

pain, but I hope it also added some sense of pride and triumph; whatever they had endured, these people had lived through it to pass the truth down to history.

Hoping to give readers some perspective on slavery — trying to avoid the book being a tool for the “us-against-them” mentality — I began by putting it in the context of human history; slavery has been with us throughout recorded time, and it is not over yet. This was of course a massive and horrendous example; but still, slavery is not just a matter of one lot of bad people, or one bad era; it is a miserably persistent manifestation of the self-serving, self-deluding side of human nature.

To help readers grasp the roots of what might seem like incomprehensible evil, I had to include the essentials of the political and economic background — the labour-intensive agricultural economy of the south versus the mechanization of the north, the political shenanigans as one American territory after another came to statehood — but I tried to keep them as simple as possible, and to express them in terms of greed, jealousy, fear, and other motivations children could relate to their own experiences.

The book is newly published, and I fully expect to hear complaints about one aspect or another. But I am happier with the result than I expected to be. I have not waffled; I have not downplayed anything; I have not pandered to revisionism. Now I can only hope that children (of whatever colour) read it, and remember it a little as they live their own lives.

Gena K. Gorrell is an editor and writer living in Toronto. Her previous book, *Stories of the Witch Queen*, was published in a limited edition by Peppermint Press.

IN FLANDERS FIELDS

Linda Granfield

Résumé: Pour son ouvrage intitulé *In Flanders Fields: the Story of a Poem* by John McCrae, Linda Granfield a dû consulter les archives de l’auteur qui lui ont fait découvrir les horreurs de la guerre. Pour elle, les vrais héros sont les petites gens qui ont vécu l’enfer de 14-18 et non les poètes officiels qui ont servi à la propagande.



Linda Granfield

Photo credit: Dan Callis

In Flanders Fields: the Story of the Poem by John McCrae, Lester/Stoddart, 1995, was my most difficult project thus far, primarily because it dealt with war, a topic (not specifically Flanders, I should mention) with which I had approached different children’s book publishers during the five previous years; none would have any part of the idea. I commend Kathy Lowinger for realizing the potential.

It was agreed upon from the start that I would not have to water down any of the horrible information I found and wanted to use. I could see no point in

cleaning up history to make it more palatable (saleable?) to the public. Whatever I found would be considered for the page. I was to spend the next few months delving into the history of the first World War and was shocked at what I found. Never before had I been exposed to such raw emotion, such bone-chilling notations, such awe-inspiring actions.

I remember reading a letter from a British soldier to his wife back in England. He asked after her and their child, noting how his daughter so liked to play. In his next line, he wrote of having gone out to lime the bodies after a battle, a waste of time, in his opinion, because the rats usually got to the corpses before the lime did. The next sentence recalled how his wife liked to shop, or some such mundane detail.

The manner in which this soldier moved back from the familiar to the horrific was astounding ... and so repeated in other letters and journal entries I read. I couldn't imagine how his wife must have felt reading words that revealed how changed he already was by days, months, years, on the battlefields.

This letter, and the hundreds of others read during my research, were difficult to deal with day after day. I generally work on more than one book at a time, moving among the different topics each day. During *Flanders*, however, I stopped all other work and spent ten weeks reading nothing else but World War I history and journals, watching films, videos, listening to music of the period, locating photographs, fine art works, even medical books depicting the wounds doctors like McCrae treated.

I learned never to research like that again. By the end of the ten weeks, I was having terrifying nightmares in which I was the body being limed in a trench, except I wasn't dead and couldn't stop the soldiers from shovelling. The dreams are with me still.

It was difficult to relate a story about war without taking sides. Objectivity tends to fly away when one deals with a subject that touches home which was, in my case, a grandfather who served in the United States Army, late in the war. There were times when I thought I'd better prepare myself, just in case the word "hawk" came into a conversation about the book. And it did. Some assumed that anyone who writes about war supports hostility as a solution. (I found the "hawk" label particularly ironic since I spent my university years helping fellow [male] students pass their final exams so they wouldn't be called up for Vietnam.) Listeners found it hard to believe that Canadians could have celebrated in the streets when war was declared. What was wrong with them? What was wrong with me if I wanted to write about it all? When we look into the past, it is easy to point the finger and blame.

While researching, it is also very easy to be swayed by the propaganda that governments issue during wartime, and the posters, political cartoons, and jokes of the period posed a particular problem. Beautiful artwork couched bigotry. Places like Berlin, Ontario, had to change their names in order to swear allegiance to Canada, rather than appear allied to the Germany of the townspeople's pasts.

One solution to many of my anticipated problems with relating history was to see the events through the eyes of a person living during McCrae's lifetime. Had I lived then in Guelph, Ontario, I perhaps might have met Jack McCrae on the street one day, while he was visiting his parents. Details about him became important; for instance, how tall was he compared to my height? (Six feet to my five-nine.) If I walked beside him, how would his shadow have appeared on the pavement? Thick? Thin? (One-hundred and eighty pounds.) Did he have an accent? What kind of tobacco did he smoke? What kind of stories did he tell at the dinner parties he was invited to attend?

I must confess I couldn't find the answers to every question I had about Jack. When someone becomes a hero before he dies and then an even greater hero after, it's difficult to learn the truth. One example: after McCrae's death, a number of women came forward and claimed to have been engaged to the bachelor. Even since my *Flanders* was published, I've been approached by a woman who had a story about her relation who was engaged to him, and a letter from another reader whose mother's ... and so on. That's how history gets re-written!

I restricted myself to seeing the war as McCrae's contemporaries saw it — as something they supported, and then learned the bitter truth about later, when the family letters started revealing the horrors. I still weep to think of fifteen and sixteen-year-old farm boys, expecting to see the sights in Europe, being mowed down by newly-developed weaponry, their bodies hanging on the barbed wire rolling across miles of no-man's land.

I've found the sounds of the war particularly hard to stifle. Imagine sitting in a trench, listening to the wounded moaning all day as they lie on the field. And there's nothing, absolutely nothing, you can do about it, until someone tells you it's safe to go out after them. And it may not be safe for days.

Imagine the non-stop noise of shells exploding, bullets cracking over your head. Day and night. Endlessly. Ceaselessly. And still, there's the moaning.

I was horrified by the wounds I saw in graphic photographs, all the while realizing that many of the pictures could have been doctored to make more enemies for the dreaded Huns. I've found too many postcards of supposedly authentic burial scenes, staged by the government for the folks back home. And I've heard true stories that have made my hair stand on end: how battle-stunned soldiers used the protruding legs and arms of the dead in their shallow graves as hooks upon which they hung their rifles. Of indignities to bodies. Of psychological problems manifesting themselves in the trenches. There are those who believe we still haven't heard all the truth about the first World War yet; that not enough time has gone by, not enough government files have been opened. I've been told the world will be even more horrified when all is revealed in the future. I cringe to think of what else we might learn.

I wasn't sure who I'd call a hero when I began the book. I wasn't at all convinced that John McCrae was a hero because he wrote a poem that raised 400 million dollars for the war effort. But his contemporaries were convinced.

When I finished I knew who the heroes were, for me. They were the men and women who travelled to Europe to fight for a cause and soon admitted they were fighting for the man standing next to them in the trenches, countries be damned! They were the men and women who came home and had to live with the sights, sounds, and smells of war for the rest of their lives. And the people who had stayed behind, only to deal with the forever-changed relations who returned "alive" to them in 1918. I wonder how that Englishwoman coped with her husband, if he returned. I wonder if he screamed in the night, thinking he was being covered in lime.

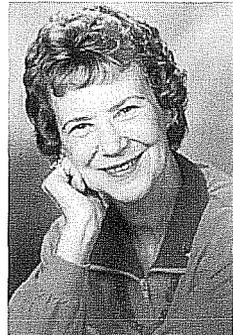
The road into the past is indeed a difficult one to travel. Each generation provides new maps, coloured by its own views. I selected the map I wanted to follow, and there met hundreds of thousands of heroes, my personal heroes, caught body and soul in a disaster that changed the world.

Linda Granfield grew up in the history-rich Boston area, and for nearly 25 years has been mining Canada's wealth of non-fiction treasures for her nine children's titles. Forthcoming books for 1997 include *Circus: An Album* (Douglas & McIntyre), and *Amazing Grace: The Story of the Hymn* (Tundra).

INSPIRATIONS

Bernice Thurman Hunter

Résumé: L'auteur relate sa rencontre avec Lucy Maud Montgomery, dont l'influence fut déterminante dans le choix et l'orientation de sa carrière littéraire.



Bernice Thurman Hunter

Like most authors I know, I have loved writing from early childhood and my favourite subject in school was "composition." But my writing career didn't take off until much later in life.

I began with short stories. My first serious attempt was a story called "Imagination." I was pretty sure it was a good story, but I didn't know what to do with it. As luck would have it, Lyn Cook, one of Canada's dearest authors, was my daughter's Sunday School teacher. So I asked her to read my story. Lucky for me she liked it and told me where to send it. But she said it had to be typed and double-spaced! I didn't own a typewriter, so I went next door and begged to use my neighbour's. I mailed my story off to Holt Rinehart and they must have liked it too because they published it and sent me a cheque for \$200! I promptly bought a typewriter (second-hand electric) and my career was launched.