

Challenging the Myths of the Great War: John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" Revisited

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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.

John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" (1915) deserves critical attention when dealing with issues of remembrance of the Great War because of the centrality of this poem in current performances of war commemoration not only in Canada, the home country of its author, but also in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the former British Empire. Furthermore, McCrae's poem inspired the poppy emblem as a memorial symbol which was originally linked to the First World War, later extended to the Second, and at present is often used to pay homage to the victims of all wars since 1914. Remembrance poppies are common at

wreath-laying ceremonies throughout the United Kingdom and some of the Commonwealth Countries, where many people also wear them, close to their hearts, every year from the last Friday in October to the end of the day on 11 November.

Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae was a Canadian soldier, doctor and poet. Born in Guelph (Ontario) in 1872, he graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1894 and a degree in medicine in 1898. He served in the South African War leading an artillery battery for one year and resigned from the army in 1904, having experienced mixed feelings about warfare (Prescott 42; Graves 90). McCrae furthered his medical career in Montreal while teaching and doing research at McGill University for about ten years, until he volunteered for service in 1914. He was appointed Medical Officer in the First Brigade of Canadian Field Artillery, and was sent to the Belgian front. In April and May 1915 he tended hundreds of soldiers wounded during the Second Battle of Ypres, a battle in which chlorine gas was used as a weapon against the Allied troops. McCrae expressed the difficulties he experienced when he tried to describe that devastating ordeal in the journal he was keeping. In an entry dated 2 May 1915, he recorded the death of Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who was killed by enemy artillery fire at the age of 22 (Prescott 94; Graves 228; Raby-Dunne 75). Helmer died instantly as his body was blown to pieces when a canon shell burst while he was on his way to check on a Canadian battery positioned on the bank of the Yser Canal. In the absence of a chaplain, McCrae conducted the burial service for Helmer, whose fragmented remains were interred in a makeshift cemetery located just behind the advance dressing post where the doctor was caring for the wounded at Ypres. The following day, feeling deeply affected by the loss of his close friend and former student at McGill University, McCrae wrote the fifteen lines which would become one of the most quoted war poems in the English-speaking world.

McCrae's biographers have documented several contradictory versions about the exact circumstances in which the poem was written (Prescott 95; Graves 230; Raby-Dunne 78). According to Cyril Allinson, a young soldier who witnessed the scene while he was delivering the mail, McCrae kept looking at the poppies that sprang up among the simple wooden crosses marking the graves of the nearby cemetery. Allinson would

later report what he had seen, and how he had reacted as the first reader of the poem, handed to him by McCrae as soon as it was finished.¹

By mid-June of 1915, McCrae was ordered to leave the artillery and was transferred from the front lines to serve as Chief of Medical Services in a Canadian hospital located near Boulogne-sur-Mer. His health deteriorated in the period between 1915 and 1918. He died of pneumonia on 28 January 1918 at a hospital set up by the British Army in Wimereux. His body was buried in the military section of the Wimereux Communal Cemetery. Alexis Helmer's grave is now lost whereas McCrae's grave has become a "site of memory". Many Canadians pay their respects by decorating it with poppies, crosses and small flags. In addition to the plaque located at the Wimereux Cemetery, other plaques honoring McCrae were unveiled in 2014, when commemorating the Centennial of the First World War. In 2015 a stamp and a collection of coins were issued by Canada Post and the Royal Canadian Mint respectively to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of "In Flanders Fields". People continue to pay tribute to the poet by visiting McCrae House, his stone cottage birthplace, which was turned into a museum in 1968.

McCrae's fame today is inextricably linked to "In Flanders Fields". The poem was in circulation among the troops before it was first published anonymously in the December 8, 1915 issue of London's illustrated magazine *Punch*, tucked away in the right bottom corner of page 468. It had previously been submitted for publication to *The Spectator*, but it had been rejected by this journal. Two years later *The Spectator* would publish McCrae's last poem, "The Anxious Dead" (1917), which dealt with the same theme, but never became as famous as the earlier poem. Eventually,

¹ "His face was very tired but calm as he wrote. He looked around from time to time, his eyes straying to Helmer's grave. The poem was an exact description of the scene in front of us both.

The word blow was not used in the first line though it was used later when the poem appeared in *Punch*. But it was used in the second last line. He used the word blow in that line because the poppies actually were being blown that morning by a gentle east wind.

It never occurred to me at that time that it would ever be published. It seemed to me just an exact description of the scene" (qtd. in Mathieson 264).

The Spectator did publish “In Flanders Fields” in 1919, once it had been reprinted by other journals and widely anthologized.

In addition to its popularity with the general public, the poem soon inspired a number of literary responses, some of which were published as early as 1918. Perhaps the most influential response was that of an American, Moina Michael. Two days before the Armistice was declared, she found “In Flanders Fields” reprinted in an issue of the *Ladies Home Journal*, and although she had previously read McCrae’s poem many times, at that precise moment she was so impressed that she wrote a poem entitled “We Shall Keep the Faith”, echoing McCrae’s thirteenth line: “If ye break faith with us who die”.² According to her autobiography, *The Miracle Flower*, a book she dedicated to the memory of John McCrae, she felt such a great emotional impact—which she described as a “full spiritual experience”—that she immediately “pledged to KEEP THE FAITH and always to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance and as an emblem of ‘keeping the faith with all who died’” (47).³

² Her poem would be included, together with twenty-four poems by McCrae and four other poems by four different authors, in the collection *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems* edited by David Wheeler in 2012 (27). The other authors were R. W. Lillard, C. B. Galbraith, John Mitchell, and Donald Joseph Connolly.

³ Later on the same day, she bought one large poppy for her desk and twenty-five small artificial red silk poppies. She pinned one of the small poppies on her cloak collar and distributed the others among the conference delegates, to whom she also showed McCrae’s poem. This was the first step of her campaign for the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy, which earned her the title of “Poppy Lady”. There was another “Poppy Lady”, Madame Anna Guérin, who was present at the 29th September National American Legion convention as a representative of the French YMCA Secretariat in 1920. Upon her return to France, she founded the “American and French Children’s League” through which she organized women, children and war veterans to make huge amounts of artificial poppies which were sold in America between 1920 and 1924. Madame Guérin also traveled to Canada, where she convinced the representatives of the Great War Veterans Association, which would later become the Royal Canadian Legion, to adopt the poppy as their emblem for remembrance, a decision they took in July 1921. The first lapel Poppies to be worn in Canada were made, beginning in 1922, by disabled veterans under the sponsorship of the Department of Soldiers Civil Re-establishment in order to provide them with a small source of income.

The First British Legion Poppy Day Appeal took place on 11 November 1921, with thousands of poppies selling across the United Kingdom. At present, the funds raised from the sale of the poppies and associated merchandise are used to support both former military service people in need and the families of those killed in armed conflicts. According to some reports, there is an increasing interest in these campaigns, which are enthusiastically supported by many people, but contested by others. For instance, "No poppy, thank you" is the last line of Martin Bell's aptly titled poem "Reasons for Refusal". The key issue of this bitter controversy can be formulated as a question: Is this just remembrance, or is it war propaganda? In fact, the arguments for and against the use of the poppy symbol are very similar to those heard about "In Flanders Fields". While its first two stanzas raise no objections, the third is a permanent subject of dispute. In *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) Paul Fussell observed that "it is an interesting poem because it manages to accumulate the maximum number of well-known motifs and images, which it gathers under the aegis of a mellow, if automatic, pastoralism" (259). However, he complained about the "recruiting-poster rhetoric" of lines 10-12 and argued about the last stanza as a whole: "We finally see—and with a shock—what the last six lines really are: they are a propaganda argument—words like *vicious* and *stupid* would not seem to go too far—against a negotiated peace" (250).

Apart from Fussell's comments, "In Flanders Fields" received little scholarly attention in the twentieth century, in spite of the fact that the period of reassessment of issues of war memory and commemoration had begun as early as 1964, when the fiftieth anniversary of the declaration of World War I coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of World War II (Tylee 1). The situation began to change in the present century as a result of the development of a new interest in "exploring the relations of power that structure the ways in which wars can be remembered" (Ashplant xi). In 2005 Nancy Holmes held up to scrutiny the artistic merits of McCrae's poem and thoroughly surveyed its reception, analyzing its complexities in the context of Canadian culture. In 2014 Neta Gordon used "In Flanders Fields" as a point of departure to examine how contemporary Canadian literary accounts of the First World War "respond to images, concepts, issues, and dilemmas introduced in McCrae's poem,

in particular the difficult question of what our debt to those war dead entails, especially as that debt inheres with the concept of collective memory” (1).

As an extremely popular war poem, “In Flanders Fields” certainly performed an important consolatory and healing function in the immediate aftermath of the First World War for those who were mourning the loss of more than 60,000 Canadian lives on the European battlefields. Furthermore, far from being forgotten as the years went by, the poem has made a lasting impression on Canada’s collective memory. Celebrated and beloved by the general public, it tends to be simply perceived as “a poem that continues to inspire us and call to action” (Grandfield 30), without having a clear idea of what “inspiration” and “action” may entail. Indeed, it has become an iconic poem recited with reverence and patriotic pride at solemn commemorative ceremonies every Remembrance Day. Nevertheless, taking advantage of the fact that many Canadians grew sentimentally attached to the moving lines they learned in their childhood, “In Flanders Fields” has often been misused as a pro-war propaganda tool. Moreover, in the essay “Treason to their Memory”, Mary Janigan convincingly argues that it was used to fan antagonisms between French- and English-speaking Canadians during the Conscription Crisis of 1917, which she calls “the most divisive and regrettable election campaign in Canadian history” (75).⁴

Without doubt, “In Flanders Fields” has been “exploited by the Canadian state as military propaganda” (McCutcheon 771).⁵ It should be noted, however, that two of the initial sympathetic responses it inspired

⁴ Janigan contends: “‘In Flanders Fields’ might have reinforced the Western Front with patriots, but it also reinforced Canada’s two solitudes. The sons of English Canadians enlisted, fired with the desire to take the torch from failing hands. Their fathers and mothers, their friends and relatives, subscribed to war bonds and believed Union government allegations that francophone Quebecers were traitors” (96). Janigan concludes affirming: “And ‘In Flanders Fields’—with its haunting evocations of lost lives and its fierce call to arms—provided the ammunition that Canadians would deploy against their fellow Canadians” (97).

⁵ See the two posters of the Victory Bond campaign which quote lines 13-14 and 12 from the last stanza of “In Flanders Fields” (Vance plates 6 and 7). Jonathan F. Vance’s caption for plate 6 reads: “John McCrae’s ‘In Flanders Fields’ became a powerful weapon in mobilizing support for the war” (n.p.).

—"In Flanders Now" by Edna Jaques⁶ and "In Memory of Lt.-Col. John McCrae" by Stella M. Bainbridge⁷—were poems concluding with unequivocal calls for world peace. In contrast with the respectful attitude expressed in both of them and in other contemporaneous literary responses, McCrae's rondeau was later subversively transformed or parodied through innovative uses of intertextuality for various satirical purposes, including that of rejecting any glorification of war, and more specifically, the moral and political questioning of Canada's engagement in a war fought on foreign soil.

A number of Canadian writers have carefully re-worked or significantly alluded to John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" (1915) either to support or to challenge some of the myths of the First World War.⁸ While many believe that the Great War gave birth to the Canadian nation, some maintain that WWI also inflicted injuries and left permanent scars on it. Sherrill Grace has examined the

⁶ First published in the *Calgary Herald* in 1918, "In Flanders Now" was soon reprinted by many newspapers and anthologized in Canada and the United States. This poem includes the hopeful proclamation that "And blood will never flow again / In Flanders' fields" (lines 14-15) and ends with the equally optimistic words: "And 'Peace on Earth' has just begun / In Flanders' now" (lines 21-22). Defining Edna Jaques as "Canada's bestselling but largely forgotten poet of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s" (90), Candida Rifkind argued: "Her war poetry—a genre she began after the First World War when she wrote an internationally popular response to John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' titled 'In Flanders Now'—captured the shift towards patriotic sentimentality but also the pacifist anti-modernism of the early 1940s" (110).

⁷ "In Memory of Lt.-Col. John McCrae", an eighteen-line poem first published in Montreal by *The University Magazine* and included just below McCrae's "The Anxious Dead" in the third edition of the anthology *In the Day of the Battle: Poems of the Great War* (1918), concludes with the line "And peace enshrines our tears". Stella M. Bainbridge is the author of a poem entitled "Peace" (1919), which was also published by *The University Magazine*.

⁸ Löschnigg explains: "The Great War of 1914-18 has become a Canadian foundation myth. It has been interpreted as the birth of the Canadian nation in the mud of Flanders, and in the victories of the battlefield. As Canadians fought with distinction on the side of the British, thus the national myth, the dominion's support of the mother country won it the respect that led to Canada's full sovereignty" ("Canada in Flanders" 213).

significant shift (...) away from an earlier realism, satire, or battle action account to an art characterized by the stress laid on the *process* of remembering, on the attention to trauma aftershocks, on the need to expose a range of betrayals and lies that cost Canadian lives, on the healing power of commemoration through art (...) and on the profound impact war has had on the home front. (*On the Art* 96)

Grace underscores the importance of the “works in which the First World War refuses to stay over there or release its victims but insists on permeating home ground and haunting the future” (*On the Art* 77). One of such works is Joseph Boyden’s first novel *Three Day Road* (2005) which, according to Hanna Teichler, revisits World War I as “one of the formative narratives of Canadian national self-consciousness” (240) through the perspective of Cree characters and claims recognition for the participation of indigenous people.

When modern Canadian drama has dealt with the complex issues related to the remembrance of the Great War, it has often questioned its mythology through the presentation of characters who are traumatized Canadians. For instance, the protagonist of Guy Vanderhaeghe’s play *Dancock’s Dance* (1996), Lieutenant John Carlyle Dancock, is a shell-shocked veteran haunted by the specter of a soldier he shot in the battlefield for refusing to obey the order to “go over the top” before an attack.⁹ The play, which was first performed in 1995, is set in the Saskatchewan Hospital for the Insane during the late fall 1918 outbreak of influenza. When most of the regular staff is dead or dying, Lieutenant Dancock, who has been interned there, becomes the courageous leader of the surviving patients while he is fighting the demons of his own post-traumatic stress disorder. Within the locked doors of the asylum, the ghostly soldier makes the ultimately disenchanted Lieutenant Dancock understand that he misapplied the code of duty he had been taught. The former officer partly seeks redemption by protecting the helpless Rudy Braun, an inmate of

⁹ Having surveyed how Canadian writers and artists have mapped the Canadian cultural landscapes formed by the memories of war they inherited, Sherrill Grace concludes: “Ghosts haunt the film footage and the pages of Canadian representations of the war” (*Landscapes* 210).

German background—not a German, Dancock corrects the Superintendent, but an “immigrant of German descent” (166)—who is terrorized by the cruel orderly Kevin Kennealy. The fifth scene starts with a monologue of the orderly, who enters drunk and in a quarrelsome mood, swearing and cursing “the Hun” (87). Rather than celebrating peace, he celebrates the allied victory in belligerent terms by means of a boxing simile in which he conceptualizes himself as if he were one of the fighters who managed to “black old Kaiser Bill’s eyes” (87).¹⁰ Then, he begins to recite “In Flanders Fields”, but after the first two lines, according to the stage directions, he “*can’t remember the words, mumbles in cadence, recalls a few more lines*” (87). He finally remembers the last three lines of the poem and “*raises the flask in a toast*” shouting “To the glorious dead!” (87). Martin Löschnigg has rightly pointed out how “the maudlin patriotic sentiment” voiced by “the opportunist orderly” Kennealy in this scene stands in sharp contrast with Lieutenant Dancock’s commitment, “sense of fairness and respect for the enemy” (“Like dying on a stage” 161-62). Curiously enough, one of the ten lines Kennealy fails to remember in his monologue is the controversial “Take up our quarrel with the foe”, which is exactly the one we would expect to hear from such a violent man.

Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977), a fictional biography now widely acknowledged as Canada’s classic war novel, has become a text as iconic and as influential as “In Flanders Fields” though for opposite reasons.¹¹ P. S. Sri has set these two texts in contrast, highlighting how Findley’s “satirical and unsparing vision of the Great War” (27) forms the

¹⁰ Kennealy’s boxing simile exemplifies Paul Fussell’s theory about the “gross dichotomizing” between us and the “enemy”: “‘We’ are individuals with names and personal identities; ‘he’ is a mere collective entity” (75).

¹¹ Robert Ross (1896-1922), the protagonist of the novel, enlists in the Canadian army at the age of nineteen, fights in France, is wounded in Ypres in 1915, recuperates in England and returns to the front, where he rebels against Captain Leather. Ross disobeys an order not to release the horses stabled in a barn under German bombardment, kills Captain Leather and Private Cassles as they are trying to prevent his escape with the horses, is wounded, flees with the horses he has freed, takes refuge in a barn which is set on fire, is arrested, court martialled *in absentia* (while he is being nursed) and convicted of insubordination and murder.

core of *The Wars*, “a penetrating post-colonial and post-modern text that effectively deconstructs and demythologizes the sentimental patriotism” of McCrae’s poem (35). Tracing the details of Timothy Findley’s growing up “in an upper middle-class Toronto family for which war was omnipresent”, Sherrill Grace has perceptively explained how the author’s

life-long antipathy for war informs his portrayal of the character of Robert Ross, fuels the passion with which he recreates and imagines trench warfare, and drives the narrative search for meaning that commands a reader’s attention and has intrigued so many critics since the novel’s publication. (“Remembering” 221, 223)

Grace emphasizes Findley’s concern with memory and bearing witness in order to challenge the official history of the war, undermining and contradicting the dominant narrative, insisting that readers must “resist the easy path of blind acceptance of myths of noble sacrifice for king and country” (234). In her extremely favorable review of *The Wars*, Margaret Atwood hailed its protagonist as “an essentially Canadian hero” and interpreted his last heroic act as “a protest against the death-force of the war, not an endorsement of it” (294).

“In Flanders Fields” was the only poem by John McCrae which Margaret Atwood chose for *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (61). She began her introduction to this anthology by praising the work of the compiler who preceded her two decades earlier, acknowledging that she “first came to Canadian poetry through two collections edited by A. J. M. Smith: the third edition of his *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1957) and *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1960)” and stating that, when she “was an extremely young poet”, she became aware of the existence of a Canadian tradition in poetry thanks to those two books (xxvii).¹² In the opening paragraph of her introduction Atwood drew attention to her acquaintance with McCrae’s poem:

¹² A. J. M. Smith includes “In Flanders Fields” in his 1960 anthology (110-11). Donna Bennett and Russell Brown excluded McCrae when they compiled their two-volume anthology entitled *Canadian Literature in English* (1982) and also from both *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2002) and *An Anthology of*

Furthermore, as a Canadian born in 1939 I had "In Flanders Fields" hammered into my head at an early age, and will doubtless never be able to shake the notion that what one properly does with torches is to hold them high: otherwise you get haunted. Consider what follows, then, as the propitiation of both a collective ancestral ghost, and of the individual spirit of a sage and generous man.

With these remarks in honor of A. J. M. Smith, Atwood humorously summarized what "In Flanders Fields" meant for her, indicating the two main ways in which she would use it throughout her fiction. The first effect is substantiated by her protagonists' quotations from McCrae's poem, which they were obliged to learn by heart in their school days, in an age when memorizing and reciting verse were staples of childhood. The poem is brought back to their minds on the occasion of Remembrance Day or when they ponder death-related issues. It is so deeply ingrained in their psyches, that they recall some of its lines without effort, although they never express any enthusiasm about it. The second way in which "In Flanders Fields" has had an impact Atwood's writings concerns a recurrent theme in many of them: the return of spectral soldiers, and by extension, of all the dead who come back as ghosts in order to haunt the living.

Margaret Atwood has made a very extensive use of McCrae's poem, and has resorted to quoting from it or alluding to it over and over again in her novels and short stories.¹³ For instance, in one of the sections of *Life*

Canadian Literature in English (2010). John McCrae is not even mentioned in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* (2015). However, in *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* (2009) D. M. R. Bentley briefly refers to "the popular success of McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' (1915)" (142) and Susan Fischer has singled out "the most famous poem of the war" as one of the many Canadian poems about the Great War which "employed voices from the grave, as if dead soldiers acquired immortality" (226). Joel Baetz not only included "The Anxious Dead" and "In Flanders Fields" in *Canadian Poetry from World War I: An Anthology* (81), but also a frontispiece photograph of McCrae with an extract from one of his diary entries used as a caption. In his introduction Baetz referred to his strong attachment to "In Flanders Fields" (1).

¹³ For a detailed survey of Margaret Atwood's literary treatment of war issues, including the presence of spectral soldiers haunting the protagonists of some of her fictional writings, see Gibert 2018.

Before Man (1979), which is focalized through the character of Elizabeth and dated 12 November 1976, the narrator uses a very poignant image to describe the artificial poppies worn on lapels in the days leading up to Remembrance Day as “red cloth petals of blood spattered out from the black felt hole in the chest, pinned at the center” (57). The allusion to McCrae’s poem is immediately made explicit by the literal quotation of three lines from it: “If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders fields” (57). Although McCrae’s name is never mentioned in *Life Before Man*, the narrator’s comments following this quote underscore the nationality of the poet—“A Canadian wrote that”—and the relevance of his most famous work for his fellow citizens. In the context of this particular scene, the line “*We are the Dead*”, which is italicized for emphasis, may be interpreted as Elizabeth’s perception that her country is inhabited by people leading death-in-life existences exactly like the one she feels she is leading after the suicide of her lover and the break of her marriage. “A morbid nation” (58) is how she regards a society with the habit of making their schoolchildren repeat such gloomy lines year after year. Elizabeth belongs to a generation used to memorizing poetry, an activity she seems to have enjoyed at the time, and even recalls how she was once chosen to recite McCrae’s poem in public. The proof that she still observes Remembrance Day is that she has bought a poppy, although her lack of enthusiasm is conveyed by the fact that she has not worn it, but simply kept it in her pocket, “her thumb against the pin” (58) in a symbolic gesture of minor self-harm.

Atwood reworks her recurrent image of the artificial poppy—conceptualized as a wound made by a bullet—in “Poppies: Three Variations”, a piece which has been classified as a prose poem by some literary critics and as an example of flash fiction by others. In its first section, the violent effect caused by the vision of the “small red explosions pinned to your chest, like a *blow* to the heart” (114) has the same intensity as the one provoked by the sight of the “red cloth petals of blood spattered out from the black felt hole in the chest” which had impressed Elizabeth while walking in the streets of Toronto in *Life Before Man* (57). Atwood uses the first stanza of “In Flanders Fields”, followed by its author’s name, as an epigraph to open “Poppies: Three Variations”, an experimental short narrative which is divided into three sections, each one consisting of a

single long paragraph with no breaks. The words of McCrae's stanza appear in italics woven into each section of Atwood's text so that the full stanza may be read three times if we select the embedded italicized words as they shoot off the page, an uncommon device which has been received with mixed reactions. This highly intertextual parodic piece, which combines satirical and elegiac elements in a clever manner, was first published in the November 1992 issue of the monthly magazine *Saturday Night* and included not only in Atwood's collection *Good Bones* (1992), but also anthologized by Callaghan and Meyer in the two editions of *We Wasn't Pals: Canadian Poetry and Prose of the First World War* (2001 and 2014), by George Bowering in the collection *And Other Stories* (2001) and, on the centenary of McCrae's poem, in Amanda Bett's collection of essays, poetry, fiction and visual art, *In Flanders Fields: 100 Years: Writing on War, Loss and Remembrance* (2015), where the embedded words are printed in red rather than italicized (135-40).

Switching between the past and the present, the opening section of "Poppies: Three Variations" focuses on the meaning of warfare for two different generations: the one whose thoughts about war were based on memory (because they had first-hand experience of battle) and the one whose thoughts are filtered through post-memory (because war is for them a distant historical event rather than part of their direct experience). The two perspectives are presented through the juxtaposed pattern of a first-person narrator alternately memorializing her now-deceased uncle and relating his recollections of the war in which he fought as a young soldier both to her own memories of him as an old veteran and to her current perception of war issues. She begins by stating that he once served either in Flanders or perhaps in France. She is not sure about this geographical detail and does not seem to care much about its exactitude, because what attracts her attention is how those fields look at present: they must have regained their greenness and are profitably cultivated again, "though they keep throwing up rusty shells, broken skulls" (*Good Bones* 114-15). Her uncle used to march in Remembrance Day parades, each year more slowly and with fewer veteran comrades, while the rest of the family commemorated the Armistice by buying poppies, formerly made of felt and nowadays made of plastic. One of the most striking features of this passage is its strong emphasis on the act of buying the poppies in

comparison to the less important act of wearing them. The artificial poppies are presented as a sign of the commodification of war, a sign immediately related to the buying and selling of tiny lead soldiers, which are no longer made of poisonous lead, but of supposedly less toxic plastic, and which are often advertised as marked down products. The narrator reinforces the idea that the commodification of war is not a novelty by referring to a series of objects decorated with one of the two Canadian flags imprinted on them, either “the red rusted-blood one the men fought under” in colonial times or the “new leafy flag”, that is, the national flag with the red maple leaf which was adopted in 1965. She remembers that her uncle still owned some household items (such as placemats, cups and saucers) exhibiting the old flag as a proof of loyalty to his country, and comments that in our time the same kind of items with the new flag may be bought as bargains. We are led to assume, although it is not explicitly stated, that today’s utilitarian customers are primarily attracted by the discounts and feel encouraged to purchase these price-reduced items not because of their patriotic decorations, but in spite of them.

Together with plastic poppies and other Canadian-themed artifacts, modern shop windows display an increasing assortment of plastic soldiers from “every part of the world”, thus giving an indication of the global dimension of our contemporary military conflicts, and additionally, of many people’s persistent interest in playing wargames. Yet, warfare was far from being a game or a pleasurable activity for the narrator’s uncle, who had neither seen nor heard McCrae’s larks, because there was too much smoke (or fog) and roaring in the battlefield. Instead of glamorizing the war he knew so well, he evoked the sordidness of trench warfare, with thousands of rotted corpses breeding flies and the dreadful scene in which a fellow soldier was suddenly blown to pieces while whispering next to him during a bombardment. His niece does not mention the mutilated bodies buried in makeshift graves or in military cemeteries in Europe, but ends her account with a chilling image inspired by them, rephrasing an utterance of the dead soldiers who, in the second stanza of the poem she is quoting and responding to, proclaimed that “short days ago” they “loved and were loved” (lines 6 and 8). She imagines how the armless or legless tin (or plastic) soldiers “that have been owned over the years, loved over the years, lost over the years” are now lying under our feet, and though they do not

speak like those of McCrae's poem, they are silently "listening to everything we say, waiting to be dug up" (*Good Bones* 115).

Apart from the italicized words drawn from the first stanza of "In Flanders Fields", the second section of "Poppies: Three Variations" contains only one reference to McCrae's poem. The third-person narrator focuses on the present lifestyle of an unnamed female protagonist whose main concerns revolve around the difficulties she faces to keep fit and healthy, her increasing forgetfulness, her fear of being harmed by street violence and, above all, the small domestic fights arising from her quarreling relationship with her male partner. Mortality looms in the background and takes shape in the line "We are the dead", the only one she can remember from a poem "she had to write out twenty times on *the* blackboard, for talking" when she was ten years old (116). In the third section of Atwood's brief narrative we hear again the voice of a first-person narrator who, when she was a schoolgirl, associated Flanders exclusively with the Flanders lace of nightgowns until she learned that this foreign place name was also connected to a war fought in a faraway country by grandfathers and other ancestors. She observes that "the trenches, the *fields* of mud, the barbed wire, became our memories as well", but admits that such second-hand memories were gradually erased like fading photographs or, to use another simile, were eroded like statues eaten away by rain (118). Now the veterans' grandchildren do not spend much time memorializing the long dead combatants because they have their own "lives to get on with" and "other things to think about", including the bothersome news about terrorists who blow up airports, or about hurricanes, famines and other disasters, while the guns are still firing because they "have never stopped, just moved around" and can be heard "below thought, below memory, *below* everything" (119-20). Death, violence and destruction are the common denominators of the three sections of "Poppies: Three Variations", which are pervaded by the struggle to cope with these three elements inherent in human nature.

The image linking the artificial poppies worn on clothing with the blood of the soldiers whose sacrifice is yearly commemorated reappears in the form of "petals of spilled blood" in the last chapter of *The Robber Bride* (1993), a novel which ends with a funerary ceremony performed on "November 11, 1991, at eleven o'clock in the morning, the eleventh hour

of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” (540). Tony, Charis and Roz are gathered together in order to scatter Zenia’s ashes in the lake at this precise moment, chosen by the first of them, a military historian whose obsession with the First World War can be interpreted as the result of her efforts to emotionally distance herself from the unbearable memories arising from the Second. Since it is Remembrance Day (nicknamed “Bloody Poppy Day” by Tony), each of the three friends “has a poppy stuck into the front of her coat” (541). Charis thinks about November as the “month of the dead, month of returning” and ponders how “the French decorate their family graves with chrysanthemums, the Mexicans with poppies”, whereas Canadians “go in poppies. The flower of sleep and forgetting. Petals of spilled blood” (541). At this point, Tony evokes, with amusement rather than fear, the possibility that the dead may “come back for revenge” (542). On the contrary, Charis is frightened by her certainty that the mere absence of a body does not prevent the dead from returning and terrified by her inability to control her own desires: “The dead return in other forms, she thinks, because we will them to” (543). But the dead summoned here are not the soldiers of McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields”. By quoting the paradoxical line “*I am the enemy you killed, my friend*” from the shocking last stanza of Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting” (line 40), what is brought to the reader’s mind is an anti-war poem, written in 1918 and first published in 1919 (the year after the poet’s death) in the spirit of reconciliation.

The time setting of *The Robber Bride* (23 October 1990—11 November 1991) roughly coincides with that of the Gulf War (2 August 1990—28 February 1991), which is one of the numerous armed conflicts discussed in this novel, especially by Tony, whose expertise as a military historian is set in contrast with the ignorance exhibited by her two friends. Tony’s exasperation leads her to put forward a series of war images which she thinks would shake Charis out of her naïve attitude:

Sometimes Tony would like to take Charis by the lily-white hand and lead her to the piles of skulls, to the hidden pits filled with bodies, to the starved children with their stick arms and ballooning stomachs, to the churches locked up and then burned with their sizzling prisoners howling inside, to the crosses, row on row on row. (36)

While all of these images seem to be inspired by photographs or documentary films, it should be noted that the words used to convey the last picture are unequivocally drawn from the second line of "In Flanders Fields": "Between the crosses, row on row". By transposing McCrae's words to the new setting of her novel and placing them at the end of a list of atrocities stemming from war, Atwood achieves a satirical effect which undermines any idyllic perception of military cemeteries which readers may have previously had.

Iris Chase, the protagonist of *The Blind Assassin* (2000), refers to John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" on three occasions in her fictional memoir. The first occurrence takes place as Iris records in disparaging terms a student graduation ceremony she had to attend when she was already an elderly woman. Her depiction of the scene successfully conveys her reluctance to listen to the trite speeches full of clichés she had heard so many times before. After some sarcastic remarks about how bored she was by the school chaplain's "prayer, lecturing God on the many unprecedented challenges that face today's young people" (38), Iris recalls that she allowed her mind to drift while "the others gave voice in turn: end of the twentieth century, toss out the old, ring in the new, citizens of the future, to you from failing hands and so forth" (38). The last of these conventional phrases is a literal quotation from McCrae's poem: "To you from failing hands we throw" (line 11).

Iris quotes from the poem again, in this case its first two lines, "*In Flanders fields the poppies blow, Between the crosses, row on row*", as an example of the type of poetry which her private tutor, an old maid with a taste for romantic novels who was nicknamed Miss Violence, taught her to read out loud (155). Later in her memoir, she explains her change of heart about those poems, perhaps including McCrae's among them: "The poems that used to entrance me in the days of Miss Violence now struck me as overdone and sickly" (389). These two instances illustrate how Iris deliberately seeks to scorn the traditional discourse of public remembrance by mocking McCrae's poem, a satirical attitude which suits the daughter of Captain Chase. Iris depicts her father as an idealistic young volunteer who enthusiastically "enlisted at once" and "joined the Royal Canadian Regiment" with his two brothers (70). After being wounded on three different occasions (at the Somme, at Vimy Ridge and at Bourslon Wood),

he returned from Europe as a disillusioned veteran, physically and psychologically maimed, suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder which would not only ruin his life, but also damage those of his wife and his two daughters (Gibert, "Haunted" 50). In fact, when Iris derides McCrae's poem in the two instances described above, she seems to be echoing her father's views of the war as a wasteful slaughter and his contempt for "all the talk of fighting for God and Civilization" (77). However, when she resorts to McCrae's poem a third time, she uses it with a different tone and for a different purpose. Near the end of the novel, Iris confesses that she is the author of the romance which was posthumously attributed to Laura, a book she wrote as a "memorial" to her sister, about whose suicide she felt guilty. She defines this kind of memorial as "a commemoration of wounds endured (...) and resented" and contends that "without memory, there can be no revenge" (508). Then, she concludes with two very short paragraphs:

Lest we forget. Remember me. To you from failing hands we throw. Cries of the thirsty ghosts.

Nothing is more difficult than to understand the dead, I've found; but nothing is more dangerous than to ignore them.
(508)

The first italicized quotation, originally from Deuteronomy 6:11 ("Then beware lest thou forget the Lord"), was drawn from the Bible by Rudyard Kipling for the refrain of "Recessional" (1897): "Lest we forget—lest we forget!" The three words, which are repeated eight times in Kipling's poem, were recommended by the poet himself as one of the tombstone epitaphs for the battlefield cemeteries when in 1917 he was appointed the literary advisor of the Imperial War Graves Commission. They also constitute the motto selected by Captain Chase, who refused all other inscriptions suggested for the war memorial he sponsored in his hometown to honor his two brothers (one killed at the Ypres Salient and the other at the Somme) and his fallen comrades.

In this context, the quotation of the eleventh line of McCrae's poem—"To you from failing hands we throw"—acquires a solemn tone as it becomes one of the cries of the "thirsty ghosts" haunting Iris, who becomes painfully aware of how difficult it is to understand the dead and how dangerous it is to ignore them. In the last of the six Empson lectures

which Atwood delivered at the University of Cambridge in 2000, precisely the year when *The Blind Assassin* was first published, she devoted close attention to "In Flanders Fields" and even quoted the poem in full in the ensuing book which came out two years later, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (165-66). The paragraphs following the poem clarify what Atwood meant when she wrote about the "thirsty ghosts" in *The Blind Assassin* (508): "They want the blood of the living, or at least they want the blood put at risk in behalf of their cause" (*Negotiating* 166). Acknowledging that "at the time of its first publication, this poem was thought to be about the sustaining of belligerence toward enemy aliens during World War I", she argues that eighty years later "something powerful remains, because it embodies a very old and a very strong pattern" (166). And she concludes, almost paraphrasing the words of the protagonist of *The Blind Assassin* when she wrote about the danger of ignoring the ghosts (508), by insisting on the necessity to pay attention to the ghosts and to always do what they request from us, because "the dead make demands, says the poem, and you can't just dismiss either the dead or the demands: you'd be wise to take both of them seriously" (*Negotiating* 166).

Neta Gordon's comments on the "prosopopoeiac disturbance" (33) created in McCrae's poem may shed light on one of the factors which have played a key role in its continuous influence for more than 100 years. The poem has certainly helped to endorse the conventional discourse of noble and glorious sacrifice, but it has also been turned into a powerful tool to subvert it while encouraging the exploration of the traumatic memory of warfare. Within the revisionist context of contemporary Canadian literature, "In Flanders Fields" stands as a symbol of the national military myths to be critically reassessed and ironically debunked rather than perpetuated.

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ABSTRACT

A number of Canadian writers have carefully re-worked or significantly alluded to John McCrae's iconic poem "In Flanders Fields" (1915) either to support or to challenge some of the myths of the Great War. Celebrated and beloved by the general public, this extremely popular war poem has made a lasting impression on Canada's collective memory. While it continues to be recited with reverence and genuine patriotic pride at solemn commemorative ceremonies every Remembrance Day, it has also given rise to bitter controversies about its presumed healing powers and alleged traumatic effects. Taking advantage of the fact that many Canadians grew sentimentally attached to the moving lines they learned in their childhood, "In Flanders Fields" was exploited by politicians to fuel antagonisms within the country and has often been misused as a military propaganda tool. Paradoxically, two of the initial literary responses it inspired were not belligerent poems, but sympathetic elegies for the dead in WWI, concluding with unequivocal calls for world peace. In contrast with the respectful attitude expressed by McCrae's contemporary writers, his rondeau was later subversively transformed or parodied—by Margaret Atwood in particular—through innovative uses of intertextuality for various satirical purposes, including that of rejecting any glorification of war, and more specifically, the moral and political questioning of Canada's engagement in a war fought on foreign soil.

KEYWORDS

War commemoration; spectral soldiers; ghosts; haunting; parody

RESUMO

Um número expressivo de escritores canadenses tem cuidadosamente re-trabalhado o poema icónico de John McCrae, "In Flanders Fields" (1915), ou a ele aludido, de forma significativa, para apoiar ou para desafiar alguns dos mitos da Grande Guerra. Celebrado e amado pelo público em geral, este poema, extremamente popular, permanece de modo duradouro na memória colectiva do Canadá.

Embora continue a ser declamado, com reverência e genuíno orgulho patriótico, nas comemorações solenes de cada *Remembrance Day*, tem igualmente originado amargas controvérsias sobre os seus presumíveis poderes curativos e alegados efeitos traumáticos. Aproveitando-se do facto de muitos canadianos terem crescido sentimentalmente ligados aos versos comoventes aprendidos na infância, “In Flanders Fields” foi explorado politicamente para espicaçar antagonismos no país, frequentemente abusado como um instrumento de propaganda militar. Paradoxalmente, duas das respostas literárias iniciais que o texto inspirou eram poemas contra a guerra, elegias compassivas pelos mortos da 1ª Guerra Mundial, que terminavam com inequívocos apelos pela paz mundial. Em contraste com a atitude de respeito expressa por escritores contemporâneos de McCrae, o seu rondeau foi mais tarde transformado de forma subversiva ou paródica—em particular por Margaret Atwood— através de usos inovadores de intertextualidade para diversos propósitos satíricos, incluindo o repúdio por qualquer glorificação da guerra, e, mais especificamente, para promover o questionar moral e político do envolvimento do Canadá numa guerra combatida em território estrangeiro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Comemorações da guerra; soldados espectros; fantasmas; assombração; paródia
