

The making of the poem

By Rob Ruggenberg

The poem "In Flanders Fields" by the Canadian army physician John McCrae 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.

The most asked question is: why poppies?

Wild poppies flower when other plants in their direct neighbourhood are dead. Their seeds can lie on the ground for years and years, but only when there are no more competing flowers or shrubs in the vicinity (for instance when someone firmly roots up the ground), these seeds will sprout.

There was enough rooted up soil on the battlefield of the Western Front; in fact the whole front consisted of churned up soil. So in May 1915, when McCrae wrote his poem, around him bloodred poppies blossomed like no one had ever seen before.

But in this poem the poppy plays one more role. The poppy is known as a symbol of sleep. The last line We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders fields might point to this fact. Some kinds of poppies can be used to derive opium from, from which morphine can be made. Morphine is one of the strongest painkillers and was often used to put a wounded soldier to sleep. Sometimes medical doctors used it in a higher dose to put the incurable wounded out of their misery.

Flanders

Flanders is the name of the whole western part of Belgium. It is flat

Field in Flanders, 1915



country where people speak Flemish, a kind of Dutch. Flanders (Vlaanderen in Flemish) holds old and famous cities like Antwerp, Bruges and Ypres. It is ancient battleground. For centuries the fields of Flanders have been soaked with blood. 'In Flanders Fields' is also the name of an American War Cemetery in Belgium, where 368 Americans are buried.



This cemetery is situated near the village of Waregem, quite a distance from the place where McCrae actually wrote his poem. The cemetery got its name from the poem though. The bronze foot of the flag-staff is decorated with daisies and poppies.

Another reference to the poem can be found on the Canadian Memorial at Vimy, in Northern France. Between the pylons stands 'The Spirit of Sacrifice': a figure holding high a burning torch, obviously referring to the last verse of McCrae's poem.



No quarrel

John McCrae's poem may be the most famous one of the Great War - sometimes only the first two verses are cited or printed. This is not just because of the lack of quality in the third verse, but also because this last verse speaks of an unending quarrel with the foe. And if one thing became clear during the Great War it was this: there was no quarrel between the soldiers (except maybe in the heat of

a fight). The quarrel existed only in the minds of stupid politicians and highranking officers who mostly never experienced the horror of the battlefield. But McCrae was not against war, he never was.

Nevertheless I will give you the full and exact version of McCrae's great poem, taken from his own, handwritten copy. But first, here is the story of how he wrote it - and how the recent death of a dear friend moved him:

Although he had been a doctor for years and had served in the Boer War in South Africa, it was impossible to get used to the suffering, the screams, and the blood here, and Major John McCrae had seen and heard enough in his dressing station to last him a lifetime.

As a surgeon attached to the Canadian 1st Field Artillery Brigade, Major McCrae, who had joined the McGill faculty in 1900 after graduating from the University of Toronto, had spent sixteen 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. McCrae later wrote to his mother:

“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.”

One death particularly affected McCrae. A young friend and former student, Lieut. Alexis Helmer of Ottawa, had been killed by a shell burst on 2 May 1915. Lieutenant Helmer was buried later that night in the little cemetery (called Essex Farm, just outside McCrae's dressing station.) McCrae had performed the funeral ceremony in the absence of the chaplain, reciting from memory some passages from the Church of England's 'Order of Burial of the Dead'. This had happened in complete darkness, as for security reasons it was forbidden to make light.



The Poem

The next evening, sitting on the rearstep of an ambulance parked near the dressing station beside the Yser Canal, just a few hundred yards north of Ypres, McCrae vented his anguish by composing a poem. The major was no stranger to writing, having authored several medical texts besides dabbling in poetry.

In the cemetery, McCrae could see the wild poppies that sprang up from the ditches and the graves, and he spent twenty minutes of precious rest time scribbling fifteen lines of verse in a notebook.

A young soldier watched him write it. 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 McCrae finished five minutes later, he took his mail from Allinson and, without saying a word, handed his pad to the young NCO. Allinson was moved by what he read:

“The poem was an exact description of the scene in front of us both. 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.”

Experimenting with the Metre

Allinson's account corresponds with the words of the commanding officer at the spot, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Morrison. This is how Morrison described the scene:

IN FLANDERS FIELD

“This poem was literally born of fire and blood during the hottest phase of the second battle of Ypres. My headquarters were in a trench on the top of the bank of the Ypres Canal, and John had his dressing station in a hole dug in the foot of the bank. During periods in the battle men who were shot actually rolled down the bank into his dressing station. Along from us a few hundred yards was the headquarters of a regiment, and many times during the sixteen days of battle, he and I watched them burying their dead whenever there was a lull. Thus the crosses, row on row, grew into a good-sized cemetery. Just as he describes, we often heard in the mornings the larks singing high in the air, between the crash of the shell and the reports of the guns in the battery just beside us. I have a letter from him in which he mentions having written the poem to pass away the time between the arrival of batches of wounded, and partly as an experiment with several varieties of poetic metre. “

The poem (initially called *We shall not sleep*) was very nearly not published. Dissatisfied with it, McCrae tossed the poem away, but Morrison retrieved it and sent it to newspapers in England.

The *Spectator*, in London, rejected it and send the poem back, but *Punch* published it on 8 December 1915 (although the magazine misspelled his name as McCree and promoted him to Lt. Colonel):

In Flanders Fields

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.

