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# **The Poppy**

Written by Nicholas J. Saunders

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# THE POPPY

A Cultural History  
from Ancient Egypt  
to Flanders Fields  
to Afghanistan

Nicholas J. Saunders



ONE WORLD

A ONEWORLD BOOK

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY FATHER, WHO PASSED away as it was being written, and thus had no chance to read it.

The connection between war, memory, emotion and the Remembrance Poppy is visceral for me. I remember as a child standing on a cold winter morning in the late 1950s among the crowd gathered around Southampton's cenotaph, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. At its summit, out of sight, lay a recumbent First World War soldier, staring into the grey sky. As I fidgeted with the poppy Dad had given me, gigantic booms filled the air and made me jump – it was 11 a.m. on 11 November, and I've never forgotten it.. Dad had fought and been wounded in Italy during the Second World War, and was here to remember the many friends he had lost. I was too young to understand, yet I feel that, in a sense, this book began then, over fifty years ago, and that its completion is a small commemoration of my own father and all those who have died and suffered during the many wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

It is impossible to express adequately the gratitude I owe to those who have inspired and helped me with their advice, experience and insights over the years in which this book has taken shape. I am, however, especially grateful to Annette Becker, Barbara Bender, Franky Bostyn, James Brazier, Piet Chielens, Paul Cornish, Anna Baker Cresswell,

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*In Flanders Fields*

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, 1915*

## I

# GENESIS

THE EUROSTAR HURTLES DOWN THE HIGH-SPEED RAIL track that cuts through the French countryside from the port of Calais to the medieval city of Lille. For a moment, a scarlet blur fills the carriage windows, and is then pushed back by a fence of barbless wire. This is the largest war memorial the world has seen – a hundred million poppies straddling the railway and A1 motorway as they make their way south from the English Channel into the heart of northern France. Yet it is a figment of the imagination.

The memorial lives only as a proposal suggested in 1999 by Pascal Truffaut, a professor of architecture from Lille. His knowledge of the First World War and his professional expertise moved him to imagine something unique, something that would vividly commemorate the tens of thousands who died on the battlefield of the Somme in the summer of 1916, exactly the time of year when poppies appear. Crimson poppies would make a striking monument, Truffaut says, ‘they should form a “river of blood”, a permanent reminder of the sacrifice, and the horrors, of the war, for all the nations who were involved’.<sup>1</sup>



Truffaut's ribbon of red was planned to follow part of No Man's Land, the killing ground which divided the opposing Allied and German trenches. It was just to the north of here, at Ypres in Belgian Flanders, that John McCrae, a Canadian army doctor, wrote the poem 'In Flanders Fields' that ignited the passions of the postwar public and launched the very first Remembrance Poppy appeal. McCrae's poem has itself become the enduring memorial to the Great War.

It was May 1915. A few days earlier, the Germans had unleashed a choking fog of chlorine gas onto the Allied positions and McCrae had read the Order for the Burial of the Dead over the freshly dug grave of his friend Lieutenant Alexis Helmer. Blown to pieces by a bombardment just hours before, twenty-two-year-old Helmer was hurriedly buried in an impromptu battlefield cemetery, yards from the first-aid dugout where McCrae tended the wounded. At dawn the next day, McCrae gazed on the makeshift burials of those who had been killed, and noted the lively corn poppies that had sprung up between them. The scene played on his mind. Glancing occasionally at Helmer's grave, he immortalised the poppy in verse.

McCrae's poem caused a sensation on its publication. The corn poppy was rechristened the Flanders Poppy, and the image of its fragile blood-red petals rooted itself in the psyche of the English-speaking Allies as their emblem of remembrance. The poem and the poppies that inspired it were fused into one, a symbol used to raise money for the war effort, and later for postwar campaigns to honour the dead and to help those maimed by the war: the Remembrance Poppy.<sup>2</sup>

Tragic yet uplifting, lethal but comforting, the story of the Remembrance Poppy is international in spirit yet intimately personal. As a symbol the poppy has an ancient and fractured past, but this history has not prevented it from taking on new and contorted meanings in our modern commercial age. Over the last century, the flower became

inseparable from our experience of countless conflicts, from the Great War through the Second World War to Iraq. Today it is embroiled in a new struggle – called until recently the ‘War on Terror’ – a seemingly unending state of conflict enlisting the men and women of our volunteer military, whether they are serving in the opium fields of Afghanistan or closer to home. The Remembrance Poppy is a touchstone for the issues and the aftermath of these wars – the value put on the sacrifice made by millions of dead, the place of pacifism, the importance of public remembrance, the billion-dollar trade in narcotics trafficking and the multi-billion-dollar business of war. The Remembrance Poppy is volatile, for ever entangled with people as they endure the chaos of war and then struggle to find some way to rebuild their lives once war has ended.

Of course, the poppy is also a real living thing. Around the world there are about 250 species of poppy, with 70 belonging to the genus *Papaver*, which takes its name from the Latin for ‘poppy’, and whose members characteristically ooze a creamy latex when cut.<sup>3</sup> These poppies range across the alkaline soils of Europe, North Africa and Central Asia. Poppy lives are brief, and they flourish in human company. The origins of the Remembrance Poppy are found in two of myriad species – the simple corn poppy and its powerful cousin, the opium poppy.

Despite the fact that the Remembrance Poppy itself was only conceived in the early part of the twentieth century, the red corn poppy and the pinkish-white opium poppy have had interwoven histories for centuries. They are the poppies of war. Both grow on sunlit, broken ground, and for millennia have inhabited the places where humans till the soil and bury their dead. The corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) grew with abandon across Europe and the Middle East as trade wars gave way to the Crusades, which in turn gave way to the resource wars of

nation states. The painkilling properties of opium have been highly valued as a powerful antidote to the traumas of battle throughout the ages. Long before the advent of modern medicine the opium poppy's (*Papaver somniferum*) juice and resin have been used to ease mental anguish and alleviate the pain of wounds. The opium poppy's soporific qualities brought temporary forgetfulness of suffering to those maimed and bereaved by conflict. Once John McCrae's poem claimed the corn poppy as the flower of remembrance, the fragile bloom was transformed. But while the Remembrance Poppy took on the corn poppy's appearance, its power to help individuals bear the pain of suffering and loss, and to continue with their lives despite it all, belong more to the realm of the opium poppy. Ancient traditions collided with modern events, and the two poppy species became one.



THE CORN POPPY'S AFFAIR with cultivated land is absolute. As long as the ground is broken, the scarlet flower will grow. Despite its apparent fragility, it is resilient, and possesses all the characteristics of a successful weed. It appears in late spring, as the warming land shrugs off the winter cold; it blooms in early summer, and its heavy, seed-filled pod weighs down the stem as the flower matures, bowing the four-petalled head. When ripe, the star-shaped top of the elongated oval pod explodes, casting thousands of black seeds to the wind, guaranteeing that new poppies sprout in the same fields year after year. The poppy contains a milky sap, whose alkaloid rhoeadine acts as a sedative, and has been used in folk medicine from ancient to modern times to make a mildly soporific tea. When crushed, the seeds yield nutritious oil, a tasty substitute for olive oil. Sunlight glimmers through its short-lived

petals, which are silky to the touch and easily bruised. They provide the blush for a deep-red dye which is used to colour wine, though is too unstable for use on cloth.

*Papaver somniferum* means ‘bringer of sleep’, but the opium poppy is no less social than the corn poppy. It too seeks out the company of people, thriving on the churned earth, reappearing year after year. The similarities, however, end there. The opium poppy is more robust, stands a metre tall or more and appears in variegated hues, though white, pink and purple are the most common. Its capsule carries a resin loaded with alkaloids, of which morphine, thebaine and codeine are the most potent. The traditional method of harvesting is to score the immature capsule so that the sap leaks out and dries on the pod’s outer surface. The sticky hardened resin is then scraped off and collected for use. The opium poppy is unique. Of the 27,000 different flowering plants in the world, only the opium poppy makes morphine.<sup>4</sup>

The opium poppy has a mysterious past, as no wild ancestor has been identified.<sup>5</sup> It has also enjoyed an elusive and unique relationship with humans for some eight thousand years because it is the only poppy species which has been domesticated as a crop.<sup>6</sup> Its origins may lie in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), or perhaps in the neighbouring Balkans, the heartland of early European agriculture. There are some early clues, however, from Western Europe.

In 1865, a charred poppy capsule was recovered from a waterlogged Neolithic village by Lake Pfäffikersee near Robenhausen in northern Switzerland. Dated to around 2500BCE,<sup>7</sup> the capsule appears to be from an intermediate species, a semi-wild opium poppy. Since that time, evidence of opium-poppy cultivation has been found by archaeologists in similar lakeside locations across Switzerland, from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age (c. 5500 to 800BCE).<sup>8</sup> At Egolzwil on the shores of former Lake Wauwil, in Lucerne, 6,000-year-old poppy-seed cakes and

poppy heads have been excavated among clay hearths and pottery in well-preserved timber houses. The evidence suggests that poppies were more commonly grown here than wheat or barley.

Another major finding came in 1935, when fossilised ripe poppy capsules, later carbon dated to around 4000BCE, were discovered in the ‘Cave of the Bats’ in southern Spain. The capsules, along with locks of hair, were tucked inside woven grass baskets, which were laid among human skeletons – the earliest evidence to date of poppies being placed at a grave. It is likely this was a deliberate act, as the archaeologist Ralph Solecki discovered similar evidence from a far older site in Iraq. He found that pollen in a 6,000-year-old Neanderthal cave burial came from variously coloured flowers and appeared to have been placed purposefully around the skeletal remains.<sup>9</sup>

Remarkable evidence has recently come from La Marmotta by Lake Bracciano, a water-filled volcanic crater situated north-west of Rome. Since 1989, archaeologists have been excavating the remains of a large Neolithic town of wattle and daub houses supported on thousands of oak posts preserved in the sediments at the bottom of the lake. Inside a large thirty-two-foot-long building they discovered a statuette, carved from soapstone, of a voluptuous woman – a so-called ‘Mother Goddess’ figurine – which may indicate that the building served a religious purpose. They also found large quantities of well-preserved charred and uncharred opium-poppy seeds, pods and stigmatic discs (the ‘cap’ to the pod that contains the flower’s reproductive stigma, which trap pollen). The seeds appear to be of a semi-wild variety, and so the poppies were most likely being cultivated near the village for their seeds and sap – and their painkilling effects. Dated to 5700BCE, they are the earliest samples of opium-poppy seeds found in a human settlement.<sup>10</sup>

For almost eight thousand years, the mildly narcotic corn poppy and the morphine-bearing opium poppy have grown alongside each

other, united in their dependence on people. This enduring relationship, while still not fully understood, spanned humanity's transition from early agriculture to urban civilisation: these two poppies were ever present as medicine, religion, literature and art developed, and they can be traced through all these human endeavours.



**HOW AND WHY** did the humble corn poppy become a universal symbol of remembrance and memory? What made it so enduring that this symbolism has survived for millennia to be reborn on the last century's battlefields, from Flanders Fields to Helmand Province? Every year, eighty million red paper and plastic poppies are distributed around the world, carrying their message to remember and honour the dead. The lightest of petals bears the heaviest of burdens. Yet, each Remembrance Poppy should also remind us of a deep-rooted connection to the past, when the opium poppy floated the soul to the afterlife.

We disturb the earth for only a handful of reasons – to build somewhere to live, to grow plants for food and to bury our dead. Life and death flourish in the churning of soil, and it is in such places that poppies thrive – on the boundary between existence and extinction. From the wheat fields of antiquity to the battlefields of the Somme and Helmand, poppies have affected us as much as we have affected them. They have the power to enthrall and repel, to beguile and repulse, a mirror held up to our imperfect humanity. Long before the twentieth century brought industrialised war to the world, the poppy haunted our imagination.