

## **Canadian government use of “In Flanders Field” poem by Lieut. Col. John McCrae in the Canadian ‘Victory Bond Campaigns’ of the First World War.**

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2013

Aim of the project: To harness the popularity of Lieut. Col. John McCrae’s poem “In Flanders Field” in order to increase ‘Victory Bond’ purchases and generate greater public support for Canadian participation in the First World War.

Scenario: In May 1915, Canadian Lieut. Col. John McCrae wrote the poem “In Flanders Field” in response to the burial of a friend following the Second Battle of Ypres in Belgium. The poem was anonymously published on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1915 in the British weekly magazine *Punch*, reaching a wide audience and achieving wide-spread popularity.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Government was struggling to unite their population behind the war effort with French Canadians providing the main voice of dissent, advocating loyalty to Canada rather than the British Empire. The newly formed Unionist Party successfully won the 1917 winter elections and maintaining a pro-war involvement grouping at the seat of government. As the war lengthened, volunteers to the Canadian forces dwindled leading to the so-called ‘Conscription Crisis of 1917’ and Prime Minister Robert Borden introduced the Military Service Act (1917) which enabled the government to introduce conscription. The implementation of this act on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1918 led to protests, particularly in Quebec which witnessed the Easter Riots of 1918.

Given the potential for a waning in support for the war effort in Canada, owing to the war’s length, association with the British Empire and the introduction of conscription, the Canadian government recognised the need to refocus its public diplomacy efforts to encourage support for the Canadian war effort, particularly amongst the French Canadian public.

Program Activity: Following its publication in *Punch* at the end of 1915, McCrae’s poem picked up popularity given its universal appeals of sacrifice and duty. The Canadian government harnessed this popular feeling towards the poem to develop a public diplomacy strategy to urge the Canadian public to buy war bonds or ‘Victory Bonds’ as they were renamed in 1917<sup>1</sup>. While they had the explicit goal of asking the public to carry out the action of purchasing bonds, the strategy also had a second aim of encouraging general support for the Canadian role in the war. By incorporating lines from this increasingly popular poem, the strategy hoped to couple pro-effort sentiment with a direct action.

The result was a development of a series of posters designed by artist Frank Lucien Nicolet which integrated memorable lines from McCrae’s poem along with a call for the purchase of ‘victory bonds’. These posters dovetailed in with existing efforts by the War Poster Service (established by the Canadian Government in 1916) and were incorporated

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<sup>1</sup> (NB- The Unionist Party had already used lines for this poem on election posters during the 1917 Federal Election so were therefore already well acquainted with its existing public popularity.)

into the fifth Victory Bond Campaign of 1917-8. One of the posters commissioned featured the line 'If Ye break faith- we shall not sleep' along with an image of a Canadian soldier looking down on a field of poppies. Another featured an image of personified 'Victory' holding up a flaming torch lighting up a soldier and an industrial worker standing together with the words 'Be yours to hold it high!'. Both of these posters were translated into French to target the French Canadian public. Illustrated copies of the poem were also commissioned by the Canadian government to increase its familiarity so that the posters could reach a wider audience. The posters were disseminated in 1918.

The poem's popularity and message served as a way for the Canadian government to break-down negative attitudes to war, refocus war sentiments on the bravery of those defending the country and emphasise a need to honour such sacrifice through support for their actions. As the poem focused on sacrifice of soldiers and the need to honour the war dead by continuing their fight, the Canadian government did not need to construct a new narrative, but rather coupled their direction action of victory bond purchase with the sentiments already present in McCrae's work.

The poem received worldwide attention and on Armistice Day 1918, in response to viewing a reproduction of the poem in the *Ladies Home Journal*, a YMCA volunteer named Moina Michael decided to buy silk poppies to wear in remembrance of those who had died during the war. She lobbied the American Legion to adopt the poppy as their national remembrance symbol successfully in 1920 and it crossed the Atlantic in 1921 where the British Legion also adopted the remembrance poppy as a fundraising mechanism for veterans along with a symbol for remembrance.

Analysis: While it would be difficult to assess how much these specific posters changed attitudes towards war, conscription and 'victory bonds' in Canada during the First World War, it is important to note that the Canadian Victory Bonds Campaign of 1918 raised over \$600,000 in only three weeks making it one of the most successful bond campaigns in Canada. This campaign was expected to raise around \$150million; however, it went on to raise \$400million despite a possible loss of urgency stemming from the closing stages of the war. The Canadian government recognised the work of Frank Lucien Nicolet and honoured him with an award. An updated art deco 'Torch' poster was used again in World War Two by the Canadians, highlighting their belief in its effectiveness. The poem has since been printed on the Canadian ten-dollar bill, entwining it with Canadian collective memory outwith the original PD strategy.

We can examine the appropriateness of the Canadian strategy in choosing this poem through its subsequent use and development throughout the next century. The poem has become one of the major symbols of communal memory since the war first occurred and is witnessed through worldwide Armistice ceremonies and the use of the Remembrance Poppy. The sentiments of remembrance and, to an extent, war-patriotism attached to the Remembrance Poppy are evident through its use throughout Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand to name but a few areas. The Poppy has become such an important cultural symbol in the ritual of remembrance

in the UK that the BBC assign a point person in each studio to ensure all presenters and guests on shows are wearing one.

The longevity and proliferation of the poem in modern-day society are testament to the shrewd decision of the Canadian government to incorporate the poem into their public diplomacy strategy.

Learning Points: Using popular literary devices which carry a 'ready-made narrative' sympathetic with your views can be very emotive and eliminate the need to persuade a population of certain sentiments so that the focus of your campaign can be on a desired action.

The importance of translating PD strategies in the cases of multi-lingual societies as well as the use of home-grown literature as an added benefit and potential source of pride for an audience.

Key Sources: The Poem in Full and General History:

Ed. Anne Marie Hacht. (2006), "In Flanders Fields", *Literary Themes for Students: War and Peace*,. Vol. 1. *Literary Themes for Students* Detroit: Gale, p312-322.

Accessed at:

[http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.usc.edu/ps/i.do?action=interpret&id=GALE%7CCX3451000035&v=2.1&u=usocal\\_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&authCount=1](http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.usc.edu/ps/i.do?action=interpret&id=GALE%7CCX3451000035&v=2.1&u=usocal_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&authCount=1)

Poster Visuals:

Poster 1- <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20332>

Poster 2- <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20330>

Poster 3- <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30957>

Poster 4- <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30948>

WWII Poster- <http://canadaonline.about.com/od/canadaww2/ig/Canadian-Posters-World-War-II/The-Torch-WWII-Poster.htm>

Books on poem's history:

Daniel G. Dancocks. (1988), *Welcome to Flanders Fields*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto

Prescott, John F. (1985), *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae*, Boston Mills Press Erin, Ontario

Books on the poppy:

Buitenhuis, P. (1987) *The Great War of Words: British, American and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914-1933*. U of British Columbia, Vancouver

Bar, Niall. (2005) *The Lion And the Poppy: British Veterans, Politics, And Society, 1921-1939*, Praeger Pub Text, Westport, Connecticut

Articles on history of the development of the poem:

French, A (2004). *Refrain, Again: The Return of the Villanelle*, University of Virginia. Charlottesville, VA: <http://amandafrench.net/files/Dissertation.pdf>  
Articles on history of the development of the posters:

Holmes, N. (2005). "In Flanders Fields" — Canada's Official Poem: Breaking Faith. *Studies In Canadian Literature / Études En Littérature Canadienne*, 30(1). Retrieved from <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/15269/16346>

Articles on history of the development of the posters:

Webb, Peter. (2012) "'A righteous cause': war propaganda and Canadian fiction, 1915 1921." *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 24.1 (2011): 31+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 13 Nov. 2012.

Articles on history of the development of the poppy:

Osborne, S. (2000, Nov 11). Flower power: How much of what poppies are meant to commemorate have we already forgotten? *Saturday Night*, 115, 20-20. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/222425171?accountid=14749>

Online Resources:

Canadian Veterans Account of the poem  
<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/history/firstwar/mccrae/flower>

Canadian Government Archives of posters  
<http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/on-line-exhibits/posters/bonds.aspx>

Online site looking at the Victory Bonds Campaigns  
<http://suite101.com/article/canadians-invested-millions-in-victory-bonds-in-wwi-and-wwii-a304679>