

The War: 1914-18



The Story of the Poppy

Each November over ten million poppies bloom in Canada. Dotting the lapels of half of Canada's population, this symbol of remembrance makes its annual appearance as it has done each year since 1926.

Although everybody knows what the poppy means, nobody is certain of how it all began; of how the poppy became so closely associated with remembrance of the war dead.

The association was certainly not new when the poppy was adopted in Canada in 1921. At least a hundred and ten years before that time, a correspondent wrote of how thickly poppies grew over the graves of the dead. He was speaking of the Napoleonic War and its campaigns in Flanders.

But a Canadian medical officer was chiefly responsible for this association, more so than any other single known factor.

John McCrae was a tall, boyish 43-year-old member of the Canadian Medical Corps from Guelph, Ontario. An artillery veteran of the Boer War, he had the eye of a gunner, the hand of a surgeon, and the soul of a poet when he

went into the line at Ypres on April 22, 1915.

That was the afternoon the enemy first used poison gas.

The first attack failed. So did the next and the next. For 17 days and nights the allies repulsed wave after wave of attackers.

During this period, McCrae wrote: "One can see the dead lying there on the front field. And in places where the enemy threw in an attack, they lie very thick on the slopes of the German trenches."

Working from a dressing station on the bank of the Yser Canal, Lt.-Col. McCrae dressed hundreds of wounded, never taking off his clothes for the entire 17 days. Sometimes the dead or wounded actually rolled down the bank from above into his dugout. Sometimes, while awaiting the arrival of batches of wounded, he would watch the men at work in the burial plots which were quickly filling up.

Then McCrae and his unit were relieved. "We are weary in body and wearier in mind. The general impression in my mind is one of a nightmare," he wrote home.

But McCrae came out of

Ypres with 13 lines scrawled on a scrap of paper. The lines were a poem which started: "In Flanders fields the poppies blow..."

These were the lines which are enshrined in the hearts of all soldiers who heard in them their innermost thoughts. McCrae was their voice. The poem circulated as a folk song circulates, by living word of mouth. Men learned it with their hearts.

In the United States, the poem inspired the American Legion to adopt the poppy as the symbol of Remembrance.

In Canada, the poppy was officially adopted by the Great War Veterans Association in 1921 on the suggestion of a Mrs. E. Guerin of France. But there is little doubt that the impact of McCrae's poem influenced this decision.

The poem speaks of Flanders fields. But the subject is universal: the fear of the dead that they will be forgotten, that their death will have been in vain.

The spirit of true Remembrance, as symbolized by the poppy, must be our eternal answer which belies those fears.