

World War I: “Flander’s Fields,” 1915-2015: Whence the Poppies?

An Excerpt From the Forthcoming Book by Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Great Class War 1914-1918*.

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*An excerpt from the forthcoming book by Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Great Class War 1914-1918*.*

The enthusiasm for war in the summer of 1914 was never as great or as widespread as we have been conditioned to believe. By early 1915, after six months of massacres and with no end in sight, soldiers and civilians were disillusioned and disgusted. The authorities of all belligerent countries responded with a major pro-war propaganda campaign, in which the British excelled.

In all the belligerent countries, the authorities worried more and more about the slumping morale of civilians as well as soldiers, and remedies were sought, war propaganda was cranked out even more grimly than before. It was in this context that on May 3, 1915, in the vicinity of Ypres, a Canadian officer, Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, known as a keen supporter of the British Empire (of which his country was still a dominion) and of the war, was inspired to write a poem in which he urged the men to carry on with their task in spite of all the hardship. This composition, entitled *In Flanders’ Fields*, was predestined to become famous all over the world, presumably on account of its potent description of poppies floating in a sea of crosses marking the tombs of the dead, and also of larks singing, high above the heads of the trench-bound combatants, in spite of the rumble of the guns:

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.

In his brilliant book on the Great War, Paul Fussell has critically dissected this poem. He denounces it as an almost “vicious and stupid” but particularly powerful and effective literary instrument of war propaganda, of what the French called *jusqu’au boutisme*, “fighting until the [triumphant] end,” in which the line “take up our quarrel with the foe” naturally jumps to the fore. The poem was indeed potent and effective, because it evoked images the denizens of the trenches were familiar with and found appealing, such as they sky stretching high above their heads, the dawn and sunset they observed keenly every single day, the mesmerizing larks, untouchable high in the sky, the blissful “mock-death” (Fussell) of the sleep they cherished so much – and the red poppies, traditionally associated not only with sleep, dreams, and oblivion, but also with love, blood, and martyrdom. (To the British soldier and poet Isaac Rosenberg too, the poppies were a strong symbol in the sense of blood and sacrifice; in his poem *Break of Day in the Trenches*, he wrote that “the roots” of the poppies “are in man’s veins.”)

It was not a coincidence that poppies flowered abundantly in Flanders’ Fields in the spring of 1915. Normally, the minuscule seeds of this flower penetrate deep into the earth in order to wait there, sometimes for years, for the soil to be upturned for some reason, and thus exposed to the sunlight and warmth they suddenly germinate. With the digging of miles of trenches and the explosion of tens if not hundreds of thousands of shells starting in the fall of 1914, the conditions were created for an unprecedented burgeoning of poppies the following spring in that corner of Belgium, of course most spectacularly so in the immediate vicinity of the trenches and in the pockmarked no-man’s land. With its poppies, McCrae’s poem thus certainly catered to the sensibilities of the Canadian and British soldiers. Even more effective as a tool of motivation was the fact that the poem loomed like an appeal emanating from the fallen comrades, rather than from officialdom, including officers like McCrae himself. It insinuated in a particularly subtle way that not to persevere in “our [sic] quarrel with the foe” would have amounted to a kind of treason, a gross shattering of the chain of solidarity that bound the men together – the living as well as the dead! Not “holding high the torch” thus became unthinkable, as it would have meant betraying the dead comrades. Such disloyalty would have prevented the latter from finding rest in an eternal sleep, even though they were cradled by a lovely landscape bursting with soporific blossoms:

If ye break faith with us who die,

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.

Such a *jusqu’au-boutiste* poem could hardly fail to find favour with military and political authorities keen to find ways to motivate the men, with the media, and thus with the public. McCrae received heaps of letters and telegrams congratulating and praising him. In

Flanders’ Fields was published on December 6, 1915 in the satirical but nationalist British magazine Punch and thus embarked on a career as one of the most celebrated and cited literary products of the Great War. The reason was not its literary merits, nor was it because ordinary soldiers liked it, which does not seem to have been the case at all. It became famous because it would be used systematically, year after year, to make propaganda in favour of the war and against pacifism, in favour of the sale of war bonds, of the recruitment of volunteers all over the British Empire and later, in 1917, in the United States – and in Canada, again in 1917, in favour of the introduction of conscription, a measure that met with much opposition, especially in the province of Québec. Even today, the red poppy is associated not only with remembrance, but with nationalism and militarism, which is why on occasions such as Remembrance Day pacifists have turned to wearing an alternative, white poppy.

The poppy also made an appearance in a very different literary and musical creation of 1915, but one of a strongly anti-militarist nature, namely a French song inspired by the bloody fighting in the infamous forest known as Bois-le-Prêtre, in Lorraine. In this song the red poppy is an analogue of the futile medals bestowed on the soldiers who “fell” for the fatherland on that particular “field of honour”:

Si, du canon bravant l'écho, gunfire,	If the sun dares to ignore the
Le soleil y risque un bécot, kiss,	And comes to bless us with a little
On peut voir le coquelicot	Red poppies all around us
Partout renaître...	Spring to life again...
Car, dans un geste de semeur,	It is God who, like a sower,
Dieu, pour chaque Poilu qui meurt,	Generously casts decorations
Jette des légions d'honneur	One for every soldier
Au Bois-le-Prêtre!	Who dies in Bois-le-Prêtre!

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