

World War I: Whence the Poppies of Flanders Fields?

An Excerpt From the Forthcoming Book by Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Great Class War 1914-1918*.

By [Dr. Jacques R. Pauwels](#)

Global Research, November 11, 2024

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

[This was first published by GR in May 2015, updated on 11 November 2024.]

The enthusiasm for war in the summer of 1914 was never as great or as widespread as we have been conditioned to believe. By early 1915, after six months of massacres and with no end in sight, the soldiers and civilians of all the belligerent countries were disillusioned and disgusted, and this alarmed the authorities. In Britain, and throughout the British Empire, the widespread war weariness manifested itself in a drastic reduction of the number of men who volunteered to join the army, and the government was forced to consider introducing compulsory military service, a measure that might trigger opposition, resistance, possible even unrest, and even worse.

The fact that the enthusiasm for the war had virtually gone up in smoke, was reflected in 1915 by the success of a pacifist song born in the United States, then still a neutral country, which became an immediate hit in Britain. Its title said it all: *I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier*.

Ten million soldiers to the war have gone,
Who may never return again.
Ten million mothers' hearts must break
For the ones who died in vain.
Head bowed down in sorrow
In her lonely years,
I heard a mother murmur thro' her tears:
I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier,
I brought him up to be my pride and joy,
Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder,
To shoot some other mother's darling boy?
Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,
It's time to lay the sword and gun away,
There'd be no war today,
If mother's all would say,
"I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier."

Indeed, in 1915, leading personalities in all belligerent as well as many neutral countries began to argue in favour of ending the war by means of negotiations. However, both sides stuck stubbornly — and literally — to their guns. It is remarkable also that the song mentions ten million mothers whose "hearts must break": the Great War would indeed

cause the death of approximately ten million soldiers.

The popularity of this song was a matter of grave concern for Britain 's political and military leaders. They wanted at all costs to fight on to a victory they had expected before Christmas 1914. Even more disturbing for these gentlemen was an echo that reached them from the front in France and Belgium, where the murderous battles of the war's early stages had given way to an equally deadly trench warfare. The ordinary British soldiers as well as their comrades from the other countries of the Empire had produced, and popularized, a song with a title that expressed their war weariness: "I want to go Home":

I want to go home,
I want to go home.
I don't want to go in the trenches no more,
Where whizzbangs and shrapnel they whistle and roar.
Take me over the sea, where the Alleyman can't get at me.
Oh my, I don't want to die, I want to go home.
(...)
Take me over the sea, where the snipers they can't get at me.
Oh my, I don't want to die, I want to go home.

The British authorities would undoubtedly have preferred more patriotic and warlike songs to be cranked out by their cannon fodder.

It was in this context that on May 3, 1915, an officer came to the rescue. in the vicinity of Ypres, a town right on the front line in Flanders, John McCrae a lieutenant-colonel in the Canadian army, known as a keen supporter of the British Empire and of the war, wrote a poem in which he urged the men to carry on with their task despite all the hardship. This composition, entitled "[In Flanders Fields](#)", was predestined to become famous all over the world, presumably on account of its potent description of poppies floating in a sea of crosses marking the tombs of the dead, and also of larks singing, high above the heads of the trench-bound combatants, in spite of the rumble of the guns:

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.

In his brilliant book on the First World War, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the

American historian Paul Fussell has critically dissected this poem. He denounces it as an almost “vicious and stupid” but particularly powerful and effective literary instrument of war propaganda, of what the French called *jusqu’au boutisme*, “fighting until the [triumphant] end,” in which the line “take up our quarrel with the foe” naturally jumps to the fore.

The poem was indeed potent and effective, because it evoked images the denizens of the trenches were familiar with and found appealing, such as the sky stretching high above their heads, the dawn and sunset they observed keenly every single day, the mesmerizing larks, untouchable high in the sky, the blissful “mock-death” (Fussell) of the sleep they cherished so much – and the red poppies, traditionally associated not only with sleep, dreams, and oblivion, but also with love, blood, and martyrdom. To the British soldier and poet Isaac Rosenberg too, the poppies were a strong symbol in the sense of blood and sacrifice; in his poem “Break of Day in the Trenches”, he wrote that “the roots” of the poppies “are in man’s veins.”

Larks and other birds deserve some comments, as they were important to soldiers on both sides of no man’s land, who were aptly described as moles by the Irish poet and actor Cyril Morton in a poem, “The Moles,” written in 1915. For years on end, hundreds of thousands of men did indeed live underground like moles in a stinking labyrinth of narrow and crooked corridors, between two walls of dirt, with high above their heads a sky that was all too often grey, but sometimes tantalizingly blue. Only the sky made them realize that they were not holed up in a long and narrow kind of mass grave. And so it is not surprising that the birds flying and singing high above their heads played an important role in the life of the combatants.

Larks appealed to the imagination of the British soldiers, while the Germans were mesmerized by nightingales. This was not a coincidence: in the British literary tradition back to Chaucer and Shakespeare, the lark, with its appearance and its song, announces the dawn and therefore, symbolically, a new life, as well as “passage from Earth to Heaven and from Heaven to Earth,” in other words, the link between life and death, which was of course particularly fragile at the front. And the German fascination for the nightingale had a lot to do with the fact that for them this songbird conjured up foreboding, above all a presentiment of death, but also a sign of spring and of love, in other words, of the life to which one was so attached, of the joy of life to which one aspired so passionately; and the *Nachtigall* also bespoke the loved ones who, for the denizens of the trenches, were as far away and as untouchable as the birds circling and singing high in the sky.

The soldiers lived below ground and, other than their comrades, they never saw a human being. One could occasionally look at the other side through a periscope, but in most cases no sign of life was visible, neither in no man’s land nor at the enemy lines beyond. One saw virtually nothing and no one, but one could smell all the more, namely, a repulsive stench. Indeed, countless corpses of men and horses were lying around unburied near the trenches, and it even happened that parts of bodies were integrated in the walls and parapets of the trenches.

The stench not only of cadavers, but also of excrement, was part and parcel of life in a system of trenches that had become one huge open sewer, a modern-day cloaca maxima. Admittedly there were latrines, and it goes without saying that the very class-conscious British had separate privies for officers and ordinary soldiers; however, the latrines were often hit by shells, which caused the contents to be scattered over a large area. It also did not help that diarrhoea was pandemic. Bits and pieces of horse carcasses might also rain

down occasionally on the soldiers on account of explosions. And the cadavers of horses reportedly smelled even worse than those of human beings. In any event, the “human moles” had no choice but to learn to live with the stench. They got used to the odour, as is illustrated by the following two lines from George Willis’s poem “Any Soldier To His Son”: “I learned to sleep by snatches on the fire step of a trench, And to eat my breakfast mixed with mud and Fritz’s heavy stench.” If the soldiers of all armies smoked a lot, pipes as well as cigars and cigarettes, it was to calm their nerves and forget their hunger, but most of all to mask the omnipresent and insupportable stench of corpses and excrement.

The generals and other high-ranking officers who occasionally visited the trenches were not used to the odours that prevailed there and were disgusted by the stench and the sight of excrement. But they did not get any sympathy from the ordinary soldiers who had to live permanently in such nasty circumstances. This lack of sympathy oozes out of the text of a humorous song that was very popular among the Tommies, “That Shit Shute”:

The General inspecting the trenches
Exclaimed with a horrified shout,
'I refuse to inspect a division Which leaves excreta about'
But nobody took any notice
No one was prepared to refute
That the presence of shit was congenial Compared with the presence of Shute
And certain responsible critics
Made haste to reply to his words
Observing his staff of advisers Consisted entirely of turds
For shit may be shot at odd corners
And paper supplied there to suit
But shit would be shot without mourners
If someone shot that shit Shute.

A typical day in the trenches started before the first rays of sunlight pierced through the darkness of night, which, during the summer, meant around 4:30 a.m. Everybody had to appear fully equipped, weapon in hand, as if an attack were imminent. The British called this routine “stand-to,” or “standing to arms.” The Tommies, like the French, stared in the direction of the rising sun, saw the first larks, and wondered if they would survive the coming day and if they would ever return home and reunite with their loved ones. On the other side of no man’s land, the Germans’ gaze chased the fleeing night and their ears strained to hear the nightingales’ finales, conjuring up life and loved ones. Then came the order to “stand down,” followed by permission for the men to have breakfast. In certain British units, rum was served on this occasion, two spoonfuls per person, to add to tea or to drink separately. The distribution of rum was a much-prized ceremony. And before an attack the Tommies received a more generous ration than usual. After an attack by the British, an odour not only of corpses and excrement but also of rum floated throughout the no man’s land.

During the day, there was work to be done. The majority of the soldiers were peasants or industrial workers, very much used to hard work. And their bosses — the officers — liked to order them to perform all sorts of tasks, feeling that it had to be that way, and observed keenly to see that the work was done properly. They also felt that it was necessary to keep the soldiers permanently occupied in order to prevent boredom and keep morale high. Trenches had to be dug, enlarged, strengthened, or repaired after a bombardment. The weapons had to be cleaned and the uniforms and boots made to look as good as possible

under the circumstances. The men were subjected to frequent inspections, and there was a constant need for soldiers to perform guard duty. The daily routine ended in the evening with the same stand-to ritual as in the morning. This time, the Germans eyed the sun setting in the west, and the British, French, and Belgians observed the approaching night; everyone looked out longingly for larks and nightingales.

McCrae wrote his poem in the spring of 1915, and it was not a coincidence that poppies flowered abundantly in Flanders' Fields at that time. Normally, that flower's minuscule seeds penetrate deep into the earth to wait there, sometimes for years, for the soil to be upturned for some reason, and thus exposed to the sunlight and warmth they suddenly germinate. With the digging of miles of trenches and the explosion of tens if not hundreds of thousands of shells starting in the fall of 1914, the conditions were created for an unprecedented burgeoning of poppies the following spring in that corner of Belgium, of course most spectacularly so in the immediate vicinity of the trenches and in the pockmarked no man's land.

With its poppies, McCrae's poem thus certainly catered to the sensibilities of the Canadian and British soldiers. Even more effective as a tool of motivation was the fact that the poem loomed like an appeal emanating from the fallen comrades, rather than from officialdom, including officers like McCrae himself. It insinuated in a particularly subtle way that not to persevere in "our [sic] quarrel with the foe" would have amounted to a kind of treason, a gross shattering of the chain of solidarity that bound the men together - the living as well as the dead! Not "holding high the torch" thus became unthinkable, as it would have meant betraying the dead comrades. Such disloyalty would have prevented the latter from finding rest in an eternal sleep, even though they were cradled by a lovely landscape bursting with soporific blossoms:

If ye break faith with us who die,
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Such a *jusqu'au-boutiste* poem could hardly fail to find favour with military and political authorities keen to find ways to motivate the men, with the media, and thus with the public. McCrae received heaps of letters and telegrams congratulating and praising him. *In Flanders Fields* was published on December 6, 1915, in the satirical but nationalist British magazine *Punch* and thus embarked on a career as one of the most celebrated and cited literary products of the Great War. The reason was not its literary merits, nor was it because ordinary soldiers liked it, which does not seem to have been the case at all. It became famous because it would be used systematically, year after year, to make propaganda in favour of the war and against pacifism, in favour of the sale of war bonds, of the recruitment of volunteers all over the British Empire and later, in 1917, in the United States - and in Canada, again in 1917, in favour of the introduction of conscription, a measure that met with much opposition, especially in the province of Québec. Even today, the red poppy is associated not only with remembrance, but with nationalism and militarism, which is why on occasions such as Remembrance Day pacifists have turned to wearing an alternative, white poppy.

The poppy also made an appearance in a very different literary and musical creation of 1915, but one of a strongly anti-militarist nature, namely a French song inspired by the bloody fighting in the infamous forest known as Bois-le-Prêtre, in Lorraine. In this song, entitled [*Au bois Le Prêtre*](#), the red poppy is an analogue of the futile medals bestowed on

the soldiers who “fell” for the fatherland on that particular “field of honour”:

Si, du canon bravant l'écho,
Le soleil y risque un bécot,
On peut voir le coquelicot
Partout renaître...
Car, dans un geste de semeur,
Dieu, pour chaque Poilu qui meurt,
Jette des légions d'honneur
Au Bois-le-Prêtre
If the sun dares to ignore the gunfire,
And comes to bless us with a little kiss,
Red poppies all around us
Spring to life again . . .
It is God who, like a sower,
Generously casts decorations
One for every soldier
Who dies in Bois-le-Prêtre

*

Click the share button below to email/forward this article to your friends and colleagues. Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

[Don't Miss Out on Global Research Online e-Books!](#)

***[Dr. Jacques R. Pauwels](#)**, is a renowned author, historian and political scientist, Research associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization. His books include *The Myth of the Good War: America in the Second World War (second edition, 2015)*, *Big Business and Hitler (2017)*, and *Myths of Modern History: From the French Revolution to the 20th century world wars and the Cold War — new perspectives on key events (2022)*.*

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Dr. Jacques R. Pauwels](#), Global Research, 2024

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **[Dr. Jacques R. Pauwels](#)**

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in

print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca