

THE MEMORIAL POPPY

Our God and soldiers we alike adore
Ev'n at the brink of danger; not before:
After deliverance, both alike requited,
Our God's forgotten, and our soldiers slighted.

--Francis Quarles, *Emblems*

The above quotation by the 17th century English poet appears to adequately sum up the prevailing attitude following all wars up to the 1914-18 holocaust.

There was no reason to assume a similar pattern of tragedy and ruined lives would not continue at the conclusion of the First World War. Returned soldiers had often been brushed aside, and thrown onto the street, at the end of hostilities, to be completely forgotten within a few years. Government support, if any, had been of short term, and woefully inadequate.

Financial help was needed to assist injured soldiers unable to resume their employment, as well as that large body of desperate men who no longer had jobs.

However, thanks to unrelenting pressure exerted by a few dedicated individuals, changes were taking place.

A few days prior to the termination of the First World War, the common poppy was chosen as a symbol of help for the victims of war. It also became the sign of hope for the homeless civilians whose devastated countries had been used as battlegrounds.

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Looking back to the spring of 1915, around the war-torn battlefields of France and Belgium, often the only living things seemed to be rats and humans, according to reports. Soldiers in the trenches were amazed to find clumps of poppies growing amongst all the carnage of war--tiny bright spots in that dirty drab universe.

This surprising poppy inspired Canadian Lt.-Col. John McCrea to write his famous poem "In Flanders Fields."

Canada Post issued a stamp, Unitrade Specialized Catalogue #487, in 1968, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the death of this soldier and surgeon. The stamp, which displayed his likeness, had his poem printed in the background.

However it seems debatable whether McCrea's familiar poem and subsequent fame would have survived for 100 years had it not been for the persistency of two women during that time — an American, Miss Moina Michael; and a French woman, Madame Anna Guérin.

Moina Michael, a professor at the University of Georgia, volunteered to work at the YWCA Overseas War Service headquarters in New York, during the First World War, training women for work abroad.

She was featured on a stamp issued by the United States Postal Service on November 9, 1948, listed in Scott's catalogue as U.S. #977.

A story is told that a few days before the signing of the 1918 Armistice ending the First World War, a serviceman passing Michael's desk left her a copy of the *Ladies Home Journal*.

Glancing through the magazine she read an article on McCrea's poem titled "We Shall Not Sleep" (In Flanders Fields), and was deeply moved by the article.

The pages had such an impact on her, it is said, the woman made a personal resolve to "Keep the Faith" and always wear a red poppy in remembrance of Flanders Fields. She also penned her own poem "We Shall Keep the Faith" in response to this pledge.

Michael purchased a number of poppies at her own expense, which she distributed around her workplace, catching the attention of a number of delegates attending a conference.

The convention representatives, after viewing the illustration and magazine article on McCrea's

poem and Michael's response to it, were most impressed and asked to include the material for discussion during the convention.

Having receiving a small financial donation from members who appreciated her efforts to brighten the premises, she later searched surrounding shops for additional poppies, and was able to locate one large and 24 small artificial red silk flowers. Retaining one poppy for herself she then donated the remainder to the delegates.

Michael's immediate goal became to have pins, postcards, and other materials prepared before the June, 1919, signing of the Peace Treaty of Versailles. She believed a type of symbolic reminder was urgently needed to preserve the memory of soldiers who would not be returning home, no longer able to join the peace celebration. The symbol had to be established before all the war-like propaganda of the previous years disappeared.

To Michael, having been raised with a religious background, the poppy represented a spiritual symbol for the world, as the "war to end all wars." was finally terminated.

Her tireless efforts, it was claimed, led to a campaign to have the poppy recognized as a national memorial symbol in the United States.

A designer, Lee Keedick, agreed to produce a design in December of 1919. The emblem, approved by Miss Michael, was said to have consisted of a border of blue on a white background with the Torch of Liberty and a Poppy intertwined in the centre, containing the colours of the Allied flags: red, white, blue, green and yellow.

On February 14, 1919, at Carnegie Hall, New York City, during a lecture given by Canadian air ace Col. William Avery "Billy" Bishop, VC, CB, DSO and Bar, MC, DFC, ED., the Torch of Liberty emblem was officially displayed for the first time. The title of Bishop's discourse on that occasion was "Air Fighting in Flanders Fields."

His likeness was reproduced on a stamp issued by Canada Post, part of a set of "Great Canadians" in 1994, listed in the Unitrade Specialized Catalogue as #1525.

Extremely disappointed, Michael discovered there was very little interest in her campaign and no group appeared willing to carry on her work. Still determined, during the winter of 1918-19, she visited nine hospitals for ex-servicemen in her home state of Georgia. She noted that mental and physical support was needed, in addition to medical care, plus help for the families of those who died in the service of their country.

Upon returning to her position as a professor at the University of Georgia, she taught a class of disabled veterans from amongst the hundreds needing to be rehabilitated. Michael was of the opinion that a Memorial Poppy fund could help provide self help for the men and their dependents.

She received a pleasant surprise in 1920, when a number of organizations chose the flower to commemorate their remembrance.

Founded by veterans the year before to provide support, the American Legion held a convention in Atlanta where delegates endorsed the poppy movement. However, the group dropped the Torch portion. It was then resolved that each member would wear a red poppy annually on November 11.

The Legion national body, at their convention a month later formerly adopted the "Flanders Field Memorial Poppy" as the United States' national emblem of remembrance.

Since that time, the annual sale of artificial poppies throughout the allied world has gained great meaning as a tool to assist disabled servicemen who fought for their country but were unable to pursue former occupations or return to the workforce.

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The Memorial Poppy movement was spread to France by Madame Anna Guérin who, horrified by the chaos left in her homeland following the signing of the armistice, felt sales of artificial poppies could help raise funds to assist children orphaned by the war. French women and war veterans were organized to make poppies from cloth with proceeds to aid restoration of war-torn zones. A group,

named the American and French Children's League, was formed to handle the operations.

During 1921 representatives were sent to the United States resulting in French-made poppies being sold in the U.S. from 1920 until 1924.

The organizing group was disbanded during 1922. Still needing help Guérin spoke with the Veterans of Foreign Wars in the United States, which adopted the poppy as their own official flower. (The group was honoured with a stamp by the USPS in 1974, Scott catalogue #1525).

The Auxiliary to the American Legion soon decided disabled and unemployed veterans could make their own poppies which the auxiliary would purchase for resale. In the United States poppies are worn in May during the annual Memorial Day.

A dedicated lady, she travelled to England and met with Field Marshal Earl Douglas Haig, founder and president of the British Legion and secured further sales for French poppies..

Of the colonial allies, Australia commemorated the event as Armistice Day from 1921 until 1977 when it was officially named Remembrance Day.

New Zealand's first Poppy Day was postponed until April 24, 1922 due to the late arrival of the shipment from France.

Guérin also visited Canada in 1921 where she met with the Great War Veterans' Association, forerunner of the Canadian Legion, which adopted the flower in July, of the same year.

Since 1922 Canadian war veterans have made lapel poppies sold in this country. The Royal Canadian Legion presently subcontracts out the making of poppies under RCL guidelines.

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Canada Post in 2009 issued a stamp and a souvenir sheet (Unitrade #2341 and 2341a) with the theme 'Lest We Forget' "To honour the memory of the men and women of Canada's Armed Forces who have given the ultimate sacrifice for our country" as expressed in '*details*' Canada Post's philatelic magazine.

The souvenir sheet of two stamps is set on a photograph of the National War Memorial in Ottawa. Creative Director for the stamp, Lionel Gadoury believes of the models "Their upward glances are forward-looking and express a sense of hope — of pride in a strong nation and belief in a peaceful future."

Prominently displayed on the permanent stamp is the vibrant red poppy.

Canada's latest stamp displaying a poppy was released in October, 2013 when Canada Post issued a permanent stamp (Unitrade #2684), commemorating the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment's 150th year since inception. While a number of amalgamations have taken place over the years, the regiment can trace its history back to the Boer War and the 1885 North-West Rebellion in Canada, the Canada Post magazine *details* informs us.

The regiment served with honour in both World Wars and volunteers have taken part in every action in which Canada has been involved. The background shows a number of soldiers apparently preparing for battle while the forefront features a pair of bright red poppies.

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Hence the value of the poppy chosen as a symbol of help.

The cheerful, vibrant, poppy is generally a most persistent annual, able to survive almost anywhere under the most adverse conditions. Scientists have improved certain varieties to provide a valuable medical aid, while other persons, less honourably motivated, have attempted to turn the plant into a major curse.

MEMORIAL POPPIES



Canada, #487-Lt.-Col. John McCrea, author of poem *Flanders Fields*



U.S. # 977--Moina Michael, author of poem *We Shall Keep the Faith* and Memorial Poppy promoter



U.S. #1525--Organization was early supporter of Memorial Poppy cause



Canada #1525--Air ace 'Billy' Bishop gave lecture on Air Fighting in Flanders Fields



Canada #2341a--*Lest We Forget*, 2009 souvenir sheet issued with two permanent stamps. Background shows portions of National War Memorial in Ottawa.