

“Remember Peace: The White Poppy in Flanders Fields”

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Speaking Notes

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“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.

John McCrae penned that poem after his friend Lieutenant Alex Helmer took a direct hit from an 8-inch shell and was blown to bits, on Sunday, May 2nd, 1915. McCrae was the medic with the 2nd artillery unit with the Canadian forces near Ypres at the time.

When the shelling finally let up, some men went to the burial ground and dug a grave, while others took sandbags and collected what they could of young Alex’s body, then arranged the sandbags in the form of a body in an army blanket, fastened it with big safety pins, and brought it to the gravesite. It was dark by then and, with the chaplain unavailable, McCrae did his best to remember the Church of England service for the dead, reciting it from memory. He recorded this in his diary, ending with: “Despite the heavy fire, I got asleep at 12, and slept until daylight, which comes at 3.”

He got up that Monday, and carried on fulfilling his duties to the regiment. But part of him kept going back, and later, he was seen sitting on the back of an ambulance wagon next to where they’d buried Lieut. Helmer, writing.

“We are the dead....
Take up our quarrel with the foe,
To you from failing hands we throw the torch...”

According to an essay Richard Doyle wrote in the *Globe and Mail* when he was editor of that newspaper, McCrae told the chaplain on the unit that by “torch,” he meant the torch of peace, and by ‘foe’, he meant war itself.



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Popular repudiation of war as an instrument of state policy was already in the air at that time, dating from the Crimean War. The Red Cross was founded in the aftermath, possibly the first trans-national organization, and its original purpose was to mobilize an end to war itself. Perhaps that's why WWI was called "The war to end all war."

But McCrae's poem was given a different spin when it was published 6 months later in *Punch Magazine*. The editors used it to feed the patriotic propaganda machine, in the aftermath of the German sinking of the British ship *Lusitania*, and that's how it is entered into history: as a statement about necessary sacrifice in a necessary war.

In the post-war period, the British army chief of staff continued this theme when he helped launch a sort of sheltered workshop for disabled vets making lapel-poppies – a forerunner of the British Legion.

The Women's Cooperative Guild, which had been active in the run-up to the war, part of a massive diplomatic and public effort to avert it, sent a delegation to this man asking that the words "No more war" be inserted at the centre of each poppy. He refused, saying that this would politicize the red-poppy remembrance. And so the guild decided to create its own poppy symbol of remembrance, explicitly remembering to repudiate war: the white poppy.

After Hitler came to power in 1933, the Women's Cooperative Guild began distributing the white poppy. In 1936, a new coalition called The Peace Pledge Union, took up wearing the white poppy as "a definitive pledge to peace, and that war must not happen again." In 1938, 85,000 white poppies were worn at an alternative Remembrance Day service held in London's Regent's Park, after which the poppies were laid at the Cenotaph. A year later, a second world war had begun, with the white poppy one of its first casualties.

“...To you, 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.”

Over the past few years, peace groups distributing the white poppy in Canada have been threatened by the Legion with prosecution. In light of that, I took a resolution to the 2010 Voice of Women Annual General Meeting which, when passed, empowered the Voice of Women to begin "a peace-making dialogue" with the Legion "working toward an understanding in which the white poppy and the red can share a common path, toward the end of warfare."

In February of this year, a delegation of us representing VOW, Quakers, Ottawa Raging Grannies, Conscience Canada and the Ottawa White Poppy Collective prepared to meet with the most senior officers of the Legion. We did so on their turf, in the dauntingly huge boardroom of their Dominion Headquarters in Ottawa. We followed this up with

our notes on the meeting, stressing the points where we thought some path-making had begun.

A few weeks later, I received a letter from Dominion President Patricia Varga that essentially shut us down. It offered no ideas for a next step in this path, only a re-statement of its determination to defend its trademark, and the reminder that they will “continue to review any...situations which infringe on our trademark.”

The letter left me feeling gagged and silenced. And also frustrated, especially as I see war being normalized in new ways these days: it’s called liberating Libya, regime change in Iraq and Egypt. Greece and Italy, too, in a way, though there were no air strikes involved.

War actions are being taken off the public radar as fighting is being contracted out to companies like Blackwater, and to drones. As well, the difference between one form of armed conflict is blurring into another: bandits marauding areas where the infrastructures of peace and due process have been blown away by war, drug cartels and drug lords, tribal rivalries and rivalries between small-time mine operators. Everyone armed with the weapons of war.

There are some 650 million small arms loose in the world right now; more than that now, since the NATO operations in Libya. AK-47s are increasingly in the hands of child soldiers, according to Romeo Dallaire’s searing book: *They Fight like Soldiers, they die like children*. He puts the number of child soldiers at 250,000, 40 per cent of them girls, who are, he writes, raped “as a matter of course in most of these conflicts.”

And then there are the countless thousands of women raped in refugee camps or outside them as women search for firewood, and the ongoing rapes of women and girls in post-conflict areas like the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

And so, yes, I will try to respect the Legion’s proprietary rights over the poppy. But I must speak the truth of the poem that sparked the wearing of the poppy in remembrance: namely, that war is wrong. It brutalizes all life and the landscape, the matrix, the womb of life itself. Armed conflict of any kind is against the law: the law of humanity and of creation. It needs to be criminalized like all other forms of violence.

“If ye break faith with us who die,
We shall not sleep...”

And so I will wear my white poppy for the children forced to carry AK-47s, to shoot, to kill. I will make more white poppies for the hundreds of thousands of women raped in war, and the thousands more beaten and abused by partners who bring the war home to places like Halifax and Kingston, Detroit and Cleveland, Ohio. And I will give away more poppies for the hundreds of thousands of vets who live on the streets, in America, in Britain and probably too, by now, in Canada.

I will wear a white poppy to symbolize my determination to be the peace that I want to see in my world.

We shall not sleep.