



Lest we forget

The Remembrance Day poppy is 100 years old in Canada, **Tim Cook** writes. It started as a symbol of the First World War's horrors, but decades of conflicts have woven it into a more complicated Canadian history

OPINION

Tim Cook is author of 12 books of Canadian military history and curator of the Canadian War Museum's current exhibition, *Forever Changed: Stories from the Second World War*.

The crimson emblem we wear on Remembrance Day is a symbol of recognition and commemoration, of sorrow and of pride. The poppy connects us to history as we bear witness to those who have fallen in service of this country, to those who returned from wars and missions wounded in body, mind and spirit, to those who demobilized or left the forces to contribute to their communities, and to those who continue to serve.

The poppy is pinned to our history, and for many Canadians it has always been a part of our lives. Yet the poppy has its own remarkable history. This year is the 100th anniversary of its adoption by Canadian veterans to mark war, loss and the obligation of remembrance.

The poppy emerged as a symbol from the killing fields of the Western Front during the First World War. That Armageddon of destruction, when industrialized fighting from 1914 to 1918 caused more than nine million soldiers' deaths in battle, more than 21 million more wounded, and destroyed empires, continues to cast a long shadow.

For Canada, which was a country of not yet eight million, more than 620,000 men served in uniform, alongside 3,000 nurses. It was a total war that thrust Canada onto the world stage, and

where its primary fighting force, the Canadian Corps, delivered victories at Vimy, Hill 70, Passchendaele, Amiens, Arras, Cambrai and Mons.

Led by Canadian-born Sir Arthur Currie from mid-1917, the Corps was the instrument of Canada's contribution to victory and a symbol that a new country was emerging from the horror of war. The cost of victory was terrible, with some 66,000 Canadians killed and another 172,000 suffering physical wounds.

The carnage was most evident at the medical aid stations and field hospitals, where doctors and nurses worked on the mangled bodies of soldiers who had been shredded by steel, scalded by poison gas, or whose bodies were being consumed by infection in the age before antibiotics.

About half of all Canadian doctors served overseas during the war, and their skill and ability to learn in the cauldron of battle led to a survival rate of more than 90 per cent of all patients who made it to a medical unit. And yet the trauma imprinted itself on these men and women in uniform who sought to save their wounded comrades, and all bore a heavy emotional load.

The link between the poppy and remembrance began with a martial poem. One of the many Canadian doctors serving in uniform was a gifted physician and poet from Montreal, John McCrae. At the Battle of Second Ypres in April, 1915, the trial-by-fire engagement where the Canadians faced the first German unleashing of chlorine gas that burned

out lungs, McCrae worked as a battlefield surgeon. In nearly two weeks of non-stop surgery, he wrote last letters to loved ones, fully expecting to be killed.

He also penned his famous poem, *In Flanders Fields*, amid the death and horror of that battle. After the poem's publication later in the year, it rapidly became a worldwide phenomenon. Its evocative words came from the dead who urged the living to keep up the fight against the Germans — "To you from failing hands we throw / The torch; be yours to hold it high" It was a call to battle and further sacrifice in the pursuit of victory. And yet its opening lines, "In Flanders Fields, the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row," offered an evocation of loss, with the poppies representing the fallen.

The success of McCrae's poem saw it conscripted into use to recruit more soldiers through live readings and propaganda posters that invoked blood-red poppies. After the war, it took on new significance, its meaning shifting with the times. It became, and remains, a poem about remembrance and commemoration, with the dead no longer demanding that the living keep up the fight, but that the living remember and honour the fallen.

The war continued to reverberate long after the guns fell silent. It had profound effects around the world, not the least being the re-making of at least nine new countries, the emergence of Communism, and the rise of the

United States as a great power. But there was also a thick shroud of grief that lay over the postwar memorial landscape and the need to come to grips with the terrible death toll.

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A French activist, Madame Anna Guérin (née Anna Alix Bouille), took up the cause to use the flower as an emblem of remembrance. In Canada, there were other groups and individuals who also promoted the poppy as an object of commemoration, especially the women who formed the patriotic Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire.

In 1921, Guérin came to Canada to meet with the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA), the largest of the many veterans' groups to emerge in the Dominion after the war. In Canada, as in other countries, organized veterans' groups united to support two major causes: to remember fallen comrades and to support wounded veterans.

The former group was honoured by Ottawa and in communities across the country through an intense period of memorial building. Stained-glass windows were erected to the slain in churches; plaques were installed in schools and businesses; and even returned captured German artillery pieces and machine guns were prominently on display in civic spaces. Overseas, monuments were built on former battlefields, most notably at Beaumont Hamel on the Somme and the National Memorial on

Vimy Ridge.

Seeking a wearable symbol of commemoration, the GWVA adopted the poppy in 1921 at their convention at Port Arthur, Ont. (now Thunder Bay). Some wore hand-crafted poppies that year on Armistice Day, which had first been established in 1919 to mark the British Empire's terrible losses.

Despite periodic opposition to the poppy as a "weed" and grumblings by some that it was a "pagan flower" linked to opium, it quickly became an established symbol of remembrance. The GWVA set up a number of factories in 1923 in which disabled veterans worked to mass-produce silk poppies that would be sold to Canadians. These Vetcraft centres were fully supported and later expanded when many of the veterans' organizations — including the GWVA — came together in 1925 to form the Canadian Legion.

The Legion had several high-profile scuffles with manufacturers across the country throughout the 1920s over the right to manufacture the poppies. Veterans argued that these private companies took away jobs from disabled veterans and funds away from the war's survivors. The Legion's Vetcraft factories eventually became the sole producers of the poppy. The revenue aided veterans in need, including purchasing food and fuel, and providing shelters for indigent men in the 1920s as the war was left behind by many Canadians, but remained raw for veterans.

In 1931, after years of debate, Armistice Day was officially renamed Remembrance Day, to be



A First World War-era poster, by Frank Lucien Nicolet for the Department of National Defence, quotes John McCrae's poem In Flanders Fields to sell war bonds. CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

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ished place of Remembrance Day throughout the 1960s. The poppy continued to be worn, however, with almost seven million distributed in 1963, but there was a noticeable drop in attendance at Remembrance Day ceremonies during that turbulent decade.

The ever-present threat of thermonuclear annihilation was also raised on occasion as a reason why some found the poppy quaint or Remembrance Day outdated. Charles Lynch, a wartime reporter and celebrated journalist, wrote the day after Remembrance Day in 1969: “Lest we forget, the poem says, as it has on every year since we were born. But hardly anyone remembers, and almost everyone forgets.” Mr. Lynch worried about the widespread ignorance of what Canadians had done in the world wars. He asked his readers: “Have we broken faith so soon?”

In 1971, attesting to the awareness of youth with no direct association with war, the now-Royal Canadian Legion offered a slogan for the annual Poppy campaign, “If You Can’t Remember ... Think.” From the 1970s, attendance at Remembrance Day dropped dramatically, Canada’s contributions in the world wars were played down in educational curricula, and the Canadian Forces were not a desirable profession for most young people, despite significant contributions to NATO, in hemispheric defence, and on peacekeeping missions.

And yet the poppy remained a symbol. There was, for instance, a sizable backlash against anti-war protesters in Toronto on Remem-

brance Day in 1983 when many wore the poppy in a protest march against American cruise missile testing in Canada. Protesters claimed that their actions were in the “spirit of Remembrance Day.” There had, in fact, been a protest poppy – the white poppy – since the 1930s, although it was little worn in Canada.

There were other periodic fights over the poppy, usually when a store or restaurant refused to allow staff to wear the poppy or to allow veterans to sell poppies on the premises. The Legion had often led the public shaming of these businesses, but in more recent years they haven’t had to do it alone, with more and more Canadians raising their voices in anger at the insensitive misreading of the poppy’s importance.

The 1990s witnessed a renewed interest by Canadians in their military history and greater numbers gathered together on Nov. 11 across the country, many spurred on by the important 50th anniversary commemorations of the Second World War in 1994 and 1995. For others, the near loss of the country in the 1995 Quebec Referendum had shaken many to reflect on what held the country together, with some believing that a better understanding of the country’s shared history contributed to unity.

With the 9/11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan, the poppy remained a symbol of remembrance and commemoration. Two decades into the 21st century, the poppy continues in its quiet mission of raising funds for those who served and for community programs, and in a visible display of remembrance.

The poppy has been worn for 100 years, through times of war and unsteady peace, from the aftermath of the influenza epidemic from 1918 to 1920 that killed approximately 55,000 Canadians to the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than half that number.

The poppy has always been tethered to those Canadians who served and sacrificed, to acts of violence and heroism, and as a symbol of commemoration and observation. It is a flower infused with tears for loved ones long gone and sadness for humanity’s flaws that lead to war.

While the poppy is worn in many parts of the world, its story, spooled out over 100 years, is very much connected to Canada’s history, of generations past and present. We’d do well to remember that.

marked each year on Nov. 11 (in the past it had been a floating day on the second Monday of each November). The changing of the name was a sign that the day of commemoration was observing a war that had moved from victory to remembrance. The poppy was fully intertwined with Remembrance Day and, in November, 1933, some two million poppies were sold to Canadians, about one for every five Canadians.

Remembrance Day and the poppy were further enmeshed with other debates in society, and both the day and the flower drew attention to the many veterans who suffered during the Depression from 1929 through much of the 1930s. Those locust-infested years led to widespread misery, with about a third of Canadians out of work during the worst of the Depression. Veterans suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder were among the first fired and the last rehired.

During the Second World War, in the week before each Remembrance Day, hundreds of volunteers in communities large and small across the country were on the streets selling poppies. “The needs of the men who already fought for democracy should not be overlooked in attending to the needs of those now carrying on,” said brigadier-general W.W. Foster, Dominion president of the Canadian Legion, a month in advance of Remembrance Day in 1939.

From 1939 to 1945, the poppy was both a sign of remembrance connected to those who never returned from the Great War, and also for the 1.1 million Canadians who would eventually serve in uniform against the Nazis and other fascists, with some 45,000 Canadians killed in service and another 55,000 were wounded during the war.

usually with a special day to kick off the program.

“Poppy Day, like Remembrance Day, belongs to the men who died in the service of their country but, even more – it belongs to the men who have gone on living, men who never quite recovered from the shock and injuries of battle, but who gave their youth and their hopes for the safety of others,” recounted an editorial from Oct. 29, 1946, in Vancouver’s The Province.

The next year, Brooke Claxton, a Great War veteran and Minister of National Defence, claimed in a well-publicized speech that the poppy had “become a part of Canadian life.” Other nations wore the poppy, especially those in the old British Empire, but its links to John McCrae made it particularly Canadian.

By the 1950s, it was common for businesses to allow for the distribution of poppies in their stores and from mid-decade more than five million poppies were worn by Canadians on Remembrance Day.

The Canadian poppies in 1955 were redesigned to be more durable, with a richer red and a finished paper, as opposed to those previous flowers that tended to be cotton or silk and often curled at the corners. Many were worn by a new generation of veterans who had served in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, during which time more than 500 Canadians were killed.

The poppy continued to be worn by Canadians in the 1960s, but a new generation was increasingly pushing back against their parents and the ideals for which they stood. The emergence of a vibrant youth culture, changing social and cultural mores, and the stronger anti-war sentiment driven by the war in Vietnam, led to more questioning of all things related to war, even commemoration. Remembrance Day faded in relevance.

Veterans of the two world wars and Korea, while never a monolithic group with uniform ideas, were distressed by the dimin-



Portrait of John McCrae, author of In Flanders Fields, showing a photo editor’s markup and cropping overlay. THE GLOBE AND MAIL PHOTO ARCHIVES