

The Flanders Poppy as Lieu de Mémoire

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John McCrae (1872-1918)



The scent of blood stains the Remembrance Poppy. In the black-magic fields of Flanders and the Somme, corn poppies are nourished by the memory of 'the missing'. It is as if the souls of those who died here between 1914 and 1918 have been transformed into a million blood-red flowers, whose enduring image reaches out to the farthest limits of our imagination. The Flanders Poppy is a volatile flower – a barometer of conscience and conflict, whose story reaches back into the distant past. How and why did such a humble flower become a universal symbol of remembrance and commemoration – a *lieu de mémoire*?

The story of the Flanders Poppy is strange and compelling. It is tragic and uplifting, deadly and comforting, intimately personal yet international in spirit. The poppy is an ancient symbol, yet also a modern icon of war and sacrifice. It collides with the First and Second World Wars, millions of war-dead, pacifism, and remembrance. Ironically, it is also embroiled in the international 'war on terror' through the billion-dollar trade in narcotic trafficking of the opium poppy and its derivatives.

The poppy's story is as old as civilization. Following its ancient origins, we glimpse a primordial world of sorcery, where Nature and humanity were joined imperceptibly by spirituality and ritual. Classical Greek myth tells that poppies flowered along the banks of the River Lethe which flowed to Hades, and from which the dead had to drink so as to forget their former existence in the world of the living. The association of the poppy with the anguish and suffering of war also appeared in the works of Homer. At a banquet in Sparta, Helen eased the Trojan War grief of her guests by spiking their wine with honey and opium.

The scarlet corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) and purple-white opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) reveal their intimacy through a long relationship with war, not least because the 'long sleep' of death was so easily associated with opium narcosis, and also because of the corn poppy's ominous ubiquity on the freshly churned fields of war.

During the First World War, personal experiences juxtaposed images of the crimson poppy and scenes of carnage on the battlefields. Corn poppies were imagined as the spirits of the dead rising from the blood-drenched earth – 'thrusting from the lips of craters, undaunted by the desolation, heedless of human fury and stupidity' as the fighter pilot Cecil Lewis observed (1). Captain Rowland Fielding described soldiers wildly rushing across a No Man's Land ablaze with scarlet poppies, accompanied by a storm of rifle and machine-gun fire (2).

Messianic conversion in New York

It was the Canadian soldier-surgeon John McCrae who crystallised these feelings in his 1915 poem *'In Flanders Fields'*. Crouching at the entrance to his dugout, just outside of Ypres in Belgian Flanders, McCrae gazed on the small battlefield cemetery where he had just buried a close friend. From his grief he conjured his poem, immortalising the poppy in his opening stanza, 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row'.

The poem became the touchstone of emotion for the war generation, striking a chord with soldiers and public alike. The corn poppy became the 'Flanders Poppy', an emblem for the souls of the dead, and a crimson palliative for those who had lost loved ones. Its ambiguous relationship with the opium poppy manifested itself in morphine, a powerful painkiller which made the physical agonies of war more bearable, and which was a derivative of opium.

In Flanders Fields established the corn poppy as the symbolic flower of the Great War, but did not guarantee its postwar emergence as an international symbol of commemoration for the English-speaking world. This final transformation took place in New York in the days leading up to the Armistice of November 11, 1918. It was here that an unassuming middle-aged schoolteacher named Moina Michael had nothing less than a messianic spiritual conversion.

Moina read McCrae's poem and imagined the voices of the dead clamouring for her to convert the scarlet flower into a sacred emblem of their sacrifice. She never married, and regarded the poppy as her 'spirit child', pledging her soul, she said, to 'that crimson cup flower of Flanders, the red Poppy which caught the sacrificial blood of ten million men dying for the Peace of the World' (3). In 1921, the poppy was adopted as the official remembrance flower of the United States. The 'Buddy Poppy', as it was soon re-christened, remains the national flower of war commemoration to this day, though most Americans wouldn't recognise it.

But this was a story of two women, for Moina's obsession was matched by Anna Guérin, an elegant French widow who championed the manufacturing of silken red poppies in the devastated areas of France, and sold them across the world to raise money for veterans and orphans of the Great War. Rivalry between the two women was unspoken but keen. Anna's early financial advantage was undermined when American veterans decided that their own disabled comrades should make poppies in the USA. Fashioned by crippled hands and missing limbs, the Buddy Poppy tugged at the nation's hearts every Veterans Day.

Anna Guérin sealed the poppy's international success by travelling to Canada, and her representatives to Australia and New Zealand, all of which adopted the commemorative flower. She visited London too, where she convinced the British Legion to embrace the poppy. This victory was short lived, as the Legion



Trench art poppy shell
© J Brazier

soon began making its own artificial flowers for their Poppy Day Appeal, where the red cloth poppy on its wire attachment recalled for many a generation of youth sacrificed on the barbed wire of the Western Front.

In Britain, from 1921, buying a Remembrance Poppy directly supported the war-wounded who were employed in the British Legion's newly established Poppy Factory. The beginnings were modest, with just five disabled servicemen in a small room above a shop off the Old Kent Road in south-east London. As poppy wearing gathered momentum, the operation soon moved to Richmond in Surrey, and then, in 1933, it moved again to a purpose-built factory nearby where it remains to this day. The symbolism of this arrangement is as poignant and appropriate today as it was at the time. Men shattered by war created poppies to commemorate their fallen comrades, and to raise money to support the bereaved and themselves. The Flanders Poppy had become an evocative *lieu de mémoire*.

The inspirational spirit of giving associated with the poppy made a deep impression, and endured for decades. Some forty years later, in 1967, the First World War veteran Alexander Anthony, who had fought on the Somme and at Ypres, clung resolutely to the poppy.

'I'm a believer, you see. And to me that poppy means everything. ... I have been connected with these poppies for the last 50 years. ... When you know where your donation goes and the amount of money spent on destitute ex-servicemen who have given their all for their country, and you see these badly disabled servicemen making the poppies, then the light in their eyes when you bring them part of this donation is all the justification needed.'(4)

Championed by Moina Michael – the 'Poppy Princess' – and Anna Guérin – the 'Poppy Lady', the Remembrance Poppy spread across the world, taking root in the hearts and consciences of men, women, and children in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and beyond. During the inter-war years of 1919-1939, crimson cloth poppies for the living and counterpart wreaths on headstones and memorials became a new tradition. They bloomed for the dead and missing as thousands of pilgrims journeyed to the scenes of sacrifice, and countless more paid their annual respects from London to Sydney, New York to Vancouver. Battlefield pilgrims sought a rendezvous of the spirit which they had been denied in life when fathers, brothers, husbands and lovers did not return.

These pilgrims fell silent only to ponder or weep, to buy souvenirs, to fix their memories to a place, and a sky, and imagine their loved ones who had once passed this way. They set down their poppies, and returned home with strangely-shaped objects reverently placed on mantelpieces and in hallways: embroidered silk handkerchiefs, decorated brass artillery-shell cases, carved wooden boxes, and even fragments of earth.

By far the most popular of these battlefield mementos were the empty shell cases decorated with art nouveau floral designs – including the poppy. They served as 'flower vases', harking back to the prewar fashion for pastoral imagery, and an ageless fascination with flowers shared by the soldiers themselves. The power of these trench art ornaments to disturb later generations was part of the hidden world of the postwar years.



A White Poppy rival

Early Remembrance Poppy
© J Brazier

It was in this volatile and unpredictable landscape of memory that the Flanders Poppy flourished, renewing itself each year, and bringing hope and financial help to families decimated by the war. Wearing the poppy was an act of faith and solidarity with the dead and the living, and seemed to promise that such terrible sufferings would never be repeated – just as Moina Michael had intended. Battlefield pilgrimages were splashed with flowers, and the sight of crimson fields brought many to tears. Commemorating the war was becoming an industry, and the Flanders Poppy its peerless emblem.

Bizarre sights were seen in Britain. A poppy-decked elephant paraded the streets of Leeds in 1924, and in the same year a poppy-covered goat hauled a miniature replica of Wimbledon's war memorial around south London streets (5). The poppy fields of the Somme and Belgian Flanders were shrunk to more manageable size in the grounds adjacent to London's Westminster Abbey. A single wooden cross brought from the battlefield grave of an unknown British soldier stood alone for several years until 1928 when passers-by began planting their own poppies alongside. The Field of Remembrance was born, and still flourishes today in the days leading up to November 11.

Public enthusiasm for the Flanders Poppy gripped the English-speaking world. Poppy selling was mainly women's work, and would remain so until the Second World War. In 1930s' Britain, poppies were sold by 100,000 women of the British Legion's Women's Section, helped by 250,000 female volunteers (6). In the United States, volunteers for the soldiers' association known as the 'Veterans of Foreign Wars' were often pretty young women, who stood in front of giant 'stars and stripes' flags surrounded by poppy wreaths and patriotic posters, handing out poppies to the public for a donation. As the Second World War approached, Hollywood joined in, and female movie stars such as Ginger Rogers and Jane Wyman were chosen as Buddy Poppy Girls. Although too young to be a Poppy Girl, Judy Garland did her bit. In 1939, the film *The Wizard of Oz* saw her falling asleep in a field of magical poppies, overcome by their drowsy vapours.

The Remembrance Poppy was not accepted by everyone. In 1933, the Women's Co-operative Guild invented the White Poppy as an emblem of peace, to commemorate all war victims and express the hope for an end to all conflict. When the British Legion refused to manufacture what is regarded as a morally dubious rival, the newly-formed Peace Pledge Union began making them (and still does today).

Many First World War veterans were enraged by the White Poppy, regarding it as undermining their wartime sacrifices, and as too close to the white feather of cowardice and the white flag of surrender. Women lost their jobs for wearing it, and on Armistice Days white poppy wreaths were removed by red poppy wearers and trampled underfoot. Some saw both sides of the argument, and wore red and white poppies together.

Powerful and enduring symbol

9/11 is a date burned into the psyche of the West. The darker symbolism of the poppy stormed back into public consciousness in an apocalyptic vision of Islamic terrorism when the World Trade Centre came crashing down just a few blocks from where Moina Michael experienced her decidedly Christian revelation eighty years before. The U.S. response – the 'war on terror' – rejuvenated the connections between poppies, war, and violent death. As coalition troops flooded into Afghanistan, the nightmare of 1914-18 returned, and soon American, British, and Canadian soldiers were dying again amidst fields of poppies.

The invasion breathed new life into opium, and eradicating its poppy quickly became a key objective in winning the conflict. British soldiers last smelled opium winds in the summer of 1880, when a British army was all but annihilated by Afghan tribesmen at the Battle of Maiwand on the banks of the Helmand River. Now the British were back. The corn poppy remains a symbol of commemoration and war, but its opium-bearing cousin has become a reason for conflict. The two poppy varieties are locked together through conflict as closely today as they were in Homer's account of the Trojan War.

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan rejuvenated the Remembrance Poppy's image and significance in Britain. Passengers at London's Heathrow airport were astonished in 2008 when confronted by a huge Poppy Man, towering five metres tall, and covered in 8,000 scarlet poppies. Poppy Man was a giant version of a smaller life-size figure invented for the Royal British Legion in 2007 (7). Poppy Man is hollow inside, yet his void is filled with the identity of loved ones by all who have been bereaved by war. More than this, he captures the transience of life, linking the war-maimed and disabled who make the Remembrance Poppy to thousands of poppy sellers who fill the streets in the weeks before November 11. He is unbearably poignant – a spiritual mannequin, covered in red.

The Legion launched its 2008 Poppy Day Appeal by taking him to southern Iraq, where he posed alongside British soldiers, calm and surreal amongst the chaos of war. He stood alongside troops in Basra at a service of dedication at a memorial wall commemorating fallen British soldiers in Iraq, and toured their barracks (8). Poppy Man taps into the core of the Remembrance Poppy – honouring the past, but resolutely contemporary, forever relevant to the young men who die and are wounded so far from home, and who leave wives, sweethearts and children behind.

The poppy is a powerful and ancient symbol, embodying ideas of war, death, eternal rest, and, ironically, of remembrance and forgetfulness. Its ability to change its meanings, and become relevant to new realities, shows how deeply rooted it is in human consciousness. Our imaginations play with the poppy's emblematic qualities, moving back and forth between the two varieties and forging the composite that is the Flanders Remembrance Poppy.

Every year, around 80 million people across the world buy a Poppy, participating in its message of remembering and honouring the war dead. Unknowingly, they acknowledge a deep-rooted and formative connection from the distant past, when the opium poppy was a sacred flower that floated the soul to an afterlife of never-ending sleep. Separate, but forever intertwined, the corn and opium poppies have generated more wealth, misery, hope and death than any flower in human history, and together have created the Remembrance Poppy, surely one of the most powerful and enduring symbols of our humanity. ■





NOTES

- (1) Cecil Lewis, quoted in P. Fussell [1975] (2000), *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p 254. New York: Oxford University Press.
- (2) Rowland Feilding. (1929), *War Letters to a Wife*, p 21, 23. London: The Medici Society.
- (3) Moina Michael. (1941), *The Miracle Flower: The Story of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy*, p 79. Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company.
- (4) Anthony Alexander, quoted in V. Newall. (1976), Armistice Day: Folk Tradition in an English Festival of Remembrance. *Folklore* 87 (2), pp 226-9.
- (5) B. Harding. (2001), *Keeping Faith: The History of the Royal British Legion*, p 127. Barnsley: Leo Cooper.
- (6) A. Gregory. (1994), *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946*, p 111. Oxford: Berg.
- (7) A. Hildebrandt. (2008), Poppy Man tours war zone to launch Remembrance Day appeal. *CBC News*, 23 October. <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/10/23/poppy-campaign.html>. Accessed on 24 October 2008.
- (8) BBC. (2008). Poppy Appeal Launched from Basra. news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7685840.stm. Accessed on 23 October 2009.

Nicholas J. Saunders' book, *The Poppy. A Cultural History from Ancient Egypt to Flanders Fields to Afghanistan*, was published by One World Publication, London, 2013.