**The Poppy**

**Red Poppy Symbolism**

Initially, the red Poppy became a symbol of remembrance of lives of Allied military personnel lost during the First World War. With the passage of time and subsequent wars (World War II, Korea, Gulf War, Afghanistan etc.) it has also come to represent remembrance of other service personnel lost in these conflicts, and as a show of support for the Armed Forces Community generally. The Royal Canadian Legion states, “Today, the Poppy is worn each year during the Remembrance period to honour Canada’s Fallen.“

**The Genesis of the Poppy Campaign – Mother Nature, a Man and Several Women**

The rise to prominence of a battlefield flower to become a powerful symbol of remembrance for war dead especially resulted from the combined efforts of Mother Nature, a Canadian man and two very determined women.

**Mother Nature:**

The origin of the Poppy Campaigns that now take place in many countries around the world, of course, began in the front-line, war-torn landscapes of France and Belgium during the First World War. Beginning in July 1914, the war between the Allied and Central Powers quickly ground to a stalemate of trench warfare along a line from the

English Channel on the North Sea all the way to Switzerland. The fighting devastation badly disturbed what had formerly been pastoral farmland, churned up soil, smashed wood, fields and streams and left a wasteland. Few elements of the natural world could survive except for the soldiers hunkered down in their trenches.

The field poppy (“papaver rhoeas”: red leaf with black centre) is a perennial plant which flowers each year between May and August. Its seeds are disseminated on the wind and can lie dormant in the ground for many years. If the ground is disturbed, the seeds will often germinate and poppy flowers will grow. Furthermore, the debris and rubble from the fighting added much lime to the soil, an ingredient much desired by poppies.

This is what happened with the arrival of warm temperatures in the spring of 1915. The ground that had been disturbed by the fighting thawed and the poppy seeds lying in the ground began to germinate and grow during the spring and summer of 1915. Around Ypres, in Belgium in the West Province of Flanders where the Canadian Expeditionary Force was located, poppies began to bloom. Records from that time indicate how thick the poppies grew over the graves of soldiers in the area of Flanders.

The lime from rubble added to the growth spurt. As set out below, these would soon be noticed by a Canadian doctor named John McCrae servicing there with the 1st Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery. The poppy was also blooming in parts of the Turkish battlefields on the Gallipoli peninsula when ANZAC and British Forces arrived there at the start of that campaign in April 1915.

These red poppies with their black centres grew in fields where almost nothing else could. They also grew up around some of the many makeshift gravesites that increasingly dotted the landscape as the human carnage of the war progressed. When the war ended the lime was quickly absorbed into the soil and the poppy began to disappear again.

So, Mother Nature provided the first step in the sequence of events that led to the popularization of Poppies as a symbol of remembrance. The next impetus came from a man at Ypres.

**The Canadian Man:**

**Major John McCrae**

The Second Battle of Ypres was fought there between 22 April and 25 May 1915. It was the first major battle fought by Canadians (serving under British Command) in the Great War. It was a particularly brutal battle involving 81,000 Allied casualties and 35,000 from the Central Powers. More than 6,500 Canadians were killed, wounded or captured in the Second Battle of Ypres. It was also the first time the Central Powers had employed poisonous, chlorine gas in large quantities. At the end of the fight, the Allied Powers, including the green Canadians held the Ypres Salient.

Serving with the 1st Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery was Major John McCrae. He was both a military officer and the Brigade senior medical officer. McCrae was born in Guelph, Ontario on 30 November 1872 and was 42 years old at the time of the Second Battle of Ypres. He had graduated from medical school at the University of Toronto, had previously served in the Boer War (1899-1902), where he was mentioned in dispatches, and subsequently continued to serve in the militia until the start of the Great War.

One of the 2,000 servicemen killed in action was a young, 22-year-old civil engineer from the Ottawa area serving as a Lieutenant with McCrae’s brigade. His name was Lt. Alexis Hannum Helmer. He and McCrae were good friends and McCrae was badly distraught by the loss of his young friend and comrade.

Afterwards, Cyril Allison, a sergeant-major in McCrae’s unit was delivering the brigade’s mail and watched McCrae as he worked on a poem which was soon to become famous. Allison noted that McCrae’s eyes periodically returned to Helmer’s grave as he wrote. Red poppies had grown up around the soldiers’ gravesites where Helmer had been interred. When handed the notepad by McCrae, Allison read the poem and was so moved he immediately committed it to memory. He described it as being “almost an exact description of the scene in front of us both.” Legend has it that McCrae dashed off the original text of the poem in 20 minutes. But he was not satisfied with it and crumpled the paper upon which he had written and threw it away. The crumpled paper was retrieved from the garbage by Sgt.Maj. Allison and turned in to his commanding officer in the Brigade. The C.O. returned the poem to McCrae and encouraged him to continue working on it. According to this account, McCrae did so and worked on the poem for several more months before considering it ready for publication.

“Punch” Magazine published McCrae’s poem on 8 December 1915. In time it would become the most memorable poems written about the Great War and remembrance. The original title of the poem was “We Shall Not Sleep,” but later evolved to the title “In Flanders Fields” as we know it today.

**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.

“Punch” Magazine made a wise publication choice, as McCrae’s poem became instantly famous and continues to be now over 100 years later.

Unfortunately, John McCrae did not survive the Great War. His lungs had been damaged as a result of gas attacks of the Second Battles of Ypres and he developed pneumonia in January 1918 which was soon complicated by meningitis. On 28 January 1918 McCrae passed away at Boulogne-Sur-Mer-France at the age of forty-five. He was buried with full military honours at Wimereux Communal Cemetery in Pas-de-Calais, France. A monument to Lt. Col. John McCrae was subsequently erected at Essex Farm Cemetery, a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery near Ypres, Belgium.

**The Women**

**Madame Anna A. Guerin (nee Boulle) – the “French Poppy Lady”**

Anna Alix Boulle was born on 5 February 1878 in the southeast of France near the Rhone Alps. She was the second child of eight and was born into a Protestant farming family. At the age of 19 she married Paul Rabanit and the couple almost immediately moved to Madagascar which had just recently become a French colony.

While in Madagascar, Anna had two daughters but then became divorced from her husband. Anna returned to France with her two daughters in 1909 or 1910. Once back in Paris, she remarried to Constantin Charles Guerin, whom she had met in Madagascar. Guerin was Justice of the Peace who was resident in Paris but working in Senegal, West Africa.

With her husband working in West Africa, Ann took her two daughters and they resided in England until the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. She made a living by giving literary and musical lectures all around England, Scotland and Ireland. The topics of the lectures generally focused on French culture, history and important French historical figures, and were often presented in French then repeated in English. In time, she became a very well-known lecturer, and some called her the “Sarah Bernhardt of the Lecture Platform.”

Two months after the outbreak of World War I Anna Guerin left France and sailed for America arriving in early October 1914. Her daughters were left in England at boarding school and her husband volunteered to serve as an interpreter at a German prisoner-of-war camp in France for the duration. Anna was now on her own in America.

From this time forward, for the duration of the war, Anna would split her time in America for half the year and then return to France for the other half to help out the people of her now war-torn country. While in America she continued her lecture series that had been so popular when in England. But now her focus on fundraising kicked in and she began speaking under the auspices of the “Alliance Francais” and for the benefit of the Red Cross who were delivering aid to war-torn France. In time, the beneficiary of the lectures evolved to include proceeds for the “Orphelins de la Guerre” - the orphans of the war. Later still, injured French soldiers also became beneficiaries.

Just before the Armistice in November 1918, Anna Guerin left the U.S.A. to return to France. She was called to Paris by “La Ligue des Enfants de France et d’Amerique,” an affiliate of the newly installed French government. Due to her extensive experience and connections in America, Anna was asked to return to the USA to create an American branch called “the American and French Children’s League, sometimes also known as the “Fraternal League of the Children of France and the Inter Allies Children’s League. **The Poppy was the organization’s emblem.**

Madame Guerin did return to the U.S.A. in March 1919 and began a twenty-month lecture series and fundraising campaign. She became known as the “Poppy Lady from France.”

During these early days, Poppies were manufactured out of cloth in orphanages in France by the children and shipped to America where Anna Guerin tirelessly traversed North America promoting Poppy Days in many cities. Proceeds from the sale of these Poppies then went back to aid the orphans of war in France and also to provide aid to widows and disabled soldiers as well. All of this was intended to help with the restoration of the devastated regions of France.

In the U.S.A. her efforts, when combined with those of another woman who will be introduced below, led to the American Legion agreeing to use the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy as the United States’ national emblem of Remembrance in 1921.

Madame Guerin was active not only in the U.S.A, but also in Canada. During her lecture and fundraising tours in North America she also travelled extensively throughout Canada. In May 1921, Anna commenced a tour in Canada to organize a Canadian version of her league: “The Canadian-Franco Children’s League.” She met with various officials including the National Chapter of the International Order of the Daughters of the Empire (“IODE”) and the Catholic Women’s League of Canada amongst others.

In 1991, a plaque was unveiled at the Prince Arthur hotel in Thunder Bay, ON to commemorate her contributions in 1921.

The inscription reads:

“In commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the blood red Poppy as a symbol of remembrance to war veterans and those who gave their lives for freedom and truth during the Great War, Madame Guerin, the Poppy Lady of France first proposed that a Poppy Day be held in Canada at a National Conference of the Great War Veteran’s Association(\*) during their meeting at the Prince Arthur Hotel, Port Arthur, Ontario 4 July 1921. The first Poppy Campaign Held in Canada 11th November 1921.”

* Port Arthur Branch No. 5 Manitoba and Northwest Ontario Command. Royal Canadian Legion. 17 June 1991.

(\*) the Great War Veteran’s Association was a predecessor organization to the Royal Canadian Legion. The Royal Canadian Legion came into being in 1925.

The first Canadian Poppy Day in Canada sold over 1 million lapel poppies and 200,000 large poppies. The endeavour turned a $90,000 profit for the Association in its different branches. And, of course, Anna Guerin’s League reaped the benefits of the poppy production which took place in France. Madame Guerin was actually in Toronto on 11 November 1921 to see the fruits of her labour on this the first Remembrance Day with Poppies. Madame Guerin’s efforts, and those of her League, were very important in developing the North American tradition of the Red Poppy being used in both the U.S.A. and Canada on Remembrance Day.

In August 1921, a few weeks after the formation of the British Legion (May 1921), Madame Anna Guerin travelled from Canada to London for a meeting at the British Legion Headquarters. She explained her idea for the public sale of artificial red Poppies to raise money for veteran’s needs with a percentage of funds to go to her own cause of supporting the children of devastated areas in France. The idea was accepted by the British Legion for the forthcoming third commemoration of the Armistice on 11

November 1921. One million artificial poppies were ordered from France as recommended by Anna. This was the first introduction to the British people of the idea of a Memorial Poppy, and the first British Poppy Appeal was launched in the run up to 11 November 1922. In 1922 the Poppy Factory was established in south London and later moved to Richmond, Surrey. Nowadays this factory produces over 40 million poppies for wreaths, sprays and buttonholes. Another factory, this one in Scotland, was established in 1926, and these days produces over 4 million poppies each year.

Madame Guerin had had a most profound effect on the adoption and acceptance of the Poppy in North America as well and the United Kingdom. However, as had been the case in England, by 1922 the French production of poppies for the North American market was completed not only by French war orphans but also by “returned men out of work.” Toronto’s Globe & Mail reported on 12 February 1922 that, “a small portion of the poppies to be used for the next Armistice Day will be made by children in the French orphanages but the bulk of the poppies will be the product of returned men out of work.” Indeed, other sources indicate that from 1922 disabled Canadian war veterans made the lapel poppies that were sold in Canada.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the very high volume of Poppies needed to serve the North American market was such that it was almost impossible for the supply line to continue emanate from France. Beginning in 1922 and beyond, North American sources were found for the Poppies to be sold in North America thus bringing to an end the use of French orphans or disabled French veterans for production.

Sometime in the early 1920s, Madame Guerin granted the Canadian manufacturing rights over to the Canadian principal of the Vocational School for Disabled Soldiers, Brigadier James Learmonth Melville, M.C. His organization would operate as a non-profit, providing employment to disabled soldiers to produce and assemble the poppies. Then, the finished product was turned over to Great War Veteran’s Association who did all the marketing, sales and distribution placing the profits into a special fund.

Melville acknowledged that, “it was Madame Guerin who started it all, I just picked up a good idea and ran with it.”

In June 1925 Canada hosted a conference of the “British Empire Services League” in Ottawa where it was decided that the Poppy would be adopted as the universal emblem of remembrance. The Royal Canadian Legion was founded in 1925 when various groups of the World War I Canadian Veterans unified under the “Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League banner. Remembrance Day Poppies were sold under the auspices of the Canadian Legion from 1926 and onward, ever since. Poppies sold in Canada are now made by a company under the guidelines of the Royal Canadian Legion.

**Moina Belle Michael – the “American Poppy Lady”**

Moina Michael was born on 15 August 1869 in Good Hope, Georgia. Ancestry from both sides of her family had Hugenot origins from Brittany and Flanders. That was her ancestral connection to Flanders and the rest of the Poppy story. Michael’s family was wealthy and owned a cotton plantation until 1898. She was well educated and became a teacher, then a teacher’s teacher at the Normal School in Athens, Georgia. Moina also studied at Columbia University in New York City in 1912-13.

Moina Michael was visiting Germany when war broke out in 1914. She transited from Germany to Rome as a path to finally return to the U.S.A. While in Rome, she assisted

some 12,000 American tourists to find passage back to the U.S.A. Following this, Moina returned to the U.S. herself and resumed her teaching responsibilities at the Normal School in Athens, GA.

By 1917, at the time the U.S finally entered the war, Moina Michael was working as a Professor at the University of Georgia. After the declaration of war, she took leave from this position and went to New York City to assist the New York-based training for overseas Y.M.C.A. workers.

From her autobiography titled, “The Miracle Flower – The Story of the Flanders Field Memorial Poppy,” Moina continues her tale where she was on duty for the 25th Conference of the Overseas Y.M.C.A. which was being held at Columbia University in New York City. She was in a room which was often used as a “get-together” place for soldiers, sailors and marines about to embark for overseas service and their family members who were there to say goodbye. In her own words:

“On Saturday morning before Armistice, during the 25th Conference of the Overseas Y.M.C.A War Secretaries, November 9, 1918, a young soldier, placed a copy of the November Ladies Home Journal on my desk at Headquarters. About 10:30 o’clock, when everyone was on duty elsewhere, I found time to read it and discovered the marked page which carried Col. John McCrae’s poem, ‘We Shall Not Sleep,’ later renamed, ‘In Flanders Fields.’ It was vividly picturized – most strikingly illustrated in color. I read the poem, which I had read many times previously, and studied its graphic

picturization. The last verse transfixed me – ‘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.’ “

“This for me was a full spiritual experience. It seemed as though the silent voices again were vocal, whispering, in sighs of anxiety unto anguish, “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.”

“Alone, again, in a high moment of white resolve, I pledged to KEEP THE FAITH and always to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance and the emblem of “keeping the faith with all who died.”

“In hectic times as were those times, great emotional impacts may be obliterated by succeeding greater ones. So, I felt impelled to make note of my pledge. I reached for a used yellow envelope, turned the blank side up and hastily scribbled my pledge to keep the faith with all who died.”

Moina Michael’s story of that day goes on to describe how she was asked by Conference members to purchase some flowers and she decided to purchase red poppies. These were distributed to Committee members when she returned to the

office. Moina explained that “since this was the first group ever to ask for Poppies to wear in memory of our soldier dead, and since this group gave me the money with which to buy them, I have always considered that I, then and there, consummated the first sale of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy.”

After the war was over, Michael returned to the University of Georgia and taught a class of disabled servicemen. Realizing the need to provide financial and occupational support for these servicemen, she pursued the idea of selling silk Poppies as a means of raising funds to assist disable veterans. In addition to her teaching duties, Moina Michael worked tirelessly in support of the idea of the Poppy being adopted as a fitting memorial and also as a source of income for disabled veterans. In 1921, her persistent efforts paid off when the Poppy being adopted as a symbol of remembrance for war veterans by the American Legion Auxiliary. She also helped convince the British Legion in their decision to adopt the Poppy Appeal.

Moina Michael became known as the “Poppy Lady” for her humanitarian efforts and received numerous awards during her lifetime.

**The Cambridge Poppy Project – 2021**

It seems very fitting that the volunteers of Cambridge Poppy Project have chosen to undertake their project on the 100th anniversary of the first national Poppy Days in both

Canada and the U.K. In this way, the Cambridge Poppy Project has grasped the torch that John McCrae hoped others would, and they are holding it high, and inspiring others just as Madame Guerin, and Mrs. Moina Michael had before them. The 2021 Cambridge Poppy Project has already resulted in close to 30,000 Poppies produced and it can already be seen that the project will certainly be a big success and greatly contribute to an especially fine Memorial on November 11th. The team behind the Cambridge Poppy Project can also take great pride in knowing that they are promoting the continued popularity of the Poppy as a key symbol of Remembrance and that they are following in the footsteps of women who were so instrumental in achieving

acceptance the Poppy for Remembrance. This will certainly be a special Remembrance Day in Galt, Preston and Hespeler.

**Who, What, Why: Which countries wear Poppies?**

Principally, red Poppies are worn in the United Kingdom, Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa and by British and Commonwealth expats located all around the globe. In 2010 for example, the Royal British Legion distributed 45 million poppies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and sent some 3 million poppies to over 120 countries outside the U.K. In Scotland, over five million poppies are distributed each year.

In Canada the quantity of poppies sold each year typically exceeds 15 million and the Poppy Campaign is one of the Royal Canadian Legion’s most important programs. The latest figures found were for 2018 when a record 19 million Poppies sold raised $15 million. It should be noted that Poppies are always free. The public makes a voluntary donation in exchange for their Poppy. The money raised from donations provides direct assistance for Veterans and their families in financial distress, as well as funding for medical equipment, medical research, home services, long-term care facilities and many other purposes. As a sign of the times, in 2020 the Royal Canadian Legion makes

available Digital Poppies, to complement the traditional lapel Poppy. Learn more at MyPoppy.ca.

Since 30 June 1948 the Royal Canadian Legion was given the responsibility to safeguard the Poppy trademark. Any proposed use of the Poppy symbol requires the approval of RCL Dominion Command.

**How to Wear and Lay a Poppy**

The Canadian Poppy Campaign begins on the last Friday in October and continues through November 11th. Poppies may be worn during this timeframe.

Poppies may also be worn at commemorative events throughout the year, such as anniversaries of significant battles, a memorial service, and other similar occasions. Event organizers are encouraged to seek advice from the Royal Canadian Legion on the use of the Poppy for events outside of the Poppy Campaign.

There is no hard rule about how to wear a Poppy, but the convention is to wear the Poppy on the left lapel or closest to the heart. The Royal Canadian Legion encourages this practice.

Many people wear their Poppy during the Campaign period up to the conclusion of the Remembrance Day ceremony after which they place their Poppy at the base of the cenotaph or memorial, or attach it to a wreath there, as a sign of respect at the end of the ceremony.

Information compiled by Warren Cresswell, September, 2021