

John McCrae

1872-1918

The name of John McCrae (1872-1918) may seem out of place in the distinguished company of World War I poets, but he is remembered for what is probably the single best-known and popular poem from the war, "In Flanders Fields." He was a Canadian physician and fought on the Western Front in 1914, but was then transferred to the medical corps and assigned to a hospital in France. He died of pneumonia while on active duty in 1918. His volume of poetry, *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems*, was published in 1919.



John McCrae graduated at the top of his class in medicine at the University of Toronto, and in 1899 was awarded a fellowship in pathology to McGill University in Montreal. This award coincided with the start of the Boer War (1899-1902) and John put off accepting the fellowship in order to go to South Africa with the artillery.

When the first World War began in 1914, McCrae again offered his services to the military. He was conditionally offered the position of Brigade Surgeon in the First Brigade of Canadian Field Artillery by E.W.B. Morrison, the brigade commander and a friend of McCrae. McCrae was formally confirmed in this position in the fall of 1914. While Brigade Surgeon, John was responsible for a field dressing station at the front and treated those wounded during the Second Battle of Ypres (Ieper) in the spring of 1915. As well as performing his duties as surgeon, he also served on the guns when needed and occasionally performed burial services. It was after performing the service for a friend, Alexis Helmer, that McCrae was inspired to write *In Flanders Fields*. The poem was written May 3, 1915 and first published in *Punch* that same year.

In the summer of 1915, McCrae was transferred from the artillery Brigade to the Number 3 Canadian General Hospital in France, where he was second in command of medical services. During McCrae's time there, the Number 3 Hospital received a visit from Queen Mary, who toured the hospital. McCrae disliked these official visits as he felt they detracted from the real work of the hospital.

While still at this hospital in January 1918, McCrae became ill with pneumonia, which was soon complicated by meningitis. Four days before he died, he was honoured by being the first Canadian appointed as consulting physician to the First British Army. John McCrae died on 28 January 1918, and was buried with military honours at Wimereaux Cemetery in France. At McCrae's funeral procession, 75 nursing sisters stood by to watch and McCrae's horse, Bonfire, wore his master's boots backwards in military tradition.

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.

A Song Of Comfort

Thro' May time blossoms, with whisper low,
The soft wind sang to the dead below:
"Think not with regret on the Springtime's song
And the task ye left while your hands were strong.
The song would have ceased when the Spring was past,
And the task that was joyous be weary at last."

To the winter sky when the nights were long
The tree-tops tossed with a ceaseless song:
"Do ye think with regret on the sunny days
And the path ye left, with its untrod ways?
The sun might sink in a storm cloud's frown
And the path grow rough when the night came down."

In the grey twilight of the autumn eves,
It sighed as it sang through the dying leaves:
"Ye think with regret that the world was bright,
That your path was short and your task was light;
The path, though short, was perhaps the best
And the toil was sweet, that it led to rest."

The Unconquered Dead

Not we the conquered! Not to us the blame
Of them that flee, of them that basely yield;
Nor ours the shout of victory, the fame
Of them that vanquish in a stricken field.

That day of battle in the dusty heat
We lay and heard the bullets swish and sing
Like scythes amid the over-ripened wheat,
And we the harvest of their garnering.

Some yielded, No, not we! Not we, we swear
By these our wounds; this trench upon the hill
Where all the shell-strewn earth is seamed and bare,
Was ours to keep; and lo! we have it still.

We might have yielded, even we, but death
Came for our helper; like a sudden flood
The crashing darkness fell; our painful breath
We drew with gasps amid the choking blood.

The roar fell faint and farther off, and soon
Sank to a foolish humming in our ears,
Like crickets in the long, hot afternoon
Among the wheat fields of the olden years.

Before our eyes a boundless wall of red
Shot through by sudden streaks of jagged pain!
Then a slow-gathering darkness overhead
And rest came on us like a quiet rain.

Not we the conquered! Not to us the shame,
Who hold our earthen ramparts, nor shall cease
To hold them ever; victors we, who came
In that fierce moment to our honoured peace.