

# The Poppy

On and around 11 November each year, the League sells millions of red poppies for Australians to pin on their lapels. Proceeds go to League welfare work. Why a red poppy?

The red poppy, the Flanders poppy, was first described as the flower of remembrance by Colonel John McCrae, who was Professor of Medicine at McGill University of Canada before World War One. Colonel McCrae had served as a gunner in the Boer War, but went to France in World War One as a medical officer with the first Canadian contingent.

At the second battle of Ypres in 1915, when in charge of a small first-aid post, he wrote in pencil on a page torn from his dispatch book:

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.

The verses were apparently sent anonymously to the English magazine, Punch, which published them under the title "In Flanders' Fields".

Colonel McCrae was wounded in May 1918 and died after three days in a military hospital on the French coast. On the eve of his death he allegedly said to his doctor, "Tell them this. If ye break faith with us who die we shall not sleep".

An American Miss Moira Michael, read "In Flanders' Fields" and wrote a reply entitled "We Shall Keep the Faith":

Oh! You who sleep in Flanders' fields,  
Sleep sweet - to rise anew,  
We caught the torch you threw,  
And holding high we kept  
The faith with those who died,  
We cherish, too, the Poppy red  
That grows on fields where valour led.

It seems to signal to the skies  
That blood of heroes never dies,  
But lends a lustre to the red  
Of the flower that blooms above the dead  
In Flanders' fields.

And now the torch and poppy red  
Wear in honour of our dead  
Fear not that ye have died for naught  
We've learned the lesson that ye taught  
In Flanders' fields.