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'We are the Dead': rhetoric, community and the making of John McCrae's iconic war poem

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ways in which John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' sought to rhetorically build community, how it became the poem of both the army and of the civilians at home, and how it solicited responses from across the boundaries of combatants and non-combatants, male and female, and young and old. By engaging with wartime and post-war responses, including L. M. Montgomery's home front novel *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), this discussion suggests that the practices of recitation and the composition of derivative or responsive works constitute a performative collaboration that the poem itself invites, which allows the poem to be reimagined and repurposed to new ends in new eras. By drawing on rhetorical theories, and by closely considering the poem's composition and publication history, a new understanding of this poem emerges, one that draws attention to the function of war poetry as a social text that both emanates from and shapes its culture, with the capacity to mobilize readers and audiences across boundaries of gender, age and nation. Ultimately, this essay recognizes the rhetorical function of poetry in changing individual and collective consciousness, highlighting the way that rhetoric and poetry are entwined in acts of response and collaboration.

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'You were asking what I recited at the recruiting meetings', Canadian writer L. M. Montgomery recalled in a letter to her Scottish confidant and pen pal G. B. MacMillan on 7 April 1918. She continued:

Well, I had lots of pieces, mostly patriotic of course. But the one I always give for an encore was "In Flanders Fields," written by one of our Canadian soldiers, who now himself sleeps "somewhere in France." The poem has had a tremendous success. It was reprinted everywhere and likely you have seen it but I enclose a copy on the chance that you have not. I think it very fine.¹

Montgomery, who admired the poem's artistry, also saw it as a powerful tool in her own home front work. From November 1915 on she was engaged in the war effort as the President of the Red Cross Branch of Leaskdale, Ontario, involved in volunteer work that she proudly described as her contribution to the war effort in her letters, journals and fiction. Showing deep awareness of the verse's power as a rhetorical tool during war time, she gave stirring renditions of the poem to get men to volunteer for overseas

service, noting: ‘It was a regular slogan here in the election campaign.’² While it may seem unusual to reference a poem as a slogan, the term was appropriate, because John McCrae’s verse, as she explains, was used in Canada’s controversial election campaign to bring about conscription in 1917. Written during the Second Battle of Ypres in May 1915, and published on 8 December 1915 in the British *Punch* magazine, ‘In Flanders Fields’ spurred civilians and soldiers to action and helped deliver a victory in an election that convulsed the whole country with controversy.³ Moreover, musicians and illustrators created artistic renderings of the verse that amplified its action-focused rhetoric.⁴ Printed on Victory bonds (Figure 1), pamphlets and posters, as well as advertisements for clothing and insurance companies that promised to make donations to the war effort, the verse performed home front work by raising financial contributions for the war effort.⁵ In the aftermath of the war, the verse spawned a considerable body of response poems.⁶ In any estimation, the poem had a remarkable appeal and social effect, with the poem itself circulating widely in Canada, Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, France and Belgium.⁷

Over one hundred years later, the poem has sustained its mass appeal, and performs a key role within the memory culture of Allied nations, particularly in Canada, where it is repeated annually at Remembrance Day ceremonies, and in Ypres, Belgium, today an international epicentre of Great War commemoration, where the poem seems omnipresent, even inspiring the name of the In Flanders Fields Museum. But the ritual of reciting McCrae’s verse, much like the ritual of wearing the remembrance poppies it inspired, has been criticized as reducing commemorative activities to social compunction. Such acts are dutifully performed on Remembrance Day but quickly forgotten after,



Figure 1. Frank Lucien Nicolet. ‘If Ye Break Faith – We Shall Not Sleep.’ Victory Bonds. Poster. McMaster University Libraries. Identifier: 00001805.

prompting war historian Pierre Purseigle to call for a more reflective consideration of war and veterans.⁸

No one has been more influentially critical of the poem than American literary critic Paul Fussell. Parsing the poem in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Fussell dismissed it for its traditional form and pro-war propaganda argument, which he contrasted with the high literary irony and modernist aesthetics of anti-war poets such as Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon.⁹ More recently, Fussell's criticism has been extended by Mark McCutcheon, who has argued that the verse assists in the creation and reinforcement of a lasting stereotype about Germans in which Germany acts as 'a national "Other."' ¹⁰ In a similar vein, British art historian James Fox's 2014 'Poppy Politics: Remembrance of Things Present' has argued that where floral imagery in commemorative practice has traditionally represented peace and reconciliation, the poppies of the Allied nations have, through their historic use as propaganda, been 'converted into victory medals'.¹¹

At the same time, recent studies of the First World War literature have also sought to revise the critical perception of anti-war poetry as the defining literary output of the war. In his book *Everything to Nothing: The Poetry of the Great War, Revolution and the Transformation of Europe* (2015), Belgian scholar Geert Buelens has argued based on an examination of British, French, German, Belgian and Dutch war poetry that far from representing anti-war positions, poetry played a key role in mobilizing the war effort in diverse countries, making the war's mainstream culture a specifically literary and poetic one. As Buelens writes: 'While poems can be found describing the war as gymnastic exercise, it is striking how explosive, not to say violent, most verse from the period is: like a god, war gives and takes, especially the latter'.¹²

This shift in the critical climate suggests that the time is ripe for a reconsideration of 'In Flanders Fields' and its widespread and long-lasting cultural impact. Whereas literary scholars, notably Nancy Holmes, have established the poem's literary sophistication,¹³ the powerful and far-reaching capacity of 'In Flanders Fields' to engage its audience rhetorically has thus far remained obscure in scholarly literature, and will be the focus of this essay. What is it about this poem that instantiated such powerful emotions in readers or listeners that it incited them to enlist? What are the techniques of persuasion that allowed this poem to cross geographic, national and temporal distances to marshal both soldiers and civilians for concrete actions?

This essay focuses precisely on the poem's intricate place in the First World War culture and social life, considering how the poem's rhetorical techniques contributed to its ability to mobilize others to specific ends. Thus, in what follows the goal is not to provide a comprehensive record of the countless iterations of McCrae's poem as it circulated through mass culture, but rather to focus on specific examples to analyse its rhetorical *modus operandi*. Exploring the verse's ability to mobilize, motivate, lift morale and commemorate, this essay argues that while the timing of its release in 1915 was particularly fortuitous, the poem's striking visual rhetoric, its experiential authenticity, and its rhetorical production of community contributed to its enormous success. These elements combined, I suggest, achieved the highest rhetorical power during and after the war.

More generally, in drawing on rhetorical theory, this essay builds on the premise that war poetry has a social function,¹⁴ requiring readers to look past the traditional

understandings of lyrical poetry as a mirror of the poet's soul, or a reflection of inner feelings and private selves, to reveal instead the poet's role in 'constructing communal identities'¹⁵ and to discern the powerful ways in which poetry can express these identities. Stephen Voce's book *Poetic Community* explores a 'network of poets, cultural spaces and institutional frameworks',¹⁶ groups of poets involved in co-producing poetry and community. Likewise, Dale Smith's *Poets Beyond the Barricade* looks at 'rhetorical poetry' and 'rhetorical modalities in order to understand poetry invented for the specific purposes of public engagement' and for inciting 'actions in public culture'.¹⁷ These rhetorical and cultural studies consider poetic community formation in terms of counter-voices against dominant ideologies and discourses, just as 'In Flanders Fields' presented a concept of building collective identity and community that emanated from spontaneous grassroots gestures before becoming institutionally co-opted and enshrined. In considering the poem as public address and rhetoric, this essay pursues a dual approach. First, it explores the poem's specific rhetorical gestures by focusing on its evocation of collective identity and its call for action. Second, the essay scrutinizes specific responses by fellow soldiers and civilians like L. M. Montgomery to illuminate the reception of 'In Flanders Fields' as the poem of both the army and the home front, as well as of post-war commemoration. More generally, this essay recognizes the rhetorical function of poetry in changing individual and collective consciousness, and the way that rhetoric and poetry are entwined, fuelled through acts of collaboration. Ultimately, it critically probes the intricate rhetorical power of war poetry in order to comprehend its remarkable ability to galvanize and mobilize readers.

‘...and now we lie’: The rhetoric of community

McCrae first drafted his famed poem on 3 May 1915, midway through the Second Battle of Ypres. The previous day, his friend Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, 22, was killed. The official log of McCrae's regiment noted, 'Intense heavy shelling by the enemy all night which increased towards morning. Lt. Helmer killed + Lt. Hague severely wounded while observing'.¹⁸ Helmer's body was dismembered by the explosion, requiring his fellow soldiers to gather up the body parts for burial. A distraught McCrae, who officiated at the burial of his friend, wrote in his diary:

Lieut. Helmer was killed ... at the guns. ... His diary's last words were – "It has quieted a little and I shall try to get a good sleep." His girl's picture had a hole right through it – and we buried it with him. I said the Committal Service over him, as well as I could from memory.¹⁹

The next day, McCrae composed the first draft of the poem on a 20-minute break while he waited for a new group of wounded to arrive from the fields. According to his friend Major C. Cyril Allinson, a witness to its composition, the first version read as follows, except for one small change made months later in the published poem:

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!

Yours now 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.²⁰

The version published in *Punch* seven months later (and subsequently republished and circulated elsewhere) replaced ‘Yours now’ at the beginning of the third stanza with the more demanding ‘Take up.’ Andrew Macphail, fellow Canadian army surgeon, writer and editor of the posthumous collection of McCrae’s poems, did much to track the poem’s early reception by the soldiers, foregrounding this immediate experiential link to the poet’s involvement in the gruesome Second Battle of Ypres.²¹ With its claims to experiential verisimilitude, the poem’s rhetorical power is accumulative, rising from gentle persuasion in stanza one to a rhetorical crescendo in the final stanza.

The poem opens with a powerful visual image: scarlet poppies, charged with added kinetic energy of the wind, and set amidst the wooden crosses. Amongst soldiers and war workers, these concrete images had a visceral appeal, working like the ‘poetics of sense memory’ that Jill Bennett has theorized as a way of transmitting traumatic affect not through graphic or horrific means but by recreating the sensation in the present through visual images.²² These images were signs of witnessing and experience: poppies were the result of shell-churned earth and the wooden crosses were planted by the soldiers themselves, and so were the daily reality of the soldiers who were the poem’s first readers. The ‘crosses, row on row’ are vertical signs rising on the flat fields of Flanders and conjure the memory of those marching to war; at the same time, they mark ‘our place’ in the horizontal position of the soldiers lying side by side in the mass grave. The poem thus stresses spatiality and visuality to convey traumatic memory. Fussell explains the importance of images of flowers, especially as conjoined with the trappings of death: ‘Skulls juxtaposed with roses could be conventionally employed as an emblem of the omnipotence of Death, whose power is not finally to be excluded even from the sequestered, “safe” world of pastoral.’²³ The pastoral, a genre in literature, music and visual art that features bucolic scenes in idealized landscapes, had been part of poetic tradition since British Romanticism, and is tied closely to elegy. It was this particular resonance of the English elegiac tradition that gave the flowers of wartime poetry their melancholy power by imbuing the pastoral poetry of Arcadian peace with the smell of death. The poem’s pastoral focus is further subverted in the stanza’s final words, for ‘the guns below’ situate the poem not in a peaceful mourning scene but in an active battlefield, immersing readers in the time and space of battle and rhetorically positioning them as eye witnesses close to the frontlines; in short, the spatial position and perspective of the army surgeon and poet McCrae.

From the beginning, McCrae rhetorically builds collective identity. In lieu of the lyrical ‘I’ that might individualize the speaker, the poem repeatedly employs plural pronouns. The reference to ‘our place’ in the first stanza, followed by a heavy reflective caesura, instantiates a collective, united by the speakers’ shared places marked by crosses in fields covered

in poppies. The second stanza builds on the poem's affective impact by taking the reader inside the trenches and into the graves as well as building the visual by referencing the rising and setting sun; this amplification serves the goal of conveying trauma by confronting the reader with the past events. These visual and spatial fields of action are joined by a temporal narrative (experience) in the second stanza, which opens with a jolt: 'We are the Dead. Short days ago/We lived ...'²⁴ With these lines, the dead take centre stage as speakers that are both present and absent, ghosts that haunt the battlefields and whose deaths solicit the reader's sympathy. In *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, Charles Hill observes that vivid and concrete images increase the effectiveness of rhetorical communication, for '*Vivid information* takes the form of concrete and imagistic language, personal narratives, pictures, or first-hand experience.'²⁵ The techniques used to sustain a four-year long industrial war required new and direct, as well as more experiential, ways of connecting with the audience. Since the battlefield context was an integral part of the poem's meaning making, the poem encoded what Hill describes as 'the most vivid type of information', that is, 'an actual experience', which carries 'highest rhetorical power.'²⁶ Even though the situation is clearly fictional – the Dead cannot speak – the reality effect lends it the 'soldier's truth.'²⁷ This rhetorical solicitation of sympathy is amplified by the line, 'loved and were loved', which further expands the poem's implied community of mourners to encompass those who loved the soldiers, their families thousands of miles away. This expansion of community through temporality (from present to past) is a key strategy of this poem. The memory of the soldiers is immersive, encoded in images that conjure an experience of the spatiality of trench life, where visibility is severely reduced to a cyclical feeling 'dawn' and seeing 'sunset glow'. In its suggestion of the soldiers' collective experience, the poem builds towards what in Hill's visual rhetoric terms constitutes 'an extraordinary persuasive power', dominating 'to the point of crowding out other, seemingly relevant and important information.'²⁸ In the third stanza, the temporality of the second stanza moves from the present and past to include future possibilities, while visuality and spatiality recede into the background to make room for a single image: the torch.

Almost all critics profess some admiration for the first two stanzas, praising also McCrae's pastoral vision and sophisticated poetics, yet have taken umbrage with the third stanza. The dead's instruction to their audience to 'Take up our quarrel with the foe' echoes the common drill command to 'Take up – arms.' The rhetorical impact of 'In Flanders Fields' is highest in this third stanza, with the speaker-chorus's insistence on communal action: it articulates a bond between the living and the dead which calls upon the audience to accept 'the torch', or cause, and 'hold it high'. The torch's rhetorical focus works through visuality: it serves as a beacon to lure those not at war. The pronouns that denote collective identity (*we*, *ours* and *us*) are used eight times in this fifteen-line poem, while also emphatically and urgently soliciting help from the reader/addressee ('*To you*, from *failing* hands we throw/The torch'). The 'you' addressed include the civilians who are called up to bring the support that will break the stalemate in the war. Their response, in turn, would perpetuate and give new life – literally – to a brutal war of attrition. Fussell describes the experience of reading this final verse as 'a shock', asserting that 'it is grievously out of contact with the symbolism of the first part.'²⁹ Other critics have argued along similar lines, noting the same split. Holmes writes: '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.'³⁰ And yet, in thus separating the poem, critics have inadvertently obscured the escalation in tone and urgency that makes 'In Flanders Fields' rhetorically powerful. The early verses

have subtly unsettled the pastoral, purposefully disturbing it with the war's rumbling 'guns below' before startling readers with the unquiet dead so that the verses consistently build and expand the audience's war consciousness to the shocking moment of choice. The thrust of the poem's argument for engagement is furthered by its restricted but insistent rhyme scene (*sky, fly, lie, high, die; and blow, row, below, ago, glow, foe, throw, grow*), which conjures the circularity and repetitiveness that was trench warfare while also hammering its point home. Soldiers' personal war diaries reveal precisely the repetitive monotony of daily life which consisted of building and repairing trenches, cleaning weapons and observing the enemy over long hours, all the while being exposed to often cold and filthy conditions. This monotony was interrupted by the piercing shock of sudden artillery attacks, just as the poem performs a sudden shift, triggering the startle response that awakens the reader or listener and requires them to act.

While much of the rhetorical force of 'In Flanders Fields' is directed towards persuading its reader to further engagement in the war effort, in other ways it resists conforming to some of the more traditional tropes of war poetry. In particular, the poem both evokes and complicates traditional ideas of the soldiers as sacrifices or martyrs. McCrae's poem pays tribute to the memory of the men who already have given their lives, and those who are asked to engage in combat in the future. As Jonathan Vance has observed, the concept of sacrifice in the First World War culture assumed the soldier's free will and agency: a soldier did not lose his life; he gave his life to his country.³¹ Much like glory and patriotism, sacrifice was an idealized and abstract social value that was part of the patriotic teaching and the preaching during the era. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Jay Winter describes 'the return of the sacred' in First World War poetry, which includes both 'conventional and unconventional religious forms'.³² He observes that 'Most [poets] do not escape from the spiritual framework which, with qualifications, their poems reaffirm' and cites among his examples soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon who occasionally responded with a 'quintessentially romantic' register, yearning for spirituality without modernist irony ('My Spirit longs for prayer,/And, lost to God, I seek him everywhere').³³

McCrae's apparently conventional poem does not entirely conform to these conventional religious poetic strategies. In important ways, McCrae's poem evokes Winter's 'soldier-poet':

He was the upholder of moral values, the truth-teller par excellence, the man who faced fear and death and spoke about them to the yet unknowing world. He ventured into the domain of the sacred, the no man's land between the living and the dead.³⁴

However, while McCrae himself was a religious man who routinely officiated at burials,³⁵ in 'In Flanders Fields' he refrains from overt religious rhetoric: while he refers to crosses, they are deindividualized and desacralized 'crosses, row on row'. Significantly, McCrae's dead do not solely conjure the conventional Christian connotation of resurrection. Their ghostly voices belong more to a classical tradition, recalling the underworld shades of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* more than the figure of the soldier as Christ (a popular figure in both poetry and visual art of the First World War, as Vance has noted³⁶). McCrae, who was well educated in classical literature, found his frame of reference in the *Iliad*. The words, 'if you break faith' echo the *Iliad* where, in Book III, the princes chant a prayer in a chorus, 'who first break faith in the treaty, ... may their life-blood stream on the pavement; – Their, and their children's blood'.³⁷ The phrase is thus a dire warning, and also implicitly gendered: the word 'faith' recalls the domestic world of the faithful Penelope of the *Odyssey*, and by extension the need for women to sustain the war through 'faith' or loyalty. In this way,

McCrae's poem compelled diverse audiences: the mourners seeking solace through elegy, the wounded veterans seeking sympathy, and the civilians waiting to be mobilized. The poem deliberately appealed – and continues to appeal – to different readers and audiences who could tap into and respond to its messages.

Passing the torch: collaboration, (re)citation and rhetorical amplification

As the poem circulated, soldiers and civilians played the role of quasi-collaborators. They coproduced poetry and community in the way described by Voyce for the various poet groups of the Cold War era. This collaboration worked performatively, like 'the improvisational accompaniment' referenced by Voyce: 'This form of interaction preserves the status of the single author, while relegating the group to the secondary and corollary role', whereby the group gives its own timbre and focus to the poem shifting its meaning.³⁸ In this way, 'In Flanders Fields' worked on different registers for distinct readerships: as a mourning song assembling groups of mourners; as a psychological poem assembling groups of war maimed and wounded veterans; and as a recruitment song assembling new soldiers and mobilizers to bring new energy to weary warriors in the field. Far from regimenting the performance, the poem allowed for a certain flexibility, performing the mourning work for some, its psychological work for others, as well as its recruitment work, so that the poem's collective labour was divided amongst different groups of performers and reflected in a medley of multiple voices. Each performance of the poem, then, might be thought of in Voyce's terms as 'a particular sort of social formation involving actors, networks, and technologies.'³⁹ Each performance can be thought of as a collaborative act that nonetheless does not contest the poem's single author status.

Vance suggests that these works deriving from 'In Flanders Fields' amount to 'a separate subgenre: [poetic] replies to "In Flanders Fields,"'⁴⁰ which I propose are part and parcel of its rhetorical co-construction. Even before its publication, the poem circulated orally and in written form among the soldiers and the nurses. 'It is little wonder then that "In Flanders Fields" has become the poem of the army', Macphail wrote: 'The soldiers have learned it with their hearts, which is quite a different thing from committing it to memory. It circulates as a song should circulate, by the living word of mouth, not by printed characters.'⁴¹ This circulation, which mirrors the circulation of ancient epic poetry, produced many poetic variants in terms that suggest dynamics of co-production and poetic collaboration, as Macphail corroborates:

The army has varied the text; but each variation only serves to reveal more clearly the mind of the maker. The army says, 'AMONG the crosses'; 'felt dawn AND sunset glow'; 'LIVED and loved'. The army may be right: it usually is.⁴²

Like Macphail, Cyril C. Allinson, McCrae's friend and a Brigade Sergeant-Major working side by side McCrae at the time, acknowledged that there were 'at least five known "variations"' circulating amongst McCrae's friends and colleagues at the time.⁴³ He also noted that by the time it was 'sent ... to Punch ... from the McGill Hospital Unit, many of his friends, and their friends, knew it off by heart – in one or the other of the various versions.'⁴⁴ After copying out the poem, he notes: 'I memorized it – easy enough as I was so involved in the whole circumstances and scene.'⁴⁵ Allinson thus suggests that McCrae's fellow soldiers did more than participate in the interpretation of the poem: they helped in shaping the poem rhetorically.

Allinson's recollections of the poem's composition, early circulation, and publication, recorded in a little-known 1972 document, also offer suggestive evidence of the history of the poem's use as propaganda. Allinson claims that the highly charged words 'Take up' were inserted by *Punch* editor and cartoon artist Bernard Partridge. He recalls,

a prominent English journalist who was visiting the Hospital saw the poem and personally took it to "*Punch*": Bernard Pa[r]tridge was delighted at it and suggested a change in one line; my informant cannot recall, at this time so many years later, which line was changed, but I feel certain it would have been the first line of the 3rd stanza, and that the change was "Take up" in place of "Yours now."⁴⁶

Allinson's conviction shows the significance of the change to him: he evidently found the overtly militant phrasing of the published version less satisfying, or at least less authentic to McCrae's message, than the gentler, more fraternal wording of the 'original' version he remembers. While there is no way of confirming this potential editorial genealogy, the possibility Allinson proposes is suggestive. The published wording rhetorically aligns the poem with Partridge's own 1915 lithograph recruitment poster, 'Take Up the Sword of Justice' (Figure 2). *Punch* magazine, a staunchly pro-war and anti-modernist illustrated magazine with a circulation of 150,000, clearly fuelled the recruitment rhetoric, and the original publication of 'In Flanders Fields' in *Punch* worked to encourage nationalistic and pro-war readings.⁴⁷ It is worth noting that in spite of Allinson's conviction that it was Partridge and not McCrae who was responsible for the recruitment-oriented rhetoric of the third stanza, McCrae himself was passionate about the need for more soldiers: in 1915, he told his friend, alluding to his own role as a military surgeon, 'Allinson, all the godam [*sic*] doctors in the world will not win this bloody war: what we need is more and more fighting men'.⁴⁸

As the war dragged into its third and fourth year, the published poem was used to mobilize support for the war among civilians at the home front, as evidenced in the examples at the essay's outset. Those who could not enlist were called upon to support the war in other ways – particularly through financial support – and McCrae's verse helped perform the home-front labour of fundraising. No longer just a grassroots phenomenon, the verse's rhetorical power was harnessed for home-front labour by the government and large organizations like the Red Cross and the Canadian Patriotic Society. 'It was used with tremendous effect in the Victory loan campaign of November last, and may be credited with having brought many million dollars into the coffers of the Canadian government', *The Canada Lancet* reported in March 1918.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the Canadian Patriotic Fund and the Red Cross used the poem to raise money for the war effort, as evidenced in a large $\frac{3}{4}$ page advertisement that appeared in the *Ottawa Journal* in February 1918, exhorting readers to 'See it through!!' – a line juxtaposed with McCrae's lines, 'If ye break faith with us who die,/We shall not sleep'.⁵⁰ It mattered little that the poet's name was misspelled as MacRae in the advert – the poem's motivational message, and its successful cooptation, was clear.

Meanwhile, the poem was recited regularly in schools, 'committed to memory by generations of Canadian schoolchildren', as Vance writes.⁵¹ Between 1917, when the United States entered the war reluctantly and belatedly, and 1920, when commemorative efforts peaked, McCrae's poem inspired at least 55 American composers to set the poem to music. Once the United States entered the war, as Jennifer Ward documents by pointing to the proliferation of McCrae's poem, 'the musical transition to supporting the war effort happened overnight'.⁵² Within the wartime's sonic landscape, McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' emerged as the most popular song, not in terms of recordings and sheet music sold but in terms of

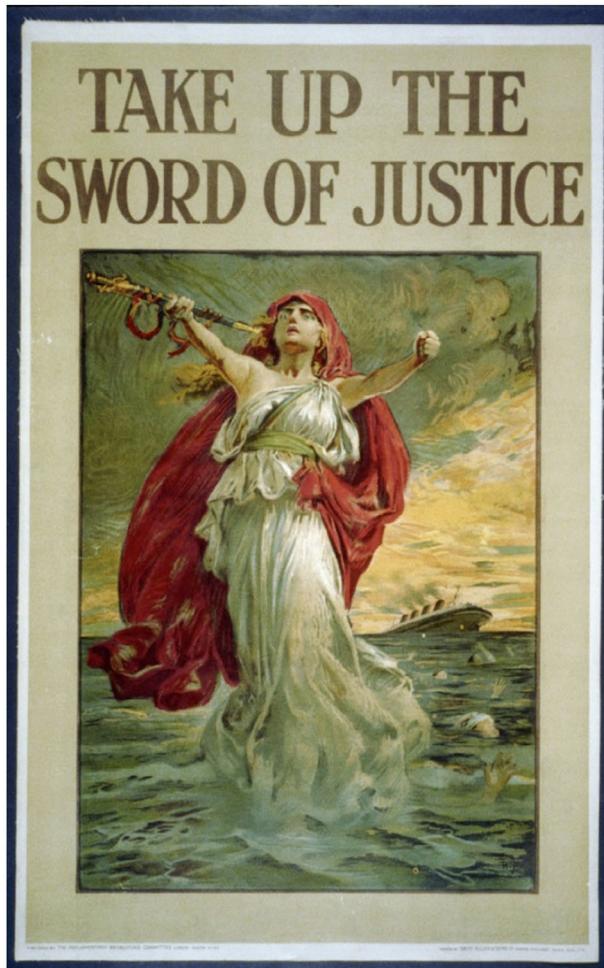


Figure 2. Bernard Partridge, 'Take Up the Sword of Justice.' 1915. Lithograph poster print. 102 × 63 cm. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20,540. This poster was created in the wake of the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

the number of settings it received'.⁵³ These settings straddled the divide 'between popular song and art song'.⁵⁴ The reason for the popularity was that the poem invited expressions of grief or sorrow, and allowed for the support of a pro-war agenda, and thus could be used in multiple settings – like in American Victory Loan campaigns of 1917–1919 and in different ways in a post-war context.⁵⁵ Before his death John McCrae himself had asked American composer John Philip Sousa to set the poem to music and sent him a typescript of the poem. Known for his marches and as the leader of a military band, Sousa was especially taken with his words 'to take up his "challenge to the foe"', as he paraphrased in his autobiography.⁵⁶

With McCrae's death in January 1918, the real life poet seemed to merge with his chorus of dead speakers, amplifying its experiential authenticity and its commemorative power in the service of mourning. Coinciding with the Armistice in November 1918, McCrae's poem was reprinted in *The Ladies' Home Journal* (Figure 3), a women's magazine with a mass circulation. The page informed readers that 'The author's body now lies buried in Flanders

56 *The Ladies' Home Journal for November, 1918*



Contributed toward the Winning of the War by
BAUER & BLACK Makers of Surgical Dressings, etc. Chicago New York Toronto

We
Shall Not Sleep
"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 amidst
the guns below.
We are the dead.
Short days ago we lived,
till 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 falling 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."

Courtesy of G.P. Putnam's Sons

In behalf of the brave men who have enlisted in the fight of right against might we reprint the above lines by Col. McCrae.

As an inspiration to war giving and war sacrifice strikes a major note. There is no war appeal to which it is not applicable.

This beautiful lyric of the war was written by Lieutenant Colonel Dr. John McCrae of Montreal, Canada while the second battle of Ypres was in progress.

The author's lady now lies buried in Flanders fields.

Is it conceivable that we shall break faith with those who die for us?

Figure 3. John McCrae. 'We Shall Not Sleep.' *The Ladies' Home Journal* 35, No. 11 (November 1918): 56. Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre, Ryerson University, Toronto.

fields', while the accompanying full-page colour illustration supplied the amplifying visual rhetoric. Out of the horizontal battlefield covered with poppies arises the flame as a vertical projection of triumph, carrying a chorus of soldiers chanting as they move upward to heaven. The rhetorical question at the end asks: 'Is it conceivable that we shall "break faith" with those "who die" for us?'⁵⁷ This poem and advertisement were encountered by a woman who would become a leading figure in the popularization of McCrae's poppy imagery for the First World War commemoration: Moina Belle Michael (1869–1944), a professor at

the University of Georgia and humanitarian activist who had trained YMCA workers in New York as part of the war effort. In her memoir, she describes taking inspiration from reading McCrae's poem, and conceiving the idea of making and selling silk poppies to generate funds for returning soldiers: 'I pledged to KEEP THE FAITH and always to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance and the emblem of "keeping the faith with all who died."⁵⁸ By April 1920, her campaign resulted in the official recognition of the poppy as the symbol of remembrance by the American Legion, although ironically poppy symbolism never had the longevity in America that it had in Canada and Britain. By 1921, Anna Guérin took the poppy campaign to France, and Lillian Freiman became the campaign's torch-bearer in Canada. In Britain, too, the poppy became the symbol of remembrance, and further cemented McCrae's poem as the iconic poem of the First World War.

That same year, L. M. Montgomery, the internationally famous author of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and an avid reciter of McCrae's poem during the war, launched Canada's first home front novel, *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921). The novel was a double homage, using his poem to mourn McCrae's death and the dead while paying tribute to Canadian girls and women for their home front service during the war. She put their volunteer work front and centre. From collecting Red Cross supplies such as bandages to sewing shirts meant to keep off cooties, Montgomery drew specifically on her own wartime experiences and observations with the Red Cross and Junior Red Cross. Once more enlisting McCrae's verse, she revealed in fiction how the poem functioned as a home front motivator and consoler for the girls and women. In the novel, Anne of Green Gables's son Walter Blythe writes a battlefield poem called 'The Piper' in the trenches. Published in 'the London *Spectator*,'⁵⁹ it enjoys international success:

The poem was a short, poignant little thing. In a month it had carried Walter's name to every corner of the globe. Everywhere it was copied – in metropolitan dailies and little village weeklies – in profound reviews and "agony columns," in Red Cross appeals and Government recruiting propaganda. Mothers and sisters wept over it, young lads thrilled to it, the whole great heart of humanity caught it up as an epitome of all the pain and hope and pity and purpose of the mighty conflict, crystallized in three brief immortal verses. A Canadian lad in the Flanders trenches had written the one great poem of the war. "The Piper," by Pte. Walter Blythe, was a classic from its first printing.⁶⁰

In modelling Walter on McCrae, Montgomery at once paid tribute to the Canadian poet, whose Scottish-Presbyterian background she shared and admired, and translated the rhetorical effect of the poem into her novel, fuelling her novel with the poem's emotional charge and haunting lament.⁶¹ McCrae's admonishment to carry 'the torch' is echoed in Walter Blythe's final letter, which asks his sister Rilla and girlfriend Una to remember and carry on: 'And if you – all you girls back in the homeland – do it, then we who don't come back will know that you have not "broken faith" with us.' He concludes by echoing verbatim McCrae's call for the covenant or allegiance: 'Yes, you'll both keep faith – I'm sure of that – you and Una. And so – goodnight.'⁶²

As the teenaged women pledge to keep faith, they continue their dedication to both their war service and commemorative work. Thus, their faith is connected to McCrae's poem, and that connection in turn mirrors the dedication of the soldiers in the trenches. Montgomery also fictionally reimagines her soldier-poet in a way that ties him more closely to perceptions of Canadian character. Walter Blythe is initially a reluctant participant in the war, horrified by its brutality, and signs up only after being shamed into leaving. In this,

Montgomery's text performs a revision, making the poet more consistent with the legend of Canada as a peaceful nation, reluctant to enter the conflict in Europe (even though in truth many thousands volunteered almost overnight). Whereas McCrae died of pneumonia in the Canadian military hospital at Wimereux, Walter, who represents Canada's war dead, dies a violent death at Courcellette, a site of Canadian victory in the notorious battle of the Somme in 1916, proving himself a hero in action and thus a fitting voice for both his fellow soldiers and his young nation.⁶³

The First World War has long been understood by historians to have played a key role in the emerging sense of a Canadian identity, both as individual citizens and as a nation; even though this position remains contested, some historians refer to the Great War as 'Canada's war of independence'.⁶⁴ Addressing herself to the young, Montgomery's focus was commemorative, her novel written for the new 'generation to which the Great War is only a name as well as all the other wars of the past'.⁶⁵ By incorporating both the language of 'In Flanders Fields' and modelling Walter in the likeness of McCrae, Montgomery furthered the poem's connection to the history and memory of the First World War. Through her bestselling book, which was published not only in English-speaking countries, but in many translations including Polish, Japanese, Slovak, Korean, Finnish, Czech and German, this vision of the war circulated worldwide.

This essay has argued for a rhetorical approach to the First World War poetry, as a way of confronting the dynamics of persuasion that circulated during the war. 'In Flanders Fields' is a poem whose haunting lament and mobilizing rhetoric should be rigorously engaged beyond the veterans groups who use it to pass on 'the torch of remembrance', or later generations who hold on to their family histories and memories of relatives that participated in the war. Moreover, the poem is often anthologized in the teaching literature and is a standard on the Belgian high-school curriculum, a topic that has implications for the poem's contribution to non-anglophone nationalities' understanding of war. Given the national and international circulation of 'In Flanders Fields', the poem is key to transnational considerations of the First World War and the role of war poetry that circulated on the frontlines as well as among civilians. Performing military labour, reaching and influencing masses of civilians in the combatant nations, and fuelling home front volunteer work, the poem's rhetorical gestures and its direct appeal to diverse readers illuminates its power as a technology of war communication, emphasizing the influence of the First World War poetry on the lived experiences of soldiers, veterans and civilians alike. In the end, McCrae's poem may well be 'an accidental and revelatory self-portrait',⁶⁶ as one critic has described it, but even more it is a social text with enormous relevancy for the First World War and the post-war era: a rhetorical tour de force emanating from a specific space and time shaped by, and in turn shaping, the mobilizing dynamics of a modern cataclysmic war.

Notes

1. Montgomery, *My Dear Mr. M.*, 81.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 80.
4. Many John McCrae-inspired songs were registered during wartime from 1917 on. For a full listing, see Ward, "American Musical Settings of 'In Flanders Fields' and the Great War," Appendix A, 124–128; for a list of 'Answer songs' to 'In Flanders Fields,' see Appendix B, 128, 129.

5. See, for example, William R. Lohse's Liberty Loan poster, ca. 1918, and Philip Lyford's Liberty Loan poster for the Department of the Treasury, ca. 1918; both reproduced in Ward, "American Musical Settings of 'In Flanders Fields' and the Great War," Figures 1 and 2.
6. Derivative postwar poems include Michael's 'We Shall Keep the Faith' (1918); Jaques "In Flanders Now" (1919); and Montgomery's "The Piper" (1942), published posthumously. For additional examples, see Vance, "A Moment's Perfection," 191–193.
7. See Vance, "A Moment's Perfection," 189–190. Vance notes that the poem's American debut occurred in January 1916 in the *Washington Post*, from where it spread to Australia, New Zealand, and Canada by the summer 1916; its proliferation during and beyond the war was enabled by its lack of copyright protection.
8. Purseigle, "A Poppy is Cheap; Remembrance and Solidarity Are Not." See also Fox, "Poppy Politics: Remembrance of Things Present"; Holmes, "'In Flanders Fields' – Canada's Official Poem"; and Prescott, *In Flanders Fields*.
9. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 250.
10. McCutcheon, "Come on Back to the War," 765.
11. Fox, "Poppy Politics: Remembrance of Things Present," 25. By contrast, the German War Graves Commission, commemorates its war dead with the blue flower of Romanticism, the forget-me-not (*Vergissmeinnicht*), which symbolizes 'the romanticizing of self-sacrifice of many young volunteers who were ignorant of modern war technology and its gruesome consequences,' recalling the dangers of naïve romanticism that fuelled the war for so many on both sides of the trenches (Volksbund, 6). The songs recommended for commemoration include multiple languages and are anti-war, such as John Lennon's 'Give Peace a Chance' but also includes Ludwig Uhland's lament 'Ich hatt' einen Kameraden' (1809), which is also treated with respect like an anthem, like 'In Flanders Fields,' and is also linked to Remembrance Day (Volksbund, 23).
12. Buelens, *Everything to Nothing*, 23.
13. See Holmes, "'In Flanders Fields' – Canada's Official Poem." In her examination of the poem's artistic credentials, Holmes describes McCrae's work as a 'sonnet that has been pressurized into a short ode through breaking and re-stacking the lines,' 16. See also Hemmings, "Of Trauma and Flora: Memory and Commemoration in Four Poems of the World Wars"; Acorn, "From Islandhlwawa to Flanders Fields: With John McCrae"; and Vance, "A Moment's Perfection."
14. There have been considerable efforts in opening the category of war poetry; see for example Jonathan Vance, who argues for an inclusion of war poetry independent of its literary credentials (*Death So Noble*); Santanu Das, who considers the role of touch and sensuous experience in war poetry (*Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*); Caruth, who considers poetry in counteracting trauma (*Literature in the Ashes*); Jay Winter, who focuses on the role of poetry in the experiences of loss and bereavement (*Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*); and Higonnet, who considers non-combatants including women ("Not so Quiet in No-Woman's-Land").
15. Voyce, *Poetic Community*, 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 4.
17. Smith, *Poets Beyond the Barricade*, 6.
18. 1st Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery.
19. McCrae, Diary.
20. McCrae, "[In Flanders Fields] (Original Version)," qtd. in Allinson, 'John McCrae: Poet, Soldier, Physician,' 122.
21. See Macphail's "An Essay in Character," 30–97.
22. Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 24. See also Nancy Holmes, "'In Flanders Fields' – Canada's Official Poem" who notes the 'kinetic energy' infusing the poem, 17.
23. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 246.
24. McCrae, "In Flanders Fields," 468.
25. Hill, *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, 31.
26. Hill, *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, 31.

27. Margaret Higonnet quoted in McKenzie, “Correspondence, Constructs, and Qualification in World War I,” n. p. Drawing on Higonnet’s work, Andrea McKenzie notes that
- scholarly examinations of war literature still embed the notion of ‘soldier’s truth’ versus ‘civilian propaganda’ ...; male soldiers, due to their active service, are perceived as knowledgeable about the real conditions of war, while civilians, especially women, are seen as ignorant of them.
28. Hill, *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, 35.
29. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 250.
30. Holmes, “‘In Flanders Fields’ – Canada’s Official Poem,” 17.
31. Vance, *Death So Noble*, 51.
32. Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 205.
33. *Ibid.*, 218.
34. *Ibid.*, 221.
35. Macphail, “An Essay on Character,” 83.
36. Vance, *Death So Noble*, 36.
37. Homer, *Iliad*, Bk. III l. 298, 299.
38. Voyce, *Poetic Community*, 229.
39. *Ibid.*, 231.
40. Vance, “A Moment’s Perfection,” 191.
41. Macphail, “An Essay in Character,” 34.
42. *Ibid.*, 34.
43. Allinson, “John McCrae: Poet, Soldier, Physician,” 123.
44. *Ibid.*, 129.
45. *Ibid.*, 129.
46. *Ibid.*, 139.
47. Although poison gas was absent from the poem, it was very much present in the discursive formation surrounding its first publication. The poem immediately followed a column that mock-advertised macabre Christmas toys, including ‘a Realistic Trench-warfare model, “with apparatus for Poison-Gas”’ and an ‘Influenza Doll’ (‘Seasonal Novelties’ 468). Able to emit a bronchial cough, the doll was of ‘Superior quality, with Double Pneumonia effect’ (468). Even though the British themselves had also used gas in the fall of 1915 during the Battle of Loos, in *Punch* gas was used to fuel anti-German sentiment. The association between ‘In Flanders Fields’ and poison gas was reiterated when the poem was later reprinted in full on the poster for the Military Parade Service in Montreal commemorating the Second Anniversary of the gas attack on April 22, 1917 (‘Military Service Parade’), retaining its rhetorical connection to mass death and poison gas. It is worth noting that ‘In Flanders Fields’ was unique in its success but not its theme in McCrae’s poetry. On June 30, 1917, the *Spectator* in London, which had rejected ‘In Flanders Fields,’ published McCrae’s poem ‘The Anxious Dead.’ Although it contains similar rhetorical fire, it failed to catch on as ‘In Flanders Fields.’ This suggests that the rhythm, as well as the timing and association with a known location of the earlier poem, beyond its patriotic theme, were both contributors to its success.
48. McCrae, qtd. in Allinson, “John McCrae: Poet, Soldier, Physician,” 130.
49. Anon., “The Author of ‘In Flanders Fields,’” 333.
50. “Canadian Patriotic Fund & Red Cross,” 9.
51. Vance, *Death So Noble*, 200, 201.
52. Ward, “American Musical Settings of ‘In Flanders Fields’ and the Great War,” 97.
53. *Ibid.*, 97, 98.
54. *Ibid.*, 98.
55. *Ibid.*, 101–104.
56. Sousa, qtd. in Ward, “American Musical Settings of ‘In Flanders Fields’ and the Great War,” 118.
57. McCrae, “We Shall Not Sleep,” 56.
58. Michael, *The Miracle Flower*, 47.
59. Montgomery, *Rilla of Ingleside*, 167.

60. Ibid., 167. Montgomery did not include the full poem in *Rilla of Ingleside*, but eventually wrote and published it during the Second World War; it was published in the Canadian magazine *Saturday Night* on May 2, 1942, shortly after her death. By this time, the poem revealed her late style and a different, more starkly pessimistic outlook that was preoccupied with death including her own. For more, see Benjamin Lefebvre, “‘That Abominable War!’: *The Blythes Are Quoted* and Thoughts on L.M. Montgomery’s Late Style.’ See Andrea McKenzie, ‘Women at War,’ 86, who argues for a more nuanced consideration of war poetry and prose, noting that both Montgomery and McCrae’s works have been ‘critiqued, sometimes harshly, for [their support of the war].’
61. See Edwards and Litster, “L.M. Montgomery and the First World War,” 36. They write: ‘As literature, “In Flanders Fields” cannot compete with the works of Rosenberg, Owen, Sassoon, and others; but they cannot compete with it as the perennial popular lament, perhaps the most popular latter-day bardic lament to haunt our century.’
62. Montgomery, *Rilla of Ingleside*, 192.
63. See Edwards and Litster, “L.M. Montgomery and the First World War,” 36.
64. Vance, *Death So Noble*, 10. Vance paraphrases Desmond Morton and J. L. Granatstein.
65. Montgomery, *Selected Journals*, vol. 3, 65. Published three years after the war, the novel became a bestseller during an era when Canada’s need to mourn its 60,000 dead and many more maimed was conspicuously ignored by the Mackenzie King government, leaving the mourning work to be performed by the churches, municipalities, private citizens, the war amputees clubs, and its writers and artists. The First World War represented a new way of commemorating the war dead evolved in Canada that, as Denise Thomson writes, ‘gradually moved to reflect an increasingly assertive nationalism. ... Canadian commemoration ... honoured the war dead and emphasized the need for the living to keep faith with them, but it also came to celebrate Canada’s achievement of independent nationhood’ (‘National Sorrow, National Pride,’ 7).
66. Patterson, “Soldier Surgeon, Soldier Poet,” 122.

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