In Flanders fields

POPPIES

Visit the Australian War Memorial on almost any day and one of the most moving sights will be the hundreds of poppies wedged into crevices on the Roll of Honour. The bright red poppies provide a visual counterpoint to the sombre grey of panels, yet each poppy reminds us that, here, someone has remembered the sacrifice and service in time of war of one of Australia's servicemen or women.

WHY POPPIES?

Since the First World War, the poppy has been a symbol of remembrance. All along the Western Front between 1914 and 1918, amid the ruin wrought by shells, the poppies of Flanders bloomed across the devastated landscape. Some saw in the flowers a return of life to the earth, despite the hundreds of thousands of dead buried in the countryside.

It is known that poppies flourish in disturbed soil – the shelling by the large artillery guns may have broken up the earth to such an extent that the conditions for the growth of poppies were at their best during those terrible years. At the time, many French and Belgian citizens said they could not remember ever seeing such a magnificent show of poppies, but equally war weariness may have heightened the magnificence in the eyes of the survivors.

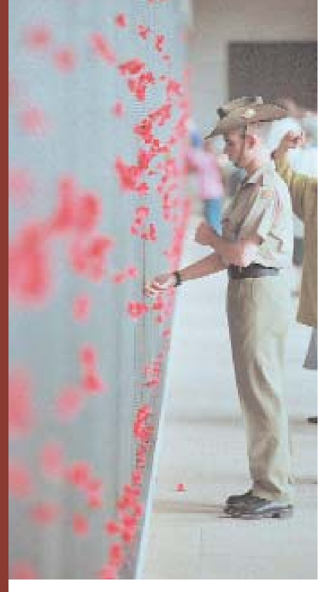
IN FLANDERS FIELDS

Close by the Essex Farm Cemetery, near the Belgian town of Ieper (Ypres), are some dugouts that in May 1915 were occupied by men of the First Brigade Artillery, Canadian Army. About them raged the second battle of Ypres, in which the Germans used poison gas for the first time on the Western Front. The brigade's medical officer, Major John McCrae, frequently visited the grave of his friend, Lieutenant A.H. Helmer, who was buried with other allied war dead in the nearby cemetery. It was supposedly during one of these visits that some of the most popular verses of poetry penned during the First World War were conceived, "literally born of blood and fire during the hottest phase" of the battle.

The poem, *In Flanders fields*, first appeared anonymously in the English magazine, *Punch*, on 8 December 1915, but it was soon recognised as McCrae's work. The poem spread quickly throughout the British Commonwealth and it was used in connection with a Poppy Fund in England in 1916. McCrae died of pneumonia on 28 January 1918 at Boulogne, on the coast of France, and was buried in the Wimereux Military Cemetery.

In 1918, an American YMCA worker, after reading McCrae's poem, wore a poppy to "keep the faith". So began the tradition of wearing poppies on Armistice (later Remembrance) Day as a tribute to the dead. In Australia, poppies are also worn on ANZAC Day.

Above: A. Henry Fullwood, *5th Division staff officers at Coisy viewing Amiens being shelled* (1918, watercolour and gouache with charcoal, 39.3 x 56.8 cm, AWM ART 02466)



(Left) Visitors to the Memorial search for names on the Roll of Honour, poignantly decorated by bright red Flanders poppies.

The Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (now the Returned and Services League of Australia, or RSL) first sold poppies in about 1921 as a reminder of the war dead and to raise funds for its charity work. Since then, wearing a poppy has helped Australians to show, in a practical way, their support for the voluntary work being done to assist those damaged in body and mind by war. To wear a poppy is also a token of remembrance for the more than 100,000 Australian servicemen and women who have died in war.

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

Robert Pounds Department of Veterans' Affairs

Flanders Poppies

The Red Flanders Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, is the poppy to which John McCrae refers in his poem. The plant is a hardy annual which grows to about 50 cm tall. It likes a sunny position protected from wind, and well drained soil turned to "a fine tilth". In compacted soil, the seeds can lie dormant. Earlier this year, as part of its schools ANZAC Day pack, the Department of Veterans' Affairs provided a packet of Flanders Poppy seeds to every school in Australia. To establish your own remembrance patch of Flanders poppies in your garden, check your local garden supplier for seeds or seedlings.

The Ode

is it *condemn* or *contemn*?

Every year, after ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day, letters to the editor appear in newspapers and magazines, asking about *The Ode*:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

The issue raised by most letters is whether the last word of the second line should be "condemn" or "contemn". Contemn means to "despise" or "treat with disregard", so both words fit the context.

The four lines quoted above, along with Kipling's lines from the *Recessional* hymn – "Lest we forget" – are now generally known as *The ode of remembrance*. They are the fourth stanza of the poem, *For the fallen*, by Laurence Binyon, and were written in the very early days of the First World War.

Binyon was the Assistant Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, and a respected and published poet. He was not a soldier, though he did work in France as a volunteer in a field hospital or first aid station during his annual leave. A week after war broke out, Binyon had his first war poem, *The fourth of August*, published in *The Times*. Here he was confident and optimistic, writing of the "Spirit of England, ardent-eyed". But by September 1914, when *For the fallen* was published, the British Expeditionary Force in France was suffering severe casualties. Each day, long lists of the dead and wounded appeared in British newspapers.

Binyon had actually written the poem some weeks earlier, just after the retreat from Mons began in August 1914, when the British Expeditionary Force had become the first British army to fight on western European soil since Waterloo. The four central lines that now make up the fourth verse were the first part of the poem Binyon composed: he wrote them while sitting on a cliff at Polseath, Cornwall. In finding a language and a rhythm for the poem, he drew on Shakespeare – especially Enobarbus' lines on Cleopatra, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale" – and the Bible: "I wanted to get a rhythm something like 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept' or 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me'."

For the fallen was first published on 21 September 1914 in *The Times*. By the end of the year, the British composer, Edward Elgar, was setting a number of Binyon's poems, including *For the fallen*, to music, in a cycle called *The spirit of England*.

To return to the question of whether the last word of the second line should be "condemn" or "contemn", it is clear that "condemn" is correct. The word appeared in that form in *The Times* on 21 September 1914, in Elgar's libretto a few months later, and in a collection of Binyon's poems, *The winnowing fan*, published in December 1914. According to Dr Christopher Fletcher, the curator of modern history manuscripts at the British Library, the Library holds a copy of the whole poem and another of only the fourth stanza in Binyon's own handwriting, and both show "condemn". Indeed, a copy of the fourth stanza in Binyon's hand was published in Australia in *Reveille* in August 1943: again it reads "condemn". Binyon was very precise in his use of words: there is no doubt that if he had intended "contemn" then he would have used it.

The only mystery is where the claim for "contemn" may have originated. There is no evidence for another story – sometimes repeated – that Binyon wrote to several poets after the poem was first published, seeking their views on whether the word should be "condemn" or "contemn", and only settled on "condemn" in 1921. He had always intended the word to be "condemn".

The alternative "contemn" seems to be a peculiarly Australian phenomenon. There does not appear to have been any dispute on this matter in Britain, Canada, or the USA. In Australia, both the RSL and the Australian War Memorial use "condemn" in their ceremonies. We may not know where the confusion arose, but surely it is now time to put the matter to rest.

Robert Pounds Department of Veterans' Affairs

Above: Students and teachers of Kensington Public School, NSW, stand at the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier while one of their number reads *The Ode.* Readings of this type are conducted by schoolchildren every week at the Memorial. (AWM PAIU 1999/26/06)

"Composed in Cornwall as Binyon sat with Cicely [his wife] gazing out over the ocean, this most public of quatrains is, like the poem that grew from it, deliberately choric, so densely laminated with allusions that the poet recedes into anonymity, allowing the literature-saturated English language to speak for itself."

John Hatcher, biographer of Laurence Binyon

For the fallen

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free.

Solemn the drums thrill; Death august and royal
Sings sorrow up unto immortal spheres.
There is music in the midst of desolation
And glory that shines upon our tears.

They went with songs to battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known,
As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain;
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain.

Laurence Binyon