

THE RED POPPY



A STUDY FOR THE ENQUIRING FREEMASON

The Red Poppy.

Why we wear a poppy as a symbol of remembrance.

Brethren, at this time of year it is traditional to wear the poppy as a symbol of remembrance, a tradition that began as a result of the poem “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae.

The field poppy is an annual plant which flowers each year between about May and August. It's seeds are scattered on the wind and can lie dormant in the ground for a long time. If the ground is disturbed from the early spring the seeds will germinate and the poppy flowers will grow.

This is what happened in parts of the front lines in Belgium and France. Once the ground was disturbed by the fighting, the poppy seeds lying in the ground began to germinate and grow during the warm weather in the spring and summer months of 1915.. The field poppy was blooming when the ANZAC and British Forces arrived at the start of the campaign in April 1915.

The sight of these delicate, vibrant red flowers growing on the shattered ground caught the attention of a Canadian soldier by the name of John McCrae. He noticed how they had sprung up in the disturbed ground of the burials around the artillery position he was in. It was during the warm days of early May 1915 when he found himself with his artillery brigade near to the Ypres-Yser canal. He is believed to have composed a poem following the death of a friend at that time. The lines of the poem have become some of the most famous lines written in relation to the First World War.

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.

How the red Flanders poppy became the modern-day symbol of Remembrance was the brainwave of an American woman, Miss Moina Michael. “The Poppy Lady”

On the 9th November 1918, two days before the Armistice was declared at 11 o'clock on 11th November. Moina Belle Michael was on duty at the YMCA Overseas War Secretaries' headquarters in New York. She was working in the reading room, a place where U.S. servicemen would often gather with friends and family to say their goodbyes before they went on overseas service.

On that day YMCA hall was busy with people coming and going. The Twenty-fifth Conference of the Overseas YMCA War Secretaries was in progress at the headquarters. During the early part of the morning as a young soldier passed by Moina's desk he left a copy of the latest November edition of the “Ladies Home Journal” on the desk.

At about 10.30am Moina found a few moments to herself and browsed through the magazine. In it she came across a page which carried a vivid colour illustration with the poem entitled “We Shall Not Sleep”. This was an alternative name sometimes used for John McCrae's poem, which was also called “In Flanders Fields”. Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae had died of pneumonia several months earlier on 28th January 1918.

Moina had come across the poem before, but reading it on this occasion she found herself transfixed by the last verse:

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands, we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

In her autobiography, entitled “The Miracle Flower”, Moina describes this experience as deeply spiritual. She felt as though she was actually being called in person by the voices which had been silenced by death.

At that moment Moina made a personal pledge to “keep the faith”. She vowed always to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance. It would become an emblem for “keeping the faith with all who died”.

Compelled to make a note of this pledge she scribbled down a response on the back of a used envelope. She titled her poem "We Shall Keep the Faith".

Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet - to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.

We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders Fields.

And now the Torch and Poppy Red
We wear in honour of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

Three men attending the conference then arrived at Moina's desk. On behalf of the delegates they asked her to accept a cheque for 10 dollars, in

appreciation of the effort she had made to brighten up the place with flowers at her own expense.

She was touched by the gesture and replied that she would buy twenty-five red poppies with the money. She showed them the illustration for John McCrae's poem "In Flanders Fields" in the Ladies Home Journal, together with her response to it "We Shall Keep the Faith". The delegates took both poems back into the Conference.

After searching the shops for some time that day Moina found one large and twenty-four small artificial red silk poppies in Wanamaker's department store. When she returned to duty at the YMCA Headquarters later that evening the delegates from the Conference crowded round her asking for poppies to wear. Keeping one poppy for her coat collar she gave out the rest of the poppies to the enthusiastic delegates.

According to Moina, this was the first group-effort asking for poppies to wear in memory of "all who died in Flanders Fields". Since this group had given her the money with which to buy them, she considered that she made the first sale of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy on 9th November 1918.

Moina Michael was determined to put all her energy towards getting the Poppy emblem adopted in the United States as a national memorial symbol. She was encouraged by a positive reaction to the idea by the press.

She began a tireless campaign at her own expense, starting with a letter to her congressman in December 1918. In the letter she asked him to put the idea to the War Department, which he immediately did. She wanted to act swiftly so that this new national emblem might be already be produced in the form of pins, on postcards and so on in time for the signing of the peace treaty at Versailles in June 1919.

She realized that after the war the numerous signs related to the war - the Red Cross, War Loan insignia, Service Flags - which had been evident all over the United States during it's involvement in the war would gradually be removed. Moina considered that a replacement emblem, the red poppy, could be used to fill those empty spaces as a symbolic reminder of those who had not returned home to celebrate the end of the war.

Her religious upbringing inspired her to believe that the Flanders Memorial Poppy was indeed a spiritual symbol with more meaning behind it than pure

sentimentalism. She likened the new optimism for a world returned to peace after the “war to end all wars” to the magnificent rainbow which appeared in the sky after the terrible flood in the bible.

Originally Moina intended to use the simple red, four petalled field poppy of Flanders as the Memorial Poppy emblem.

However, in spite of the interest raised by the appearance of the new emblem at the time, and Moina's continued efforts to publicize the campaign, this emblem was not taken up by any group or individual to help establish it as a national symbol.

By March 1919 she had moved back to Georgia to take up her place at the University of Georgia. With the return of thousands of ex-servicemen to the state Moina realised that there was not only a need to honour the memory of those who had died in the service of their country, but also a need to remember that those who were returning also had mental, physical and spiritual needs.

During the summer months of 1919 Moina taught a class of disabled servicemen. There were several hundred ex-servicemen in rehabilitation. She thought the emblem could be developed so that it could be used to help all servicemen who needed help for themselves and for their dependants.

By 1920 Moina Michael was beginning to lose hope that the Memorial Poppy idea would ever come to fruition. She was in a dilemma about whether to pursue her own academic career or whether to abandon it in order to devote herself entirely to the Memorial Poppy campaign. However, in the early 1920s a number of organizations did adopt the red poppy as a result of Moina's dedicated campaign.

In 1919 the American Legion was founded as an organization by veterans of the United States armed forces to support those who had served in wartime in Europe during the First World War.

In August 1920 Moina discovered by chance that the Georgia Department of the American Legion was to convene on 20th of that month in Atlanta. Prior to the convention she searched out the delegates and the Navy representative promised to present her case for the Memorial Poppy to the convention.

The Georgia Convention subsequently adopted the Memorial Poppy and also agreed to endorse the movement to have the Poppy adopted by the National American Legion and resolved to urge each member of the American Legion in Georgia to wear a red poppy annually on 11th November.

One month later, on 29th September 1920, the National American Legion convened in Cleveland. The Convention agreed on the use of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy as the United States' national emblem of Remembrance.

A French woman by the name of Madame Anna E Guérin was present at the 29th September National American Legion convention. Anna was a representative of the French YMCA Secretariat. She was inspired by Moina Michael's idea of the poppy as a memorial flower and she also believed that the scope of the Memorial Poppy could be expanded to help the needy. She considered that artificial poppies could be made and sold as a way of raising money for the benefit of the French people, especially the orphaned children, who were suffering as a result of the war.

Anna Guérin returned to France after the convention. She was the founder of the "American and French Children's League" through which she organized French women, children and war veterans to make artificial poppies out of cloth. Her intention was that these poppies would be sold and the proceeds could be used to help fund the restoration of the war-torn regions of France.

Anna was determined to introduce the idea of the memorial poppy to the nations which had been Allied with France during the First World War. During 1921 she made visits or sent representatives to America, Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

In 1921 Madame Guérin made arrangements for the first nationwide distribution across America of poppies made in France by the American and French Children's League. The funds raised from this venture went directly to the League to help with rehabilitation and resettlement of the areas of France devastated by the First World War. Millions of these French-made artificial poppies were sold in America between 1920 and 1924.

Madame Anna Guérin travelled to Canada, where she met with representatives of the Great War Veterans Association of Canada. This

organization later became the Royal Canadian Legion. The Great War Veterans Association adopted the poppy as its national flower of Remembrance on 5th July 1921.

The first British Poppy Day Appeal was launched that year, in the run up to 11th November 1921. It was the third anniversary of the Armistice to end the Great War. Proceeds from the sale of artificial French-made poppies were given to ex-servicemen in need of welfare and financial support.

In 1921 Anna Guérin sent some French women to London to sell their artificial red poppies. This was the first introduction to the British people of Moina Michael's idea of the Memorial Poppy. Madame Guérin went in person to visit Field Marshal Earl Douglas Haig, founder and President of The British Legion. She persuaded him to adopt the Flanders Poppy as an emblem for The Legion. This was formalized in the autumn of 1921. By 1922 Haig established the first Poppy Factory in Richmond, Surrey, but such was the demand for poppies that few were reaching Scotland. In 1926 his wife, Lady Haig, established a Poppy Factory in Edinburgh to produce poppies exclusively for Scotland.

Since then the poppy has become a symbol of remembrance and for the sacrifices made by our Armed Forces, both at times of war and in their peace keeping duties. Importantly, for nearly 90 years it has raised millions of pounds to support the needs of veterans and their families, living in Scotland.

And from that time the red poppy has been sold each year by The British Legion from mid October to raise funds in support of the organization's charitable work.

Our readers might notice that the picture used on the front page of this article features a poppy with four petals and no leaf. This is what is known as the 'Scottish Poppy.' And this is the official reason why.

Why is there a different poppy in England, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Since Earl Haig first launched the Poppy Appeal in Scotland in 1921, we have always had our own unique design. The Scottish poppy features four petals, whereas the poppy produced by the Royal British Legion for the Appeal in England, Wales and Northern Island has two petals and a green leaf.

Why can I not buy a poppy with the green leaf on it in Scotland?

Apart from being botanically incorrect it would cost £15,000 to make leaves for all poppies - money we feel is better spent on veterans. We might be slightly biased but we think the Scottish poppy looks nicer too! Now you know why we Scots wear a poppy without a leaf!

With or without a leaf, just buy one please. Lest we forget!

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