



BACK IN TIME

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Behind the shelter in the
 middle of a roundabout
 The pretty nurse is selling
 poppies from a tray

Penny Lane, The Beatles

POPPY DAY

By 1955 the British Empire was no longer the powerhouse it had been in its glory days at the turn of the century. 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 on Armistice Day 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 11th 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 was probably nearly six when I was given my first poppy, and I wore one every year after that, all the way through school and beyond. I can still picture that splash of blood-red petals on the lapel of my grey flannel jacket. It looked better, I thought, against the dark green uniform the girls wore at our co-ed school.

As I grew into my teens I started wondering about all kinds of things, one of which was what I would do 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 inspired the poppy ritual, and learned about the circumstances surrounding its origins. 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 wrote a poem. “In Flanders Fields” was published later that year in Punch magazine, and went on to become an iconic work, one of the best-known and most popular poems from ‘the war to end all wars’.

*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*

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 higher 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.





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“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.

a measure of shame) as other young men headed off on what must have seemed like the glamorous adventure of a lifetime. Many years later I came to understand something of how my Dad must have felt on being told he was unfit for active duty, and realized that those who are spared the actual fighting can also be scarred by war.



My uncle 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. 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.

My father also volunteered, but was turned down on medical grounds. He was stricken with diabetes when he was fifteen—he always said it was brought on by the shock of his father’s untimely death—and had to swallow his disappointment (and, I imagine,

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, 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.

