

0. POPPIES GROW in FLANDERS FIELDS - Story Preface

1. POPPIES GROW in FLANDERS FIELDS

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This 1890 painting by Robert Vonnoh (1858–1933), called “In Flanders Field,” depicts how beautiful red field poppies appeared in the late 19th-century. Today the original work is part of the permanent collection at The Butler Institute of American Art. Click on the image for a better view.

Over the years, the poppy has come to symbolize post-war commemorations in some of the Allied countries. And the poem—“In Flanders Fields”—is part of “Remembrance Day” in Canada (the home country of John McCrae and Alexis Helmer) as well as in other nations.

Let’s examine a few questions about these red poppies, which are also known by the scientific name *Papaver rhoeas*:

- Do they regularly grow in Flanders Fields?
- Are they planted flowers?
- Was there anything special, or unusual, which caused the red poppies to appear so beautiful, and vibrant, during the spring and summer of 1915?

As it happens, there are some interesting facts about these flowers which appeared on the bleak battlefields of Belgium, and Northern France, during WWI. Seeds—which can lie dormant for more than eighty years—grow in disturbed ground. That is why red poppies also appeared on the battlefields of northern Belgium during the Napoleonic Wars.

This 1890 painting by Robert Vonnoh (1858–1933), called “In Flanders Field,” depicts how these beautiful red poppies appeared in the late 19th-century. Vonnoh, an American impressionist, was unable to sell his most-ambitious work at the time he produced it.

In 1919, however, after WWI was over—and John McCrae’s poem had become the most-famous poem of the war—Vonnoh sold “In Flanders Field” to Joseph G. Butler. It is still part of the permanent collection of The Butler Institute of American Art (in Youngstown, Ohio).

Why were field poppies growing so well in the spring of 1915, when McCrae penned the words to his poem? Several facts, working together, made that happen:

The spring of 1915 was the first time that warm weather began to warm up the countryside after the cold winter at war in 1914-1915. In the region around Ypres in Belgian Flanders the months of April and May 1915 were unusually warm. Farmers were ploughing their fields close up to the front lines and new life was starting to grow. One of the plants that began to grow in clusters on and around the battle zones was the red field or corn poppy (its species name is papaver rhoeas). It is often to be found in or on the edges of fields where grain is grown.

The field poppy is an annual plant which flowers each year between about May and August. It’s seeds are disseminated 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, 1916, 1917 and 1918. The field poppy was also blooming in parts of the Turkish battlefields on the Gallipoli Peninsula when the ANZAC and British Forces arrived at the start of the campaign in April 1915. (See “New Life on the Battlefields,” at “The Great War, 1914-1918.”)

Just days before the Great War ended, someone was reading John McCrae’s poem about the poppies in Flanders Fields when she had an idea. To really remember the men who had died, she would always wear a red poppy.

Who was this person ... and ... how could it be that her widely embraced idea still endures?

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