

LCOL JOHN McCRAE (30 NOV 1872 - 28 JAN 1918)

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Introduction: Lieutenant Colonel

John Alexander McCrae was a Canadian poet, physician, author, artist and soldier during World War I. He was also a surgeon during the Second Battle of Ypres. He is best known for writing the famous war memorial poem "*In Flanders Fields*".



Early Life: Born in Guelph, Ontario, on November 30, 1872 John McCrae was the second son of Lieutenant Colonel David McCrae and Janet Simpson Eckford McCrae. He had a sister, Geills, and a brother, Tom.

The family were Scottish Presbyterians and John McCrae was a man of high principle and held strong spiritual values. He has been described as warm and sensitive with a remarkable compassion for both people and animals.

John McCrae began writing poetry while a student at the Guelph Collegiate Institute. As a young boy, he was also interested in the military. He joined the Highfield Cadet Corps at 14, and at 17 enlisted in the militia field battery commanded by his father.

John McCrae graduated from Guelph Collegiate at 16 and was the first Guelph student to win a scholarship to the University of Toronto.

McCrae worked on his Bachelor of Arts at the University of Toronto in 1892–93. While there, he was a member of the Toronto militia, The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. He was eventually promoted to Captain and commanded the company. He took a year off his studies at the university due to recurring problems with asthma.

During this year off he was assistant resident master at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, teaching English and Mathematics. It is reported that he also fell in love with a friend's eighteen year old sister, but he was dealt a bitter blow when the young woman died shortly after they met. John McCrae expressed the pain of this loss through his poetry which even then dwelt on the theme of death.

He returned to the University of Toronto and completed his B.A. in 1894. McCrae then returned to study medicine on a scholarship and received his Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1898. While attending the university he joined the Zeta Psi Fraternity (Theta Xi chapter; class of 1894) and published his first poems.

While in medical school, he tutored other students to help pay his tuition.



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Two of his students were among the first women doctors in Ontario.

In 1899 he interned at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, under Dr. William Osler. Later in the same year he was awarded a fellowship in pathology at McGill University.

When the South African War broke out in October 1899, John McCrae felt it was his duty to fight. In order to serve in South Africa, he requested postponement of his McGill fellowship. He was subsequently commissioned to lead an artillery battery from his home town. This Guelph contingent became part of D Battery, Canadian Field Artillery.

McCrae sailed to Africa in December and spent a year there with his unit. When he left South Africa, it was with mixed feelings about war. He was still convinced of the need to fight for one's country but shocked by the poor treatment of the sick and injured soldiers.

Upon his return in 1902, he was appointed resident pathologist at Montreal General Hospital. In 1904 he resigned from the military in the rank of Major and was appointed an associate in medicine at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Later that year, he went to England and became a member of the Royal College of Physicians.

In 1905, he set up his own practice although he continued to work and lecture at several hospitals. The same year, he was appointed pathologist to

the Montreal Foundling and Baby Hospital. In 1908, he was appointed physician to the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Infectious Diseases. In 1910, he accompanied Lord Grey, the Governor General of Canada, on a canoe trip to Hudson Bay to serve as expedition physician.

World War I: At the outbreak of World War I McCrae re-enlisted into the army and was appointed a field surgeon with the Canadian artillery and was in charge of a field hospital during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. McCrae's friend and former student, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was killed in the battle, and his burial inspired the poem, *"In Flanders Fields"*, which was written on May 3, 1915. The poem was written as McCrae sat on the back of a medical field ambulance near an advance dressing post at Essex Farm, just north of Ypres. The Canadian government has placed a memorial to John McCrae at the site of the dressing station which sits beside the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Essex Farm Cemetery.

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The poppy, which was a central feature of the poem, grew in great numbers in the spoiled earth of the battlefields and cemeteries of Flanders. McCrae later discarded the poem, but it was saved by a fellow officer and sent in to *Punch* magazine, which published it later that year.

From June 1, 1915 McCrae was ordered to set up No. 3 Canadian General Hospital at Dannes-Camiers near Boulogne-sur-Mer, northern France. C.L.C. Allinson reported that McCrae *"most unmilitarily told [me] what he thought of being transferred to the medicals and being pulled away from his beloved guns. His last words to me were: 'Allinson, all the goddamn doctors in the world will not win this bloody war: what we need is more and more fighting men.'"*¹

"In Flanders Fields" appeared anonymously in *Punch* on December

¹ Prescott, J F (1985). *In Flanders fields: the story of John McCrae*. Boston Mills Press. P.99

8, 1915, but in the index to that year McCrae was named as the author. The verses swiftly became one of the most popular poems of the war, used in countless fund-raising campaigns and frequently translated (a Latin version begins *In agro belgico...*).

McCrae regarded his sudden fame with some amusement, but *"he was satisfied if the poem enabled men to see where their duty lay."*²

On January 28, 1918, while still commanding No 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill) at Boulogne, McCrae died of pneumonia. He was buried the following day with full military honours in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission section of Wimereux Cemetery, just a couple of kilometres up the coast from Boulogne.

His flag-draped coffin was borne on a gun carriage and the mourners – who included Sir Arthur Currie and many of McCrae's friends and staff – were preceded by McCrae's horse, "Bonfire", with McCrae's boots reversed in the stirrups. Unlike most gravestones in Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries, McCrae's gravestone is placed flat, as are all the others in the section, because of the unstable sandy soil.

² Ibid, P.106

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Legacy: McCrae was the co-author, with J. G. Adami, of a medical textbook, *A Text-Book of Pathology for Students of Medicine* (1912; 2nd ed., 1914). His brother, Dr. Thomas McCrae was professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore and a close associate of Sir William Osler.

McCrae was the great-uncle of former Alberta MP David Kilgour and of Kilgour's sister Geills Turner, who married former Canadian Prime Minister John Napier Turner.



Several Ontario schools have been named in McCrae's honour, including John McCrae Public School in Markham, John McCrae Public School in Guelph, John McCrae Senior Public School in Scarborough, and John McCrae Secondary School in the Ottawa suburb of Barrhaven. The

Canadian War Museum has a gallery for special exhibits, called *The Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae Gallery*. Guelph is home to McCrae House, a museum created in his birthplace. A line from the Poem ("To you from failing hands..") was painted on the wall of the Montreal Canadiens' dressing room at the Forum in Montreal, a blunt reminder to the team that it has much to live up to.

The Cloth Hall in Ypres in Belgium has a permanent war remembrance called the "In Flanders Fields Museum", named after the poem.

There are also a photograph and short biographical memorial to McCrae in St. George Memorial Church in Ypres.

A bronze plaque memorial dedicated to Colonel John McCrae was erected by the Guelph Collegiate Vocational Institute.

McCrae was designated a Person of National Historic Significance by the Canadian government in 1946

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In Flanders Fields

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...

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