



BACK IN TIME

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In Flanders Fields

By 1955 the British Empire was no longer the powerhouse it had been in its glory days. The imperial tide first turned then receded, leaving distant outposts feeling somewhat high and dry. In our community in Montevideo, our British roots were still a source of identity and pride, but it was our rituals and traditions that now kept our sense of Englishness alive.

One of those rituals was Poppy Day, celebrated in remembrance of the moment when hostilities came to an end on the Western Front at “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” in 1918. Every November 11 since then, poppies are exchanged for donations to charities that benefit military personnel and their families. Everyone in our community wore a poppy. It would have been unthinkable not to. I wore one every year, all the way through school and beyond. I can still picture that splash of bloodred petals on the lapel of my grey flannel jacket. It looked better, I thought, against the dark green tunic the girls wore at the British Schools.

As I grew into my teens I started thinking about all sorts of things. “What would I do,” I wondered, “if war broke out and I was either called up or expected to volunteer?” At about that time, I came across the literary work that spawned the poppy ritual and learned how it came to be written. In early 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres in Flanders, Belgium, Major John McCrae, a Canadian doctor, was so moved by the death of a friend and fellow soldier that he scribbled a poem in his notebook. “In Flanders Fields” was published later that year in *Punch* magazine, and went on to become an iconic piece, one of the best-known and most popular poems from “the war to end all wars.” McCrae was inspired by the sight of poppies growing on the graves of fallen soldiers. Apparently,

the environmental devastation inflicted by the war on Flemish battle fields contributed to a high lime content, and poppies were among the few plants that could grow in that soil. As I read the poem and thought about those graves, I was torn by two conflicting emotions, each as powerful as the other. “I would volunteer,” I thought. “I’d sign up and go wherever I was sent and fight to the death to protect my country and all that it means to me.” At other times I could see myself standing in a desolate field in the middle of nowhere on a cold, grey, drizzly day, up to my ankles in mud, as a soldier in a different uniform charged at me with his bayonet affixed. My Uncle Ivor volunteered and spent the Second World War as a bomber pilot for the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for “outstanding ability, cool determination, and devotion to duty,” having completed many successful missions during which, “under a quiet and determined manner” he had been “an inspiration to his crew.” And he came through it all without a scratch.

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

I wondered if I could ever be an inspiration to my crew. Or whether I’d turn and run from the bayonet pointed at my belly.

I was lucky, and never had the chance to find out how I would respond to a call to arms, or how I would perform in the heat of battle. Not for any lack of wars since my teens, but there have been none that threatened or involved me directly, and I am certainly no soldier of fortune. Nonetheless, on Remembrance Day in November I am always reminded of—and immensely grateful to—those who “lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow” and now lie in Flanders fields.