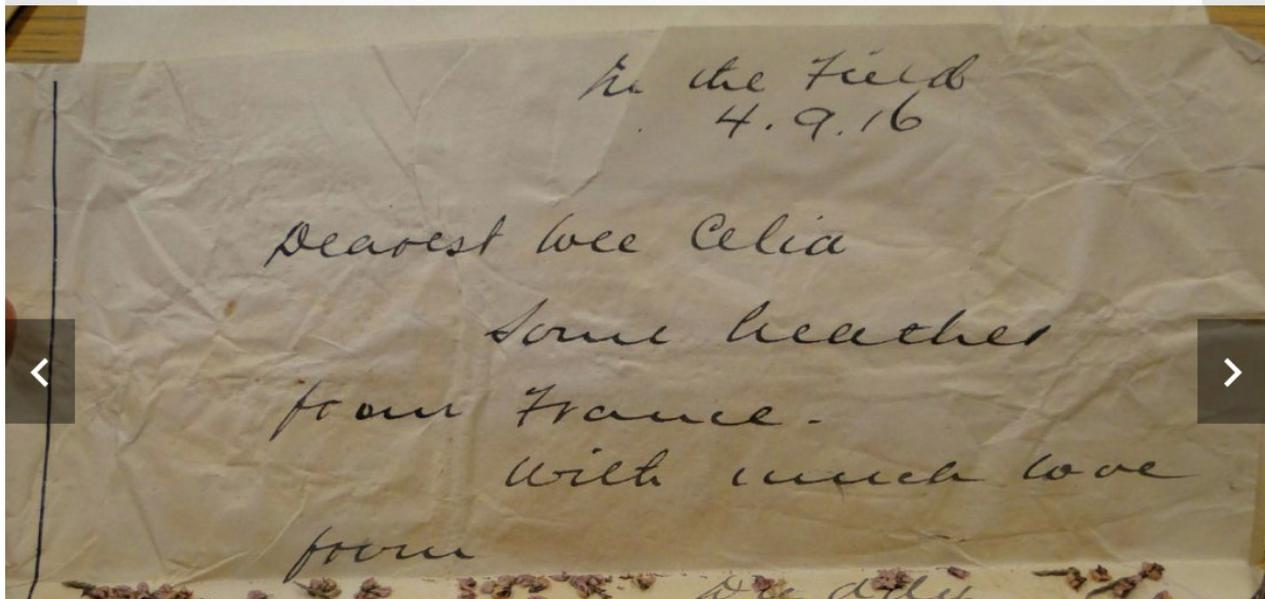


Scent plays a provocative role in botanical-themed war exhibit

War Flowers at Campbell House Museum teams up with Quebec perfumer Alexandra Bachand to give the exhibit a unique twist, Sonia Day writes.



Canadian soldier George Stephen Cantlie sent his daughter Celia brief notes during the war, always with a pressed flower tucked inside. (SONIA DAY)

By [SONIA DAY](#) Special to the Star
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Our noses don't get much respect. Yet a sudden brush with a particular smell — good or bad — can trigger remarkably clear memories of things that happened to us years ago.

Every August, for instance, the moment I catch the first distinctive whiff of phlox blooming in my flower bed, I'm a 5-year-old again, picking these flowers in my Dad's garden outside London.

Then there's limes. I cut one open, the aroma hits, and I'm transported immediately to the Bahamas, where I lived during my teen years and downed a lot of rum punch.

Why does this happen? Scientists undoubtedly have a straightforward explanation. Yet whatever the reason for such instant [nose-to-brain messages](#), I'm constantly surprised by how [forceful and vivid](#) they are.

Smell is clearly the sense that we understand the least — and now it's playing a provocative role in an unusual exhibition with a botanical theme that recently opened in Toronto.

The title is *War Flowers* and the subject is the First World War — a topic that's been tackled countless times, mostly with displays aimed at our eyes and ears. What gives this venture a different twist is that we can smell it too. As part of the show, a Quebec perfumer, Alexandra Bachand, was asked to concoct a variety of scents that aim to give viewers the sense of actually being there, on the battlefields of northern France — as well as an inkling of what the soldiers themselves were feeling.

A tall order indeed, but Bachand agreed to try. Thus, by pressing buttons on some exhibits, visitors can pick up subtle whiffs of mud, mustard gas, ammonia and sweat — odours that must have dominated the appalling atmosphere in the trenches. But also, on a more positive side, there are scents of grass, wet laundry and wild flowers like lavender and heather, which troops undoubtedly saw (and perhaps even took time to savour) while fighting in the Normandy countryside.

The flowers were in fact the inspiration for this artistic take on the "war to end all wars." While making a documentary about the Black Watch at their headquarters in Montreal, curator and filmmaker Viveka Melki was shown a stash of century-old letters, stored in a shoebox. They were written by a

Canadian soldier, George Stephen Cantlie, who thankfully returned from the war to his 1-year-old daughter, Celia — and each contained a dried flower.

“You don’t often come across war mementos like this,” Melki explains. “His letters were touching and the flowers so beautifully preserved, that I decided immediately I wanted to do something meaningful with them.”

What Cantlie kept sending to Celia were brief notes, penned in flowing script on odd scraps of paper, always with a pressed flower tucked inside.

One reads: “Dearest wee Celia. We are moving from our billets today. This is a rose I picked up in the garden — the only good one left, the last rose of summer. With love from Daddy.”

Brings a lump to your throat, doesn’t it? Following the war, these simple missives were treasured by Celia for her entire life. Then, after she died, her niece, Elspeth Angus, assumed ownership of them.

“He wrote a letter every day to someone in the family and he adored his little daughter,” explains Angus, who lives in Montreal, in an exhibit video. “He wanted her to have the flowers in case he didn’t come home.”

Melki enlisted the help of Montreal Botanical Garden in identifying the dried, brown specimens (dead flowers unfortunately do have a tendency to all look alike). In the show, they’re displayed with his letters as well as the original envelopes stamped “On Her Majesty’s Service” and some observations by Melki on floral symbolism.

One flower in the collection stands out for me. MBG botanists have determined that it’s a poppy that grew in Flanders’ Fields during the conflict. Only two other poppies like this are known to survive in the world, and they’re both in European museums.

Imaginatively put together, this little exhibition has already enjoyed successful runs in Ottawa and at the Jardins de Métis in Quebec. After Toronto, it’s headed across the Atlantic to a new visitors’ centre in Vimy.

So go have a sniff. It’s at Campbell House Museum, 160 Queen St., corner of University Ave., seven days a week until March 25. Because the building is small, only 30 people are apparently permitted into the show at once, so advance bookings online are preferred. But walk-ins are allowed on quiet days. Times: Monday to Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday to Sunday, 12 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission \$10. More info: campbellhousemuseum.ca or warflowers.com.

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