

World War I poems: “In Flanders Fields” & “The Answer,” 1918

Introduction

Ella Osborn’s 1918 diary provides insight into the experiences of an American nurse serving in France at the end of World War I. In addition to her notes about the men under her care and events in France, Osborn jotted down two popular World War I poems, “In Flanders Fields,” by Canadian surgeon Lt. Col. John D. McCrae, and “The Answer,” by Lt. J. A. Armstrong of Wisconsin.

McCrae composed “In Flanders Fields” on May 3, 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres, Belgium. It was published in *Punch* magazine on December 8, 1915, and became one of the most popular and frequently quoted poems about the war. It was used for recruitment, in propaganda efforts, and to sell war bonds. Today the red poppy of McCrae’s poem has become a symbol for soldiers who have died in combat.

In Flanders Fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place.

“The Answer” is one of many poems written in response to “In Flanders Fields”:

Sleep peacefully, for all is well.
Your flaming torch aloft we bear,
With burning heart an oath we swear
To keep the faith to fight it through
To crush the foe, or sleep with you
In Flanders Field

Osborn’s transcripts of the poems contain some textual differences from the published versions. Based on the ink used in the diary entries and the ink used in the verses, it appears she went back in her diary to find empty pages to include the poems.

Transcripts

[The poems as transcribed in Osborn’s diary contain some textual differences from the published versions.]

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders Fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place. While in the Sky
The larks still bravely singing, fly

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Unheard, amid the guns below.
We are the dead, Short days ago
We lived, felt dawns, saw sunsets glow;
Loved and were loved – but now we lie
 In Flanders Field

Take up our quarrel with the foe!
To you from falling hands we throw
The torch, Be yours to bear it high!
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep tho' poppies blow
 In Flanders Field.

The Answer –

In Flanders Field the cannon boom
And fitful flashes light the gloom;
While up above, like Eagles, fly
The fierce destroyers of the sky;
With stains the earth wherein you lie
Is redder than the poppy bloom
 In Flanders Field.

Sleep on ye brave! The shrieking shell,
The quaking trench, the startling yell,
The fury of the battle hell
Shall wake you not; for all is well.

Sleep peacefully, for all is well.
Your flaming torch aloft we bear,
With burning heart an oath we swear
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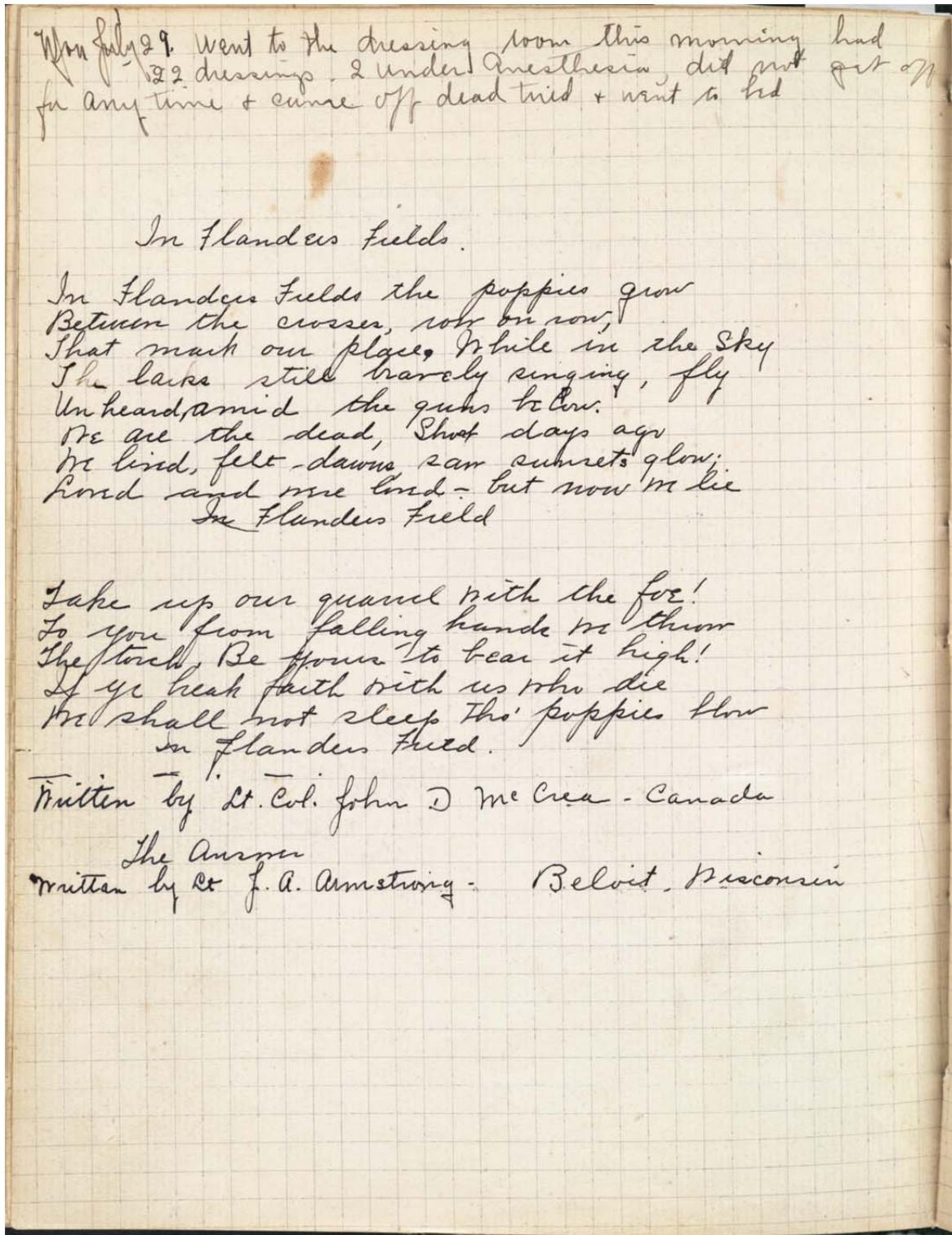
Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, examine the images from the diary, and study the poems. Then apply your knowledge of American and world history to answer the following questions:

1. How did John D. McCrae and J. A. Armstrong depict the horror of battle in their poems? Refer to specific lines in each poem to support your answer.
2. Why do you think Ella Osborn included in her 1918 diary poems published three years earlier?
3. To what extent did poems such as these serve to remind citizens of Canada and the US of the importance of supporting the war effort?
4. Propaganda for the Allied war effort included touring shows, motion pictures, posters, and songs. In this context, how can we explain the effectiveness of these poems in shaping public opinion about the war?
5. Extra:
 - a. Both poems are available with their correct and original wording on reliable websites. Note the textual differences and determine whether the changes made by Ella Osborn detract from the original phrasing. How should archivists / historians interpret these “edits”?
 - b. Research Lt. Col. John D. McCrae. How did his experiences during the war influence his poem “In Flanders Fields”?

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Images



Ella Osborn's diary entry, July 29, 1918, "In Flanders Field." (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06570)

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July 30. Tues. Miss Frigate and I went for a walk - and met some boys that were here when we came (on this front) 1st Div. They have since been up to the western front + lost many of their men + are now back to this sector

The Answer -

In Flanders field the cannon boom
 And fitful flasher light the gloom;
 Whirl up above, like eagles fly,
 The fierce - destroyers of the sky;
 With stains the earth wherein you lie
 Is redder than the poppy bloom
 [In Flanders field.]

Sleep on ye brave! The shrieking shell,
 The quaking trench, the startling yell,
 The fury of the battle hell
 Shall rattle you not; for all is well.

Sleep peacefully, for all is well.
 Your flaming torch aloft we bear,
 With burning heart, an oath we swear
 To keep the faith to fight it through
 To crush the foe, or sleep with you
 In Flanders field

Ella Osborn's diary entry, July 30, 1918, "The Answer." (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06570)