

Filip de Sagher



Growing up in Flanders Fields

I grew up in Flanders Fields but only gradually did I come to realize its significance.

It dawned on me after I had emigrated to Canada.

As young boys, we found the occasional bullet and traded it for candy at the local pub in our village. And when a new house was built in the neighbourhood, whispers did the rounds that the remains of soldiers were found, shredded uniforms, a helmet, and bombs. Bombs were around pretty much anywhere, in any size. In a ditch, in our vegetable garden, in fields . . . Every year a farmer or two would accidentally hit them when ploughing the fields, especially after a heavy rain, sometimes with devastating results.

At school in Ypres in Southwest Flanders, Belgium, we occasionally went to the War Museum with our class. For a small boy, that meant a half-day off to gawk at awesome things like rifles and medals and German guns.

And we all knew to avoid the Menin gate around 7 PM when we rode bikes home. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to get out of town.

The Menin Gate Memorial is one of the main entrance gates around Ypres, a huge arch really, under which traffic roars into town and where names of fallen soldiers without graves are listed.

But all traffic stops at 7 PM. Crowds would gather in silence and a bugle would play something called *The Last Post*. Little did I know . . .

Bombs were around pretty much anywhere, in any size.

And then there are the cemeteries. Lots of them, with bright white headstones, meticulously mowed lawns, and flags from various countries. One of the flags, someone showed me, had a bright red leaf in it as a symbol of their country.

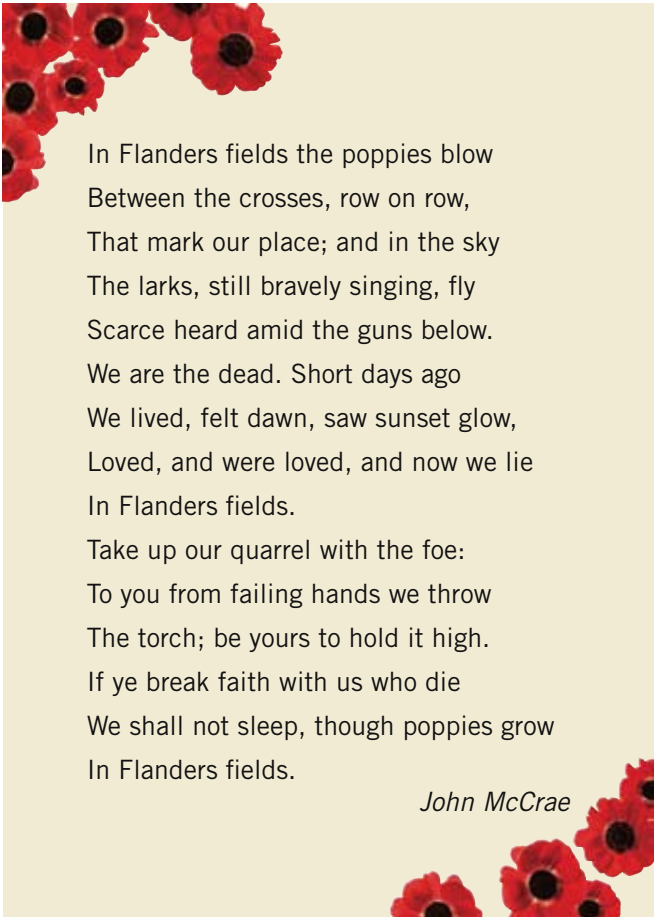
Some cemeteries encircled a monument such as an arch, an obelisk, a statue—invariably with an eternal flame.

As boy scouts, we fulfilled our good deed to the community by sometimes spending the afternoon in pouring rain or blazing sun cleaning those bright white headstones, weeding, and trimming. One of those cemeteries is in Passchendaele, locally know as “the Canadian,” because of the imposing statue of what looked to us boys like a mourning officer. They told us it was an honour guardsman from Canada, respectfully bowing his head to the fallen.



Tyne Cot Cemetery, the largest commonwealth cemetery in the world, located outside Passendale in Belgium. It remembers some of the British who died in the First World War.

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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.

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.

John McCrae

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Growing older, we made day or weekend trips in the region and gradually I started to realize the scope of these events. The Ypres Salient, the Somme, the Marne, Verdun . . . never-ending battlefields where hundreds of thousands of soldiers fell. We enjoyed these trips because many were in the Champagne region and thus the perfect combination of learning all about that noble wine and indulging in military history. Both eventually became a passion.

Then we came to live in Canada and Flanders Fields took on a deeper meaning. I grew up with The Great War being part of our daily lives, shown in so many respectfully kept memorials.

Here, celebrating Remembrance Day evokes this respect to the fallen and confirms year after year our tribute to the courage and self-sacrifice of so many.

Here, I really started to understand why they played *The Last Post* every day in Ypres, why the cemeteries are meticulously maintained, and why we all put a red poppy on our jackets.

Lest we forget is not an empty phrase. We keep the faith with those who died. ▲

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