THE WW1 ORIGINS OF THE POPPY AS A REMEMBRANCE SYMBOL

Legends & Traditions of the Great War

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THE REMEMBRANCE DAY SYMBOLISM OF THE POPPY STARTED WITH A POEM WRITTEN BY A WW1 BRIGADE SURGEON WHO WAS STRUCK BY THE SIGHT OF RED FLOWERS GROWING ON A RAVAGED BATTLEFIELD

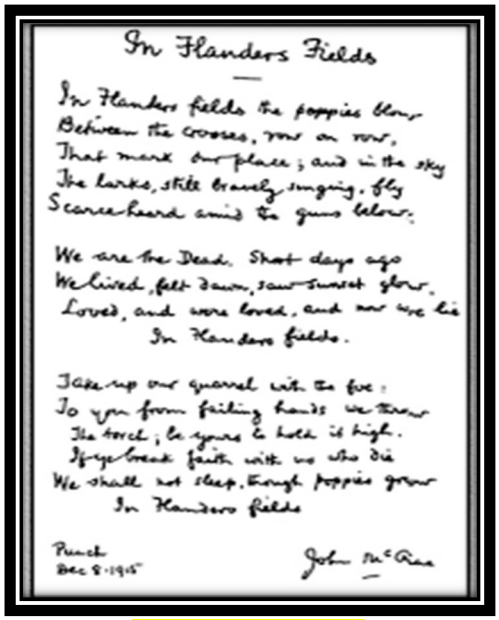
THE RED POPPY

Long before the Great War, the red poppy had become a symbol of death, renewal, and life. The seeds of the flower can remain dormant in the earth for years but will blossom spectacularly when the soil is churned. Beginning in late 1914, the fields of Northern France and Flanders became the scene of stupendous disturbances. Red Poppies soon appeared.

In 1915, at a Canadian dressing station north of Ypres on the Essex Farm, an exhausted physician named Lt. Col. John McCrae would take in the view of the poppy-strewn Salient and experience a moment of artistic inspiration. The veteran of the South African War was able to distill in a single vision the vitality of the red poppy symbol, his respect for the sacrifice made by his patients and dead comrades, and his intense feeling of obligation to them. *McCrae would capture all of this in the most famous single poem of the First World War," In Flanders Field.*

From 1914 to 1918, World War I took a greater human toll than any previous conflict, with some *8.5 million soldiers dead of battlefield injuries or disease*. The Great War, as it was then known, also ravaged the landscape of Western Europe, where most of the fiercest fighting took place. From the devastated landscape of the battlefields, the red poppy would grow and, thanks to a famous poem, become a powerful symbol of remembrance.

Across northern France and Flanders (northern Belgium), the brutal clashes between Allied and Axis soldiers tore up fields and forests, tearing up trees and plants and wreaking havoc on the soil beneath. But in the warm early spring of 1915, bright red flowers began peeking through the battle-scarred land: *Papaver rhoeas*, known variously as the Flanders poppy, corn poppy, red poppy, and corn rose. As Chris McNab, author of "The Book of the Poppy," wrote in an excerpt published in the *Independent*, the brilliantly colored flower is classified as a weed, which makes sense given its tenacious nature.



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.

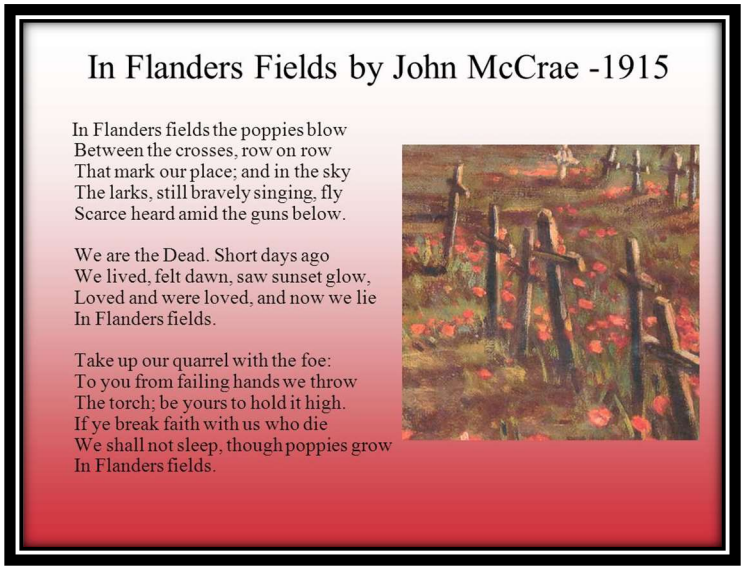
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields

Punch
Dec 8 1915

John McCrae

A HANDWRITTEN COPY

Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, who served as a brigade surgeon for an Allied artillery unit, spotted a cluster of poppies that spring, shortly after the Second Battle of Ypres. McCrae tended to the wounded and got a firsthand look at the carnage of that clash, in which the Germans unleashed lethal chlorine gas for the first time in the war. Some 87,000 Allied soldiers were killed, wounded, or went missing in the battle (as well as 37,000 on the German side); a friend of McCrae's, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was among the dead.

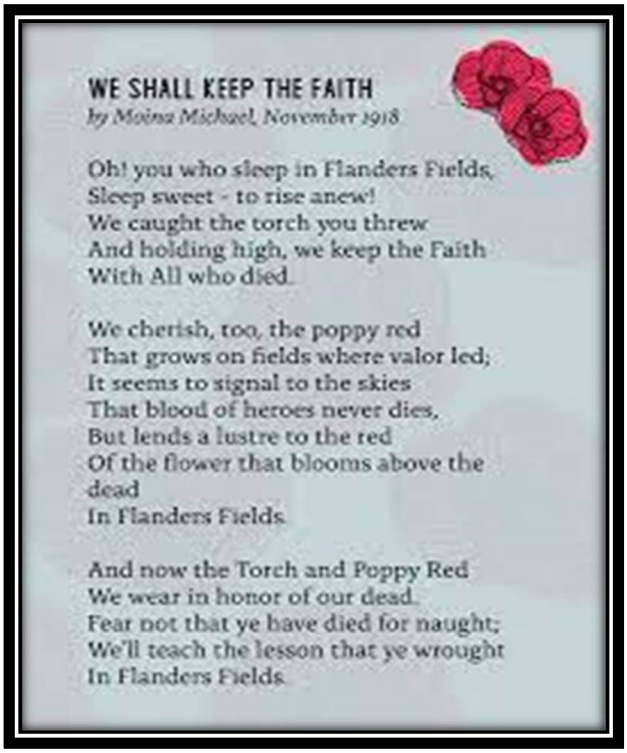


S*truck by the sight of bright red blooms on broken ground, McCrae wrote a poem,* "*In Flanders* Field," in which he channeled the voice of the fallen soldiers buried under those hardy poppies.

Published in *Punch* magazine in late 1915, the poem would be used at countless memorial ceremonies and became one of the most famous works of art to emerge from the Great War. Its fame had spread far and wide by the time McCrae himself died, from pneumonia and meningitis, in January 1918.

Across the Atlantic, a woman named Moina Michael read "In Flanders Field" in the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal* that November, just two days before the armistice.

A professor at the University of Georgia at the time the war broke out, Michael had taken a leave of absence to volunteer at the New York headquarters of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), which trained and sponsored workers overseas. Inspired by McCrae's verses, Michael wrote her poem in response, which she called *"We Shall Keep Faith."*



WE SHALL KEEP THE FAITH

by Moina Michael, November 1918

Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet - to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.

We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor 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
We wear in honor of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

As a sign of this faith, and a remembrance of the sacrifices of Flanders Field, Michael vowed to always wear a red poppy; she found an initial batch of fabric blooms for herself and her colleagues at a department store. *After the war ended, she returned to the university town of Athens and came up with the idea of making and selling red silk poppies to raise money to support returning veterans.*

Michael's campaign to create a national symbol for remembrance—a poppy in the colors of the Allied nations' flags entwined around a victory torch—didn't get very far at first. But in mid-1920, she managed to get Georgia's branch of the American Legion, a veteran's group, to adopt the poppy (minus the torch) as its symbol. *Soon after that, the National American Legion voted to use the poppy as the official U.S. national emblem of remembrance* when its members convened in Cleveland in September 1920.

On the opposite side of the Atlantic, a Frenchwoman named Anna Guérin had championed the symbolic power of the red poppy from the beginning. Invited to the American Legion convention to speak about her idea for an "Inter-Allied Poppy Day," Madame Guérin helped convince the Legion members to adopt the poppy as their symbol, and to join her by celebrating National Poppy Day in the United States the following May.

Within a year, Guérin brought her campaign to England, where in November 1921 the newly founded (Royal) British Legion held its first-ever "Poppy Appeal," which sold millions of silk flowers and raised over £106,000 (a hefty sum at the time) to go towards finding employment and housing for Great War veterans. The following year, Major George Howson set up the Poppy Factory in Richmond, England, in which disabled servicemen were employed to make the fabric and paper blooms.

Other nations soon followed suit in adopting the poppy as their official symbol of remembrance.

Today, nearly a century after World War I ended, millions of people in the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Belgium, Australia, and New Zealand don the red flowers every November 11 (known as Remembrance Day or Armistice Day) to commemorate the anniversary of the 1918 armistice. According to McNab, the Poppy Factory (now located in Richmond, England, and Edinburgh, Scotland) is still the center of poppy production, churning out as many as 45 million poppies made of various materials each year.

In the United States, the tradition has developed a little differently. Americans don't typically wear poppies on November 11 (Veterans Day), which honors all living veterans. Instead, they wear the symbolic red flower on Memorial Day—the last Monday in May—to commemorate the sacrifice of so many men and women who have given their lives fighting for their country.