blow was not used in the first line though it was used later when the poem later appeared in Punch. But it was used in the second last line. He used the word blow in that line because the poppies actually were being blown that morning by a gentle east wind. It never occurred to me at that time that it would ever be published. It seemed to me just an exact description of the scene' ⁽³⁾.

In fact, it was very nearly not published. Dissatisfied with it, McCrae tossed the poem away, but a fellow officer—either LTCOL Edward Morrison, the former Ottawa newspaper editor who commanded the 1st Brigade of artillery ⁽⁴⁾, or LTCOL J.M. Elder ⁽⁵⁾, depending on which source is consulted—retrieved it and sent it to newspapers in England. 'The Spectator', in London rejected it, but 'Punch' published it on 8 December 1915.

COL McCrae was wounded in May 1918 and was taken to one of the big hospitals on the coast of France. On the third evening he was wheeled to the balcony of his room to look over the sea towards the cliffs of Dover. The verses were obviously in his mind, for he said to the doctor 'Tell them, if ye break faith with us who die we shall not sleep.' That same night COL McCrae died.

Each Remembrance Day the British Legion lays a wreath on his grave—a tribute to a great man whose thoughts were always for others.

* We Shall Keep the Faith

The wearing of the poppy to keep faith began when an American, Miss Moira Michael, read the poem 'In Flanders Field' and was so greatly impressed that she decided always to wear a poppy to keep the faith. Miss Michael wrote a reply after reading 'In Flanders Field' entitled 'We Shall Keep the Faith'.

Miss Michael worked for the YMCA in America and on Saturday 9 November 1918 hosted a meeting of YMCA wartime secretaries from other countries. When several of the secretaries presented her with a small gift of money to thank her for her hospitality, she said she would spend it on poppies and told them the story of McCrae's poem and her decision to always wear a red poppy.

The French secretary, Madame Guerin, conceived the idea of selling artificial poppies to raise money to help needy soldiers and their families, and she approached organisations among the countries of the world that had fought as allies in Europe to promote the concept.

In England in 1919, the British Legion was formed to foster the interest of ex-servicemen and their dependants, and the late Field Marshal Earl Haig, the first Grand President, sought an emblem which would honour the dead and help the living. He adopted the Poppy as that emblem, and since then the Red Poppy has been accepted as the Emblem of Remembrance. The day chosen for the wearing of the emblems was 11 November, a Day of Remembrance to honour the dead of both World Wars, Korea, Malaya and Vietnam.

The League adopted the idea in 1921, announcing, 'The Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia and other Returned Soldiers Organisations throughout the British Empire and Allied Countries have passed resolutions at their international conventions to recognise the Poppy of Flanders' Fields as the international memorial flower to be worn on the anniversary of Armistice Day'.

'In adopting the Poppy of Flanders' Fields as the Memorial Flower to be worn by all Returned Soldiers on the above mentioned day, we recognise that no emblem so well typifies the Fields whereon was fought the greatest war in the history of the world nor sanctifies so truly the last resting place of our brave dead who remain in France'.

'The Returned Sailors and Soldiers of Australia join their comrades of the British Empire and Allied Countries in asking people of Australia to wear the poppy; firstly in memory of our sacred dead who rest in Flanders' Fields; secondly to keep alive the memories of the sacred cause for which they laid down their lives; and thirdly as a bond of esteem and affection between the soldiers of all Allied nations and in respect for France, our common battle ground'.

'The little silk poppies which are to be worn on Armistice Day are an exact replica in size and colour of the Poppies that bloom in Flanders' Fields. These poppies have been made by the war orphans in the devastated regions of France and have been shipped to Australia this year for Armistice Day'.

The League bought one million poppies from France to sell on 11 November 1921 at one shilling each. Five pence per poppy was to go back to France towards a fund for the children of the devastated areas of France, with sixpence per poppy being retained by each State branch and one penny going to the national office. The League kept up this practice for several years, and of course kept the tradition of selling poppies to mark 11 November and raise money for welfare work, even when the poppies were no longer obtained from France. Poppies now sold in Australia are often made locally by League members themselves.

Although the Red Poppy of Flanders is a symbol of modern times, legend has it that the poppy goes back even to the time of the famous Mongol leader, Genghiz Khan, as the flower associated with human sacrifice. In the 12th and early 13th centuries, the Mongol Emperor led his warrior hordes on campaigns south to the conquest of India, and west to envelop Russia as far as the shores of the Black Sea.

The modern story of the poppy is, of course, no legend. It is a page of history to which many thousands still with us can testify.

Excerpt from 'Welcome to Flanders' Fields—The Great Canadian Battle of the Great War: Ypres, 1915', by Daniel G. Dancocks, McClelland and Stewart (Toronto, Canada), 1988, pages 250, 251—Epilogue.

(1) Bassett, John. page 44, 'John McCrae'. Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984.

(2) Public Archives Canada (Ottawa), now the National Archives of Canada, MG30 E209, biographical note by Gertrude Hickmore.

(3) Mathieson, William D. page 264. 'My Grandfather's War'. Toronto: Macmillan, 1981.

(4) Public Archives Canada (Ottawa), now the National Archives of Canada, MG30 E133, volume 4, 'Origin of "In Flanders' Fields"'.
(5) 'Canadian Daily Record', 5/3/19.

We shall Keep the Faith

Oh! You who sleep in Flanders' fields,
Sleep sweet—to rise anew;
We caught the torch you threw;
And holding high we kept
The faith with those who died.
We cherish, too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valour led.
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders' Fields.
And now the torch and poppy red
Wear in honour of our dead
Fear not that ye have died for naught
We've learned the lesson that ye taught
In Flanders' Fields.



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