

“In Flanders Fields” — Canada’s Official Poem: Breaking Faith

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Article abstract

John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" now appears on the ten-dollar bill, its place firmly established within Canadian iconography. Yet the poem has been dismissed by both critics and poets as blithely Romantic and/or jingoistic, yet a close reading of the text reveals a deeper, conflicted significance. In the first two stanzas, McCrae uses conventional pastoral imagery to disrupt the familiar association between Christian ideals of redemption and renewal with nature, hauntingly capturing the uncertainty and fear that pervaded the collective consciousness of soldiers and civilians alike, both during and after World War I. However, in the last stanza, McCrae abandons his skillful representation of the war torn, spiritually diseased soul by applying an ideological gloss that reads like a recruiting poster. The critical silence surrounding the complexities of this poem have led to its reappropriation by the Canadian government as a symbol of the military and heroism rather than a rite of genuine war remembrance.

“In Flanders Fields” — Canada’s Official Poem: Breaking Faith

NANCY HOLMES

FEW COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD have a poem printed on their currency, but Canada does. True, the font is so small you need a magnifying glass to read it, but the poem is there on the new ten dollar bill, written in both English and French — it is the first verse of John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields,” a poem that each November is recited in school gymnasiums and around war memorials in Canada and throughout many other English-speaking countries. The poem appears on the ten dollar note as part of the Bank of Canada’s “Canadian Journey” series. Although “Arts and Culture” is represented on the twenty dollar bill with Bill Reid’s sculpture *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, in fact each paper note in the series has an “Arts and Culture” feature. The five dollar bill has a quote from Roch Carrier’s short story “The Hockey Sweater” (“Le Chandail de hockey”) and the ten dollar bill, whose theme is “Remembrance and Peacekeeping,” presents “In Flanders Fields.”¹ The poem appears because of its iconic status in relation to Remembrance Day, November 11. The poem is also English-speaking Canada’s most well-known verse; most Canadians can probably recite a line or two from it if from no other. Since the poem has achieved such a dominant position (one could even say it has been apotheosized), now is a good time to review its curious place in Canadian culture, to see how the poem works and what it says. In particular, I would like to analyze its literary merit and see how its virtues and its deficiencies as a work of art say something significant about Canadian identity. This poem may have made it onto the currency (one could even argue that it appears twice since the Royal Canadian Mint has just issued a new coin, the first coloured coin, with a red poppy insert), yet it has been virtually ignored in any discussion of Canadian literature. In spite of this neglect, “In Flanders Fields” encodes a pattern of thinking that is key to English Canadians, just as surely as Carrier’s “The Hockey Sweater” speaks to French Cana-

dian culture and *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* to aboriginal cultures. Whether or not people from French Canada and aboriginal cultures would agree with the choice of their representative art works is beyond the scope of this paper, but somehow the bureaucrats in Ottawa have selected a poem for English Canada that truly typifies its psyche, one that is informed by good intentions but that is disfigured by an unusual susceptibility to the vested interests of power. “In Flanders Fields” enacts a deep-rooted timidity in Canadian national identity even while it supposedly honours resolve. Its key symbol, the poppy, has recently been hijacked as a symbol of the military, partly because literary critics have ignored the poem; by not pointing out its ambivalences, officials have easily and uncritically been allowed to misuse and distort it. This poem is lavishly honoured yet studiously ignored, a complacent blindness that is key to the poem’s political aptness, its artistic strategy, and its national significance.

For ninety years, the poem has been popular with generations of local bigwigs, members of the Royal Canadian Legion, and high-school principals. It has become a crusty old standard, hauled out annually and read to us at politically sanctioned ceremonies. Since its adoption as a poem that was special to World War One, its central symbol, the poppy, has proliferated throughout Canadian society and continues to increase its presence in Canadian lives. For example, on World War One memorials around the country, the poppy is the most commonly carved flower (Shipley 144), and now it blooms on a twenty-five cent piece. The numbers of people attending Remembrance Day ceremonies and presumably wearing poppies has substantially increased in the past ten years (Mansbridge). At least two recently written children’s books refer to the poem in some way: *In Flanders Fields* by Norman Jorgensen and Brian Harrison-Lever (2003) and *In Flanders Fields: The Story of the Poem* by Linda Granfield and Janet Wilson (2000). In 1997, McCrae’s war medals sold for nearly half a million dollars although it had been expected they would fetch only \$30,000 (“History on the Auction Block” 20). A documentary on McCrae’s life was made in 1998 and his birthplace in Guelph has been turned into a museum. The poppy is now appearing on special veterans’ license plates and, living in a region of the country that has a high proportion of retired persons, poppies seem to blow along my town’s streets all the time. In short, the poem has been, and continues to be, a phenomenon, so much so that to publicly criticize it implies heresy in certain quarters. When I recently held

a talk called “What is Wrong with ‘In Flanders Fields’” in my small community in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, I received several angry emails from people who, having only heard the title of the lecture, complained that I was “disrespecting veterans” and demeaning a valuable part of our heritage.

On the other hand, the poem makes barely a ripple in Canadian literature courses and in the discussions of national identity that are inevitably a part of those classes. Although the poem appears in both A.J.M. Smith’s *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1960) and Margaret Atwood’s *New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1983), in a commonly used university textbook such as Donna Bennett and Russell Brown’s *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2002), the poem does not exist, even though a couple of jingoistic war poems by Duncan Campbell Scott are anthologized as well as a rather slight poem about the trenches by Charles G.D. Roberts. Interestingly, unlike British and American literatures, the canon of Canadian war literature is nearly empty of poetry, as if the great wars of the twentieth century have passed Canadian poets by.² This does not mean that Canadian poets have not written about war; an anthology of war poems and songs compiled by John Robert Colombo and Michael Richardson was published in 1985, and a recent anthology edited by Barry Callaghan and Bruce Meyer, *We Wasn’t Pals: Canadian Poetry and Prose of the First World War*, gathers together some long neglected works from the Great War. However, not a single author in Callaghan and Meyer’s anthology appears in the Bennett and Brown text, and only three appear in Atwood’s 1983 anthology, none represented by his war poems. With the exception of Al Purdy’s humorous “About Being a Member of Our Armed Forces,” few poems in Colombo and Richardson’s anthology have made it into Canadian literature textbooks. The poems that Colombo and Richardson choose to represent World War One are almost all comic or parodic, mostly trench songs or “Tommy’s Tunes,” as one British collection was called (Featherstone 42). None of the ironic, critical poets like W.W.E. Ross or Frank Prewitt are included in Colombo and Richardson, and none of the trench tunes is included in Callaghan and Meyer; both volumes *do* print “In Flanders Fields.” According to Callaghan and Meyer, academics and critics from the 1920s to 1940s turned away from the numerous modernist war poems published after 1918 and canonized only “In Flanders Fields.” When critic E.K. Brown in 1943 claimed “nothing good was achieved in the harsher manners,” he praised “In Flanders Fields” as a

“masterpiece . . . where careful art, studied moderation in tone, and intense as well as perfectly represented emotion fused to produce a moment’s perfection” (Brown qtd. in Meyer xxiii). However, after this fulsome praise, the poem has been neglected; it is canonized yet never read by literary critics and, in spite of its being a poem that nearly every Canadian poet has heard intoned from childhood, it is never discussed in relation to the development of Canadian literature.

Since the 1970s, academic embarrassment about “In Flanders Fields” may have been the result of the good thrashing Paul Fussell gave it in his influential book *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Fussell claims that in discussing the poem “words like *vicious* and *stupid* would not seem to go too far” and that he has “broken this butterfly upon the wheel” (Fussell 250) for a worthwhile cause; it is a piece of propaganda, shocking in its “recruiting-poster rhetoric” (249). In spite of the emails flooding my inbox, some war veterans have even agreed with Fussell’s position. Reservations about the poppy, and by extension the poem, are expressed, for example, in British poet Martin Bell’s “Reasons for Refusal,” which ends with the line “No poppy, thank you” (Bell 581). With this sort of deeply felt suspicion of the poem, it is not surprising that academics in Canadian English departments ignore this stalwart of Canadian popular culture. Perhaps because of its adoption by authorities as a patriotic tool, academics see it as neither poem nor pop-culture artifact, but instead view it as a kind of national anthem with the poppy rivalling the maple leaf as national symbol. L.M. Montgomery, another writer who is often dismissed as populist and romantic, was the one prominent Canadian of letters who early commented on the poem in an interesting manner. In her novel *Rilla of Ingleside*, Montgomery imagines a fictional “In Flanders Fields” called “The Piper” written by Anne Shirley’s son Walter. Owen Dudley Edwards points out that Montgomery’s imagined poem is clearly an ambivalent reading of “In Flanders Fields” since her version uses the figure of the Pied Piper. Dudley suggests this transformation is subversive, as McCrae’s poem is replaced with a poem that alludes to the senseless wiping out of an entire younger generation (Edwards 135-36); on the other hand, Montgomery could be giving us a sophisticated reading of McCrae’s poem, exposing its strangeness through association with one of the most sinister fairy tales of all. Ironically, Montgomery’s vision of Walter, “A Canadian lad in Flanders trenches [who] had written the one great

poem of the war” (Montgomery 174), as the son of another slightly embarrassing Canadian icon, Anne of Green Gables, is somehow a fitting pedigree for a poem so dismissed and yet so beloved.

Nevertheless, the poem’s public prominence as Canada’s *only* acknowledged war poem demands critical attention. I would like to attempt to stand in the middle for a time, if possible, and put “In Flanders Fields” in a place where it is neither sacrosanct because of Canadians’ sentimental attachment to it, nor an inconsequential piece of bad writing, as dismissible as the innumerable war poems published in Canada at the end of World War I.³ (Though, as Barry Callaghan and Bruce Meyer remind us, some of the work in those nearly eighty books of war poetry is worth a second look.) In other words, the poem deserves to be scrutinized for a variety of reasons, not excluding its artistic merit.

For those who need reminding, the poem in its entirety goes as follows:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow	1
Between the crosses, row on row,	2
That mark our place; and in the sky	3
The larks, still bravely singing, fly	4
Scarce heard amid the guns below.	5
We are the Dead. Short days ago	6
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,	7
Loved and were loved, and now we lie	8
In Flanders fields.	9
Take up our quarrel with the foe:	10
To you from failing hands we throw	11
The torch; be yours to hold it high.	12
If ye break faith with us who die	13
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow	14
In Flanders fields. ⁴	15

To summarize a story that is well known, author John McCrae was a doctor originally from Guelph, Ontario who died of pneumonia in a military hospital in Boulogne, France in 1918. He had been a pathologist at McGill University before he enlisted in World War One; he had also been involved in the Boer War. He wrote his famous poem after officiating at the burial of a young man he knew from Canada. A recent biography of McCrae gives at least three versions of the writing of the poem

(Prescott 95-96). Nevertheless, we know that he wrote it on May 2 and/or 3, 1915, in the middle of the Second Battle of Ypres, a battle notable for large numbers of casualties and for the Germans' first military use of the lethal gas chlorine.⁵ The poem was originally published in *Punch*, a popular magazine in England, in December 1915. It was later included in a post-humously published book of McCrae's poetry along with several of his pre-World War One poems whose titles like "The Warrior" and "The Unconquered Dead" reveal McCrae's military preoccupations. However, "In Flanders Fields" had already taken on a life of its own without book publication. According to the Government of Canada's Veterans Affairs Department, "Soon after its publication, it became the most popular poem on the First World War. It was translated into many languages and used on billboards advertising the sale of the first Victory Loan Bonds in Canada in 1917. Designed to raise \$150,000,000, the campaign raised \$400,000,000" ("Flower"). In the December 1917 election, the Union Government coalition under Robert Borden, on a platform of bringing in conscription, used the last three lines of the poem on at least one election poster (Prescott 125). A year later, an American woman, Moina Michael, suggested using the poppy as a symbol of remembrance, and in 1921 the Great War Veterans Association (which became the Royal Canadian Legion) adopted the poppy as a remembrance symbol in aid of fundraising for disabled and poor veterans (Hale 266). There seems to be no shame on the part of the Canadian government that we are urged to remember the sacrifices of soldiers on a bank note while frequently being subject to newspaper stories about veterans bitterly complaining about lack of adequate financial compensation.⁶

Before looking at its role as a marker of Canadian identity and war remembrance, I would like to highlight the poem's artistic merits. If it is possible to wash the glaze from our eyes and look at the poem freshly, and I grant this is difficult to do, "In Flanders Fields" reveals itself to be a rather assured little word machine. Technically, the form of the poem is a sonnet that has been pressurized into a short ode through breaking and re-stacking the lines. Its ode-like quality derives from the irregular pattern of rhyme and its seemingly uneven stanza and line lengths, variations emphasized in some editions when the left margin indentations are exaggerated, although there are no indentations on the English version on the ten-dollar bill — as far as I can tell without my magnifying glass — nor on the copy of the poem written in McCrae's hand (McCrae, Facsimile). Essentially, however,

the poem is a sonnet, a fact recognized by its earliest enthusiasts. As McPhail, the editor of the posthumously published collection of McCrae's poems, explains, the sonnet form is latent in the metrical structure of the poem and its iambic tetrameter fifteen lines (50). Two of the poem's lines, the repeated "In Flanders fields," are in fact hemistiches. If these two half lines were spliced together, the poem would acquire one full tetrameter line, which would transform the poem into a 14-line lyric (McPhail 53-55). The poem also has a perceptible octave-sestet structure; like a Petrarchan sonnet, the poem is divided into two distinct rhetorical and functional units, the pastoral part and the recruiting-poster part, as Fussell would have us say. Thus, "In Flanders Fields" is a variation of a sonnet constructed on a truncated line (not the longer pentameter) and off-kilter or shifted in its line organization. It is a sonnet splitting apart at its seams whose lines are prematurely reduced, and thus its form mirrors the chaos and loss experienced by the collective persona of the poem, the Dead who "Short days ago" were alive.

More easily noticed by the average reader is that the poem uses only two rhyme sounds ("oh" and "eye") with the punctuation of "fields" at the end of the two hemistiches, words unrhymed except to each other. This unmatched sound is the aural/visual trigger for the breaking of the sonnet into its two Petrarchan parts. Like many traditionally rhymed poems, themes are developed in the play of rhyme; every "eye" sound involves either up or down visual movement: "sky", "fly", "high" versus "lie" and "die." The two stray non-rhymes of "fields" pull the reader's inner eye downwards so that the up and down movements are neatly balanced. Like Yeats's famous sonnet "Leda and the Swan," which also splits open like a cracked egg and where the "up" and "drop" half-rhymes match the beating wings of the swan and the capture and release of the girl, so "In Flanders Fields" the verbal choreography in the rhymes enacts the imagery of the poem, which goes from grave to sky, flying birds to "guns below" or, in the case of the second verse, from rising dawn to falling sunset. The "oh" rhymes are not quite as conceptualized as the "eye" rhymes, but there is a range of motion and kinetic energy in many of them: "blow," "below," "throw," "grow," and even "row on row" which gives a sense of marching soldiers. The poem is infused with a vivid physical energy even as it speaks with the disembodied voice of a ghost, one of the first clues to the poem's artistic strategy. The rhyming vowels, of course, also have a keening sound suitable to a poem about death and mourning.

The metre of the poem, which Fussell slights as being so “rigorously regular” that the poppies seem “already fabricated of wire and paper” (249), also contains subtleties. McPhail says that McCrae “mentions [in a letter] having written the poem to pass away the time between the batches of wounded, and partly as an experiment with several varieties of poetic metre” (82). The “several varieties” may be a stretch; the last stanza, for example, is perfectly regular except for the hemistich “In Flanders fields.” The regularity of the metre in this stanza may reflect its conventional sentiments. The hemistiches, however, bracket this final, mechanically regular stanza with a downward tug since most Canadians pronounce the word “fields” with two syllables (“*fee-elds*”). Thus, the conventional and regular last stanza is enclosed between two ghostly hypermetrical syllables. In contrast to the third stanza, there *are* metrical variations in the first two stanzas, the second stanza in particular. In line six, the caesura that comes after “the Dead” perhaps rather obviously underscores the brevity of life both by enacting a cut and by using the word “Short” as the first word after “Dead.” The spondee in “Short days” forces the sensation of time slowing and then shrinking especially as the temporal word “days” is surrounded by the time-diminishing words “short” and “ago.” The first trochee in line eight means that the past participle “Loved” is emphasized, and, since the foundational metre of the poem is so heavily iambic, the next foot seems to trick the voice into emphasizing “were.” Line eight is thus portentous with past tense, sadly contrasting with the present tense in “now we lie.” Of course, for those who read the poem in the Fussellian tradition, the phrase “now we lie” has a disturbing hint of the dead telling falsehoods to the living. (Interestingly, Callaghan and Meyer design the poem so that this phrase stands out quite distinctly in the right hand margin.)

All in all, the first two stanzas seem to me to be marvels of artful construction (and, for teachers, ideally suited to introducing students to prosody). Furthermore, the opening two stanzas of the poem are highly successful in a variety of other ways. The natural elements of the first stanza — wild poppies blowing in the wind, larks, sunsets and sunrises — embed the poem firmly in a European pastoral, the countryside and its ordinary beauties. The pastoral elements in the poem are not sombre. Larks are associated with light-heartedness; early twentieth-century Britons used the word “larks” for “pranks.” The brightly coloured poppies also add to the Romantic view of nature as spiritually and physically reviving. While the red poppies do all that Fussell and others have noted that red flowers (and

sunset and dawn) do in war poetry — evoke spilled blood, honour male sacrifice, denote resurrection — McCrae also conveys the poppies' tenacity, the wild vegetation that springs up everywhere in the muck of spring-time, a vigorous and common European weed, quite unlike the more emblemized roses. However, the beauty and cheer of the first stanza are muted by death. Conventionally, McCrae uses the heavily laden symbols of crosses and the flying birds as symbols of the soul. Thus, the poem uses symbols of both nature and death that conform to a traditional Romantic and Christian view. However, the pastoral / Romantic and the conventionally Christian are conveyed through an incredibly strange persona: the voice of the dead. McCrae has created a weird dissonance as the pastoral tradition, conventional Christian symbology, and supernatural ghosts become strangely yoked. A similar dissonance of imagery is set up between the red, lively poppies blowing in the wind and the still and stick-like crosses functioning as tombstones, images which visually evoke red blood and white skeletons, stock items of horror stories and gothic romances. In the first stanza, McCrae has welded the Western cultural tradition to a complex of fear and dissonance that we call the "uncanny," a quality the poet develops more fully in the second stanza.

Many Canadian children have felt a shiver of dread when having to recite during an assembly the phrase "We are the Dead." The disturbance begins in the nearly invisible introduction of the persona in the third line of the poem: "That mark our place." That small pronoun "our" is the first hint that these words come from the grave, but the introduction is so discreet that it seems insubstantial, a wisp of language, a ghostly nudge that is only pulled into frightening obviousness when the persona names itself. The collective namelessness of this persona delivers a frisson of fear if we think about why the soldiers are unnamed and why the image of row on row of seemingly blank crosses is a chilling prospect. A common trope of twentieth-century war remembrance is the burial of the Unknown Soldier, the soldier being unknown for the grotesque reason that he is so destroyed or mutilated he is beyond identification. This sense of horror in the poem dislocates the pastoral and the actual landscape without destroying either. This palimpsest quality of a traditional poem overwritten by a strange and ghostly voice is a true example of what Freud called "*das Unheimliche*." In his famous essay "The Uncanny," Freud attempts to describe the strange effect of the uncanny in life and literature. He defines "the uncanny [as]... something which ought to have remained hidden but

has come to light" (217), a definition that suits the grisliness that seems to seep unbidden yet unstoppably into the poem's conventional cluster of images. Since Freud's essay, the concept of the uncanny has been frequently theorized, sometimes to define the horror genre but often to describe a disturbing experience of the "commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar" (Royle 1). What McCrae has managed to do is take the mundane landscape of Flanders and the familiar literary symbolism of crosses and sunsets and make them frightening by the end of the second stanza, blotting the familiar and the hopeful with supernatural horror and chilling absence.

As if realizing the effectiveness of his ghosts, McCrae reused the supernatural in the only other poem he published during World War One, "The Anxious Dead" (dated 1917). McCrae once again calls up an image of ghostly legions, but the persona in this second poem is a living collective, people who "will keep faith for which they [the soldiers] died" (12). Here the ghosts are merely artificial tools of a patriotic public position. The ghosts say and do nothing sinister and they exist in a landscape-less and culturally empty element. The poem's only images are a reference to "coming dawn" and many references to guns blasting away. The poem is essentially a rhetorical exercise demanding that "we still make war" while referring to the glories of "Caesar" (8). Certainly, by 1917, it was clear to everyone on the front lines that war was no longer about noble warriors battling it out on the field, impressing each other with their physical strength and courage. It was clear that the machine gun, the gas canister, and soon the airplane had turned war into an industrial killing machine, where nine million mostly young men⁷ were killed in four years. At this point in the war, after the futile massacre of the Battle of Somme in 1916, McCrae's pro-war stance is hard to stomach. Nevertheless, what makes this poem less haunting than "In Flanders Fields" is not its historical context, but its lack of uncanniness. The ghosts in "The Anxious Dead" are simply decorative components of a piece of propaganda. What makes "In Flanders Fields" more complex and more "anxious" is that it is a more modern poem than "The Anxious Dead." Nicholas Royle suggests that although the uncanny has always been with us, it has become an inescapable presence in modern literature: "As a term for what might be called the critical spectralization of feeling and belief, the uncanny is key to understanding both modernity and so-called postmodernity" (24). As certainties dissolve in a secularized, politically unstable and technologically radical world, more

of the world seems disturbing and irrational. “The Anxious Dead” is jingoistically certain; “In Flanders Fields” is less convincing about its ideological position because its opening two stanzas enact the de-Christianization and de-Roman-ticization of European landscape and culture. The poem cannot seem to help itself from presenting a psychic state that is radically at odds with the “glorious sacrifice” poems of the jingoists or with a simple elegy within the consolations of nature. The ghostly voices destabilize the tropes of sunsets, flowers, crosses, and larks and are so powerful that even the “guns below” seem distant threats compared to that bald statement “We are the Dead.” How fine the poem would have been if McCrae had embraced the poem’s layered complications.

What disappoints many readers about this poem happens in the last six lines, a disappointment so acute it erases a sympathetic reading of the first nine lines. On the other hand, it is the last stanza, *because* it erases the initial strangeness, that makes the poem acceptable as a public, politically sanctioned object and ideal for the Union Government’s election poster. When reading the poem aloud, most people can’t help but become more sonorous when arriving at the line “Take up our quarrel with the foe.” The poem suddenly uses the imperative as it addresses an abstract audience, not eerily nameless and featureless like the Dead, but suddenly it is we, the reader/public, being addressed, so we must scramble to pin down our “quarrel” and our “foe” and to insert some suitable stand-in for those words, which unlike crosses and flowers, have no culturally determined referents.

Ex-Marine Anthony Swofford makes an interesting observation about the identification of “enemies” on war memorials.

The problem with believing your country’s battle monuments and deaths are more important than those of other nations is that the enemy disappears, and it becomes as though the enemy never existed, that those names of dead men proudly carved on granite monuments cause a forgetting of the enemy . . . and the received understanding of war changes so that the heroes from one’s own country are no longer believed to have fought *against* a national enemy but simply *with* other heroes. (Swofford 114).

“In Flanders Fields” functions as a war monument in just this fashion. When one intones the poem at Remembrance Day ceremonies, few of us think of the barbarous Huns. Another problematic image is in the lines “To you from failing hands we throw / The torch.” The reference to the torch

comes from the Olympic games newly minted by Greek-loving Brits and Frenchmen; this allusion turns emotion and attention away from the fearfully disembodied dead, for suddenly we have a pep talk from a coach, a not far-fetched response since the lines were posted for many years in the dressing room of the Montreal Canadiens, Canada's heritage hockey team (Irvin 322).⁸ In fact, after the truly strange opening verses, these few lines feel bathetic. The poem's allusion to the sporting spirit and its deliberately high and vague medieval diction have been well documented as questionable attributes of the poem. As Fussell famously notes, this is the language of boyhood heroics and sport (21-22) fatuously at odds with the horrifying carnage of the war. Probably young men and women today suffer from similar reality deprivation when the discourse of war and violence is coloured by video-game language. Instead of "quarrels with foes," they may say "kick ass" or, as Swofford reports, "let's drop some shit on those raghead motherfuckers" (191), but both uses of language camouflage war violence with childish bluster. Similarly, in "In Flanders Fields," each feature of the last six lines of the poem trivializes each emotional or kinetic quality of the previous lines. The spiritual and natural rhythms of birds' flights become a cheesy game of toss the baton; the stark crosses and bloody graves become petty quarrels and fairy tale foes; the sun's journey becomes an Olympic torch in a relay race on the way to the Paris games. Even the ghosts in the last three lines could be seen as Halloween ghosts: "Wooo, we will come back to haunt you." Fussell and his kind find this poem smacks of unreality if not downright blindness and immorality.

So what happened in this poem? Why was McCrae unable to finish it in such a way that fulfilled its eerie promise or spiritual potential or even its modernism? Here is where the poem is ideally suited to talking about Canadian literature, colonial insecurity, and Canadian national character. Certainly, McCrae is in good company with his colonial brothers. During the war, Duncan Campbell Scott back home was writing things like "peril cannot daunt / Thy peerless heart" (6-7). The pseudo-British impulse was strong in these Canadian poets. Some years ago, Marcia B. Kline noted that nineteenth-century Canadian writers (more so than American writers) found it difficult to write about what they were really looking at in New World nature, were unable to escape "the conventions of English country estate vocabulary" (46), and, more interestingly, used Old World language and attitudes to "wipe out the effect of environment" (54). Interestingly, Freud also notes that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when

the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (221). The difficulty of reconciling real and imagined world views, which McCrae at first seems to recognize, is quickly rationalized by a comfortable glaze of traditional attitudes. As if afraid of what he has unleashed in the first two stanzas — that stew of fear, misery, and emptiness so marring the marriage of Western spiritual traditions with the living landscape — he turns away from what he has created and applies his colonial rosy glasses, falling back into the blindness that usually led poets to talk about fairy elfhorns trilling among the jack pine of the Canadian Shield. When, for example, Duncan Campbell Scott, famous for his schizophrenic attitude to aboriginal peoples, writes a war poem about an aviator, the poet uses bizarrely archaic Old-World imagery: "Tossed like a falcon from the hunter's wrist" (1). Any realism about Scott's actual place is wiped out as the feudal image of a domesticated falcon supersedes the surely more Canadian one of seeing a falcon in the wild. It is quite likely that McCrae, with typical colonial lack of confidence, felt he had to use proper British tropes to address the war topic and unconsciously or deliberately used the classical heroic language as a controlling mechanism to suppress the horror of incomprehensible violence done to the bodies of soldiers and to nature itself. As a true Canadian poet of his time, he efficiently wipes out the environment he finds himself in.

The adoption of imperial and European values in desperate opposition to lived experience is clear in the symbolism of the poppies when McCrae transforms the northern European poppy into the opium-producing poppy associated with sleep, decadence, and oblivion: "We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders fields." In my experience of teaching the poem, people are surprised when they "get" the reference. They had not really thought about what those lines meant and are likely to paraphrase them in the following way: "even though life (poppies) goes on, we soldiers won't find peace if you don't keep up the good fight." Explaining the allusion to opium startles them, though they often enjoy the surprise found in something so familiar. However, for those schooled by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the opium poppy's appearance in a manly, Olympic Games milieu is intrinsically imperialist. According to Said, by the early twentieth century there was an implicit comparison between the Orient as treacherous and passive and British or Greco-Christian culture as morally "brave" and wholesome. In Said's words, the imperialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw Orientals (which included peoples from Islamic countries and India, as well as the Far East) as little

different from “delinquents, the insane, women, the poor” (206-07). Such associations were likely fairly close to the surface in McCrae’s mind when he wrote his famous poem; many of the troops gassed in the Second Battle of Ypres were French North Africans. In a letter to his mother on April 25, about a week before McCrae wrote “In Flanders Fields,” he mentions attending to wounded French troops and describes how “one Turco prayed to Allah and Mohammed all the time I was dressing his wound” (qtd. in Prescott 90). McCrae, proud product of the British Empire, deliberately positions himself as superior to the “oriental”; his “strategic location” (Said 20), found in his slightly contemptuous tone, reveals his belief in the supremacy of European rationality over the “Turco’s” weakness and medieval superstition. Although McCrae probably used opium derivatives in his medical practice, the oriental poppies are less medicinal than infused with the association of perceived flaws of character such as drug addiction, moral laxness, and lack of manliness. In fact, Fussell points out that the poppy was associated with homosexuality in the late nineteenth century (248). The oriental poppies clearly contrast the “hardy,” “cheerful,” and “Christian” northern European poppies growing amongst the crosses. In fact, the weird dissonance again calls up the uncanny: what we thought was a field of cheerful bright Flanders poppies in a Christian setting is in fact a strange, dream-like crop of Oriental dope.

Thus, the poppy illustrates McCrae’s rejection of what was before his eyes, the very landscape he was in. His transformation of the poppy, like Duncan Campbell Scott’s rejection of an authentic Canadian falcon, shows that McCrae was unable to write a genuinely original work of art — even though the promise is undoubtedly there, for the poppies at first seem weedy and real and McCrae anchors the poem in a real place, not a phony never-never land; the name “Flanders” is used three times in this short poem. In fact, the poem is initially rooted in what critic Angus Fletcher calls “a poetics of diurnal knowledge” (79); the larks rise into the sky, the sun rises and falls, and the rural setting is clearly acknowledged. McCrae honestly registers what he sees until he cannot bear it and must add his desperate recruiting-poster addendum. Fletcher suggests that a new quality in British and American writing was emerging in the nineteenth century, particularly in the work of John Clare and Walt Whitman. These writers were engaged in looking at their environment without imposing Platonic ideals and ill-fitting ideas of progress and moralism onto the natural material, for a real environment is too complex to cat-

egorize or idealize. Fletcher claims that poets are Pre-Socratic, needing to describe rather than schematize or create hierarchies:

Poets confront death, they celebrate life, and hence are forced into an imaginative method of refusing final truths and prescriptions.... In describing, poets never begin by saying: this is how the world must or should be. Rather, they say: this is what we see and sense in the world. (30)

For a Canadian to describe with unblinkered integrity what he or she actually saw in the world would have seemed anti-art and destabilizing. If looking at the natural world of the Canadian landscape was an exercise in looking at the “terror” and “fear” of meaninglessness (Kline 48) and ultimately lack of identity, then in order to repress the terror, idealizing language had to be brought into play. As with the New World, so with the new world war. For a poet who has genuinely “described” his environment in the first two stanzas, everything in McCrae’s upbringing, nationality, and class works against his role as seer — he simply cannot refuse “final truths and prescriptions”; for him, neither nature nor war allows for ambiguity. McCrae, for all these reasons, pulls back and applies an ideological gloss to the moment. He cannot see that the uncanny is a spiritual and inner disease of the soul that he has accurately diagnosed. Ultimately, this blindness to his own power is the great failing of the poem: it too easily rejected whatever the conclusion might have been — a moving and powerful indictment of the use of poison gas and German militarism, or a great modernist poem about alienation, or a poem that refuses to be either, that simply and devastatingly “describes.”

The poppies, then, are an appropriate though ominous emblem of our war remembrance: they take us into a dream-like drugged state at the end of the poem, a state haunted by a threatening ghost. We are confused but vaguely comforted by the easy moral righteousness that props up the ending. If we look at the poem as I have just done, absolutely shredding the butterfly already broken on Fussell’s wheel, all sorts of feelings of discomfort we have about colonialism, imperialism, war mongering, homophobia, and falseness riddle this stanza. One can, at this point, believe the poem deserves all the thrashings it gets.

And yet, the poem does have beauty and power. It is “entrenched,” so to speak, in Canadian cultural heritage. As many people who revere the poem suggest, the historical context of the poem has to count for some-

thing. The feeling of anger and desire to “keep up the fight” is understandable if we go back to McCrae at the Second Battle of Ypres. He has just experienced the gas attacks and he may indeed be filled with loathing at the Germans for the use of this chemical weapon; I hope he was. A fellow Canadian who was with McCrae at Ypres, L. Moore Cosgrave, wrote of the first gas attack that “our hearts were indeed filled with the blackest, most hellish hate of fellowmen that this world has ever known” (3). Most of us can sympathize with McCrae’s wanting his fellow soldiers, Canadian and Britons, to keep fighting such an enemy. (As usual in war, though, the moral high ground is never solid: the British used gas just a few months later; the wind blew it back on their own troops.) This tendency to both sympathize and recoil is what makes war poetry extremely difficult to discuss except as a ritual or as a historical artifact. As Simon Featherstone says, “War poetry always had a social function before it had a literary one” (17). We expect war poems to be either propaganda or anti-war tracts, or to manage the rituals of grief the way poems read at funerals do. In other words, war poems are particularly unwanted when informed by “pre-Socratic” description. War poems record the beliefs, experiences, and necessary survival strategies of the public and of the soldiers, of which stirring and ennobling war poetry is one, and video game pyrotechnics, jokes, and parodies are others. Experiences of war are considered so special they are claimed to be intrinsically different from the experiences of everyday life, and thus war poetry must be treated differently from the poetry of peace. There is a sense that a poem like “In Flanders Fields” should not be toyed with by unsympathetic, pacifist, female academics who have never been in a war zone, for the piece has commemorative, emotional, and ritual purposes. War poems have fences built around them that are far more prickly and difficult than those around most texts. Featherstone calls this barrier between literary critics and war poems the “special authority of experience” (22). In particular, soldier-poets’ experience of military conflict legitimizes their perceptions over a civilian’s or non-combatant artist’s critique of a war poem or war memoir. This upholding of soldiers’ privileged experience is still strong, especially in the United States where it is considered nearly treasonable to criticize the military or soldiers. Even the highly skeptical ex-Marine Swofford claims that there is something so special about the experience of war that only soldiers can know it: “only so many men know the horror of war and fear It is necessary to remind civilians of this fact, to make them hear

the voice of the warrior" (114). Thus, Fussell's criticism that McCrae betrayed his fellow soldiers by resorting to a jingoist call to further arms and violence is "permitted" because Fussell was a soldier too (though in World War Two) and he therefore can make legitimate comparisons between McCrae on the one hand and, on the other, soldier-poets of World War One, like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who were able to break out of the cycle of heroic discourse to find new language to talk about their bitterness and the suffering of soldiers. Because both Fussell's and veterans' positions are grounded in Featherstone's "special authority of experience," although their positions are opposed, their "quarrel" is an internal battle that outsiders are not welcome to join.

When an outsider steps over that barrier and tries to talk about "In Flanders Fields" as a poem rather than a monument, veterans and members of the armed forces and their families feel discomfort and violation, as if a war memorial were being vandalized. However, genuine commentary and close readings reinvigorate the poem's relevance by reminding the Canadian community at large of the poem's significance and by removing the poem from a sterile safety zone protected by the military. As Featherstone notes, by exempting war poetry from criticism, war is depoliticized; modern states prefer to deny politics in any treatment of war, turning all military conflict into moral and ethical struggles as opposed to exercises in political power (23). Partly, discomfort with trying to remove a commemorative poem like "In Flanders Fields" from its emotional associations around soldiers' lives and deaths comes from the fact that Canadians cannot bear to think that there is often no reason for soldiers' terrible deaths. Instead of recognizing that soldiers die because diplomacy, democracy, or moral principles fail, we console ourselves with saying that soldiers die "for us, for liberty, for humanity." Similarly, instead of saying "In Flanders Fields" is a lying poem that urges the continuation of an abysmally stupid war, we say that the poem "remembers" the dead and honors their sacrifice. Many veterans insist that their attachment to McCrae's poem must not be subjected to politics because the poem is a genuine expression of the soldier's duty to "king and country," values that someone like me no longer holds dear enough in this globalized, post-Vietnam era, but that must be recognized as sincere and as part of the ethos of the armed forces to this day. However, by contextualizing "In Flanders Fields," by acknowledging its artistic, historical, and national limitations, the poem can be reclaimed for all Canadians, not just

veterans; this reconnection is necessary because the military is directed by those of us who are responsible for its deployment and its actions. Citizens of a democracy must understand the reasons for and consequences of war because they *are* the ones ultimately responsible for soldiers' lives.

McCrae's poem's last peculiar, and I would say paradoxically valuable, quality is that it is as conflicted in its intended audience as it is in its imagery and purposes. Even while it seems to speak of the special experience of soldiers, it simultaneously undermines the "special authority of experience" by the very image with which it tries most to elevate the soldiers' deaths: "to you from failing hands we throw / The torch." "In Flanders Fields," in spite of angry emails claiming this poem is of special interest to veterans, is not a poem that excludes civilian experience at all. The torch is explicitly handed on to civilians. The poem was published in *Punch*, a journal directed to middle-class, non-combatant English readers (hence the complaint about its recruiting-poster rhetoric), and as we have seen, the poem was immediately used to "talk to" the public, to urge them to buy bonds or get them to vote for conscription. The poem is embraced by people on Remembrance Day because, unlike almost all the war poems by the much greater war poets of World Wars One and Two — Owen, Sassoon, and Keith Douglas — the poem does *not* exclude non-combatants. Owen, Sassoon, and Douglas are often bitter about civilians because they are divorced from the experience of combat; thus no meaning is possible outside of loyalty to other suffering soldiers. Featherstone notes that the complete disillusionment felt by Owen and Sassoon and other war poets about the civilian population meant that these poets turned to the only ones who understood them, other soldiers, and thus their poems cherish "how exclusive and tightly-knit the masculine communities have had to become in order to survive (104). Conversely, "In Flanders Fields" from its first appearance speaks to the civilian population. However, unlike the many civilian-directed poems of its time (Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" is directed at just these types of jingoistic poems), "In Flanders Fields" is unique because, in spite of using the vehicle of the dead soldiers' voices, the poem is not speaking of the glory of war, but rather tells of the bleak state of loss and fear that was the result of that first disastrous twentieth-century war. In fact, neither the first two stanzas nor the last one is about the war. Instead, the poem attempts to reach for meaning in the face of irrational horror, no matter what one thinks of the meaning McCrae ultimately supplied. No won-

der the civilians, reeling and filled with despair after World War One, did not find solace in the poetry of Owen and Sassoon and other ironic and shell-shocked poets, no matter how fine the work, nor did they elevate the poems that more grossly trumpeted “glorious sacrifice” and patriotic platitudes. The public turned instead to the poem that expressed regret and confusion but also used the torch of hopeful connection, where the veterans’ military roles are essentially erased and the soldiers are turned into human souls. The poem urges continuity and even, through its essential ambivalence, questions its own tattered ideology, making room for a multiplicity of feelings about war ranging from patriotism to horror. That the effects of the war were felt by everyone in Canada after World War One is clearly evidenced by the lists of dead men on the unprecedented number of monuments built in towns across the country; communities were deeply wounded. It is difficult to imagine the psychic disturbance in small towns and large cities where dozens of young men had been slaughtered and maimed in Europe. Civilians paid terrible prices for their involvement in that war. Since 1918, “war remembrance” includes remembering the pain of non-combatants, the fear of war, and the tragedy of disabled soldiers as surely as it includes valorizing the dead. Arguably, this broad type of remembrance is more important today than ever when most war casualties are civilian (and have been since World War Two). Although soldiers like Anthony Swofford may feel their stories are unappreciated and unknowable, the people bombed by our modern armies have even more war stories to tell and likely more terrible things to remember. “In Flanders Fields” could help us remember these facts if we spoke about what the poem actually does as a text. Because of the peculiar quality of the two opening stanzas and the third stanza at such odds with these, “In Flanders Fields” functions dually: we civilians are drawn into memorializing soldiers and, at the same time, we are haunted by doubt about war’s purposes and about who the victims are, a doubt sown in our minds by the same ghosts that urge us to fight. It is possible that only a Canadian could have written a poem so conflicted in its identity and so suitable for war remembrance.

Ironically, just when civilians need more than ever to understand their place in the politics of war, “In Flanders Fields” is losing its effect now that the poem and its poppy are being put to uses above and beyond Remembrance Day. By displaying the poem on a ten-dollar bill beside a soldier and by giving special licence plates to veterans, the government is

using the poppy not to commemorate the Canadian community in grief but instead to single out the soldier and veteran experience, to *recreate* the “special authority of experience,” and to turn Canada’s Remembrance Day into an Americanized “Veterans’ Day.” The poppy is becoming depoliticized and dehistoricized, becoming a symbol of the military as opposed to a rite of genuine war remembrance. The poem is losing its power to connect us as citizens; instead it is beginning to separate us into hierarchies of experience and authority. A typical example of the cynical political abuse of the poem appeared recently in a *Globe and Mail* article called “Sleepless in Flanders Fields” by a Canadian politician, Preston Manning. In his article, Manning uses the poem (quoting the famous last three lines) to bolster his militaristic argument, claiming that McCrae “surely cannot rest” (A19) since Canada has declined to participate in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Not only does Manning assume that John McCrae, proud member of British Empire, would have happily acknowledged the United States as Canada’s new colonial master, but this politician also typically appropriates the image of the torch: “Canada’s leaders ... have dropped the torch thrown to them by the defenders of freedom” (A19). Manning’s distortion of the poem illustrates precisely the “war monument” problem of “In Flanders Fields”: if you do not think of the Germans when you hear or read the poem, then politicians can ignore history and conveniently add any new enemy it wants, an ideal and endlessly recyclable propaganda tool. Manning makes the torch a connection between dead soldiers and politicians: the public is neatly bypassed in the transmission of the poem, the message of the poem is simplified into militaristic pap, and the poem’s power as a ritual of memorializing and grieving is completely undermined.

Critical neglect of the poem has contributed to its misuse now. Critics and poets have not clearly explicated its complications, evasions, and communal consolations. As if enacting the mentality of the poem, Canadian intellectuals and artists have allowed it to exist but have turned their eyes away from it, which means, like the soldiers in World War One, that the poem and its poppy can be used by authorities (or “leaders” as Preston Manning calls them, applying Fussell’s false heroic language to politicians) in any way they see fit. Currently, militarism and manipulated flames of patriotism are wafting across the Canada-U.S. border, and even though Canadians are not at war and even though we claim we are devoted to “Remembrance and Peacekeeping,”

the symbols that affirm community and complexity are being rebranded to conform to the bellicose pressure of American power. The elevation of the poppy and the militaristic glorification of “In Flanders Fields” on our money is a reflection of Canadians’ deepest insecurity as a colony and as a junior partner on the North American continent. That this hypocritical quality of knowing what is right but ignoring that knowledge is a chronic Canadian failing is revealed in many aspects of our national life, whether it be war, missile defense, or, more broadly, issues like aboriginal claims to justice or global warming. Perhaps it is a quality of our book reviews and our literary criticism as well.

By subjecting “In Flanders Fields” to analysis we can begin to question the motives of the state that has issued the ten dollar bill, the poppy quarter, the veterans’ licence plates; we can ask if these tokens of remembrance are not deliberate strategies on the part of the federal government and militaristic segments of our society to re-instill simplistic devotion to nationalism at the expense of our more difficult humanitarian values and moral concerns. The more poppies I see on our streets, on our clothes, in our hands, and on our money, the more I dread a future drenched in blood, brought about by our weak commitment to hard truth. This dread is not a criticism of soldiers, or at least the ones who do their duty, nor is it a repudiation of “In Flanders Fields”; it is a criticism of our colonial timidity, our silly poppy-induced gullibility, our embarrassment about our own art, and our inability to learn about ourselves even though our official poem tells us quite clearly all we really need to know.

NOTES

¹The “Bank” of Canada’s website contains information about this series, but strangely does not mention that Carrier’s or McCrae’s work is featured, though there is a short paragraph about Bill Reid (“Bank”). A pamphlet issued by the Bank of Canada and available in various banks gives the names of the works and authors as well as the names of the translators. The French version of “In Flanders Fields” is called “Au champ d’honneur” (“On the field of honor”) and was translated by Jean Pariseau (*The New \$5 and \$10 Notes*).

²Novels are a different matter; Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, and Hugh McLennan’s *Barometer Rising* are a few popular Canadian literary examples of novels having war themes or taking place during wartime. *Rilla of Ingleside* by L.M. Montgomery is probably the first war novel I read.

³At both the University of British Columbia and University of Toronto libraries, using the phrase “Canadian War Poetry,” the search engines come up with over eighty books; nearly

all of them are patriotic dirges and ditties from the World War One era. They include volumes by Charles G.D. Roberts, Duncan Campbell Scott, Wilfred Campbell, and Bliss Carman, poets whose works are often anthologized, though rarely do these anthologies include poems from war collections like *Man of the Marne*, *Canada Speaks of Britain*, and *Other Poems of the War*, and *Lyrics of the Dread Redoubt*.

⁴ *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and French*, ed. A.J.M. Smith.

⁵ Facts and figures about World War One taken from John Keegan's *The First World War*.

⁶ Any survey of Canadian newspaper archives will reveal dozens of articles plotting the course of veterans' battles for disability compensation, health care, and pensions. Here is a small sample of headlines about disabled veterans from the past five years, using the most cursory search: "Gulf Illness Probe Urged: Opposition MPs Back Call by Veterans, Kin" in *Montreal Gazette* 14 Oct. 1999 (A8); "Sick Soldiers' Treatment a Disgrace Probe Finds" in *Globe & Mail* 17 Dec. 1999 (A1, A7); "Support Grows For Major Who Lost Legs on Duty: Calls for Military Compensation" in *The National Post* 22 Jul. 2002 (A6); Sonomara Matheson. "Forgotten Veterans: Metis are Now Fighting Ottawa for Compensation" in *Maclean's* 23 Dec. 2002 (39); "The Government Can Still Make Amends to Our Disabled Vets" in *Globe & Mail* 5 Aug. 2003 (A11); Gloria Galloway. "Disabled Vets Want Ombudsman" in *Globe & Mail* 10 Nov. 2004 (A6). This situation of official mouthing of platitudes while withholding adequate compensation goes back at least to World War One, as one can discover reading about the lobbying efforts of the Royal Canadian Legion throughout the 1920s (see Hale chapters 1-3). Even though the original idea behind the postwar use of the poppy was to remember the disabled and unemployed soldiers who had returned as well as the ones who had died, our Remembrance Day ceremonies concentrate on "the Dead," perhaps not coincidentally the voice that speaks in McCrae's poem.

⁷ The woman soldier on the back of the ten dollar bill is another questionable feature of the Canadian Journey bank note images. If this bill is about remembering the Canadian military war dead, it is odd, to say the least, that a woman soldier is front and centre. In the twentieth century, male, not female, members of the armed forces were overwhelmingly the victims of war violence. Men could be excused for finding that image a deplorable act of "forgetting." As a Canadian woman, I find it offensive that the only woman of importance on our money, besides the Queen, is a soldier.

⁸ Thanks to Wolf Depner of Penticton who told me that in addition to the quotation's appearance in the dressing room, the Canadiens carried a torch from the Old Forum to their new quarters. This curious link between hockey and war motifs on the new series of bank notes makes me wonder what "journey" the Bank of Canada is taking Canadians on.

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