

### **IN FLANDERS FIELDS (John McCrae)**

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.

### **Inspiration for "In Flanders Fields"**

During the early days of the Second Battle of Ypres a young Canadian artillery officer, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was killed on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1915 in the gun positions near Ypres. An exploding German artillery shell landed near him. He was serving in the same Canadian artillery unit as a friend of his, the Canadian military doctor and artillery commander **Major John McCrae**.

As the brigade doctor, John McCrae was asked to conduct the burial service for Alexis because the chaplain had been called away somewhere else on duty that evening. It is believed that later that evening, after the burial, John began the draft for his now famous poem "In Flanders Fields".

<h2><b>JOHN McCRAE (1872 – 1918)</b></h2>
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Lieutenant Colonel **John McCrae**, MD (November 30, 1872 – January 28, 1918) was a Canadian poet, physician, author, artist and soldier during World War I, and a surgeon during the Second Battle of Ypres, in Belgium. He is best known for writing the famous war memorial poem "In Flanders Fields". McCrae died of pneumonia near the end of the war.

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McCrae was born in Ontario, Canada.

He attended the Guelph Collegiate Vocational Institute. He took a year off his studies at the university due to recurring problems with asthma.

He was a resident master in English and Mathematics in 1894 at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph.

He returned to the University of Toronto and completed his B.A. McCrae returned again to study medicine on a scholarship. 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. Two of his students were among the first female doctors in Ontario.

He graduated in 1898, and was first a resident house-officer at Toronto General Hospital, and then in 1899, at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1902, he was appointed resident pathologist at Montreal General Hospital and later became assistant pathologist to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. In 1900 John McCrae arrived in South Africa where he served as a Lieutenant in the Canadian Field Artillery during the Boer War (1899 to 1902). In 1904, he was appointed an associate in medicine at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Later that year, he went to England where he studied for several months 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.

McCrae served in the artillery during the Second Boer War, and upon his return was appointed professor of pathology at the University of Vermont, where he taught until 1911; he also taught at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec.

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).

When Britain declared war on Germany at the start of World War I, Canada, as a Dominion within the British Empire, was at war as well. McCrae was appointed as Medical Officer and Major of the 1st Brigade CFA (Canadian Field Artillery). He treated wounded during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915.

From June 1, 1915, McCrae was ordered away from the artillery to set up No. 3 Canadian General Hospital in northern France.

"In Flanders Fields" appeared anonymously in *Punch* on December 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...*). "In Flanders Fields" was also extensively printed in the United States, which was contemplating joining the war.

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.

## Inspiration for the poem 'In Flanders Fields' by John McCrae

It is thought that doctor **John McCrae** (30 November 1872 — 28 January 1918) began the draft for his famous poem 'In Flanders Fields' on the evening of the 2 May, 1915 in the second week of fighting during the Second Battle of Ypres.

It is believed that the death of his friend, Alexis Helmer, was the inspiration for McCrae's poem 'In Flanders Fields'. The exact details of when the first draft was written may never be known because there are various accounts by those who were with McCrae at that time.

- One account says that he was seen writing the poem sitting on the rearstep of an ambulance the next day while looking at Helmer's grave and the vivid red poppies that were springing up amongst the graves in the burial ground.
- Another account says that McCrae was so upset after Helmer's burial that he wrote the poem in twenty minutes in an attempt to compose himself.
- A third account by his commanding officer, **Lieutenant Colonel Morrison**, states that John told him he drafted the poem partly to pass the time between the arrival of two groups of wounded at the first aid post and partly to experiment with different variations of the poem's metre.

John McCrae, was serving as a Major and a military doctor and was second in command of the 1st Brigade Canadian Field Artillery. The field guns of his brigade's batteries were in position on the west bank of the Ypres-Yser canal, about two kilometres to the north of Ypres. The brigade had arrived there in the early hours of 23 April.

## The Death of Lieutenant Alexis Helmer

Lieutenant Alexis Helmer was an officer in the 2nd Battery, 1st Brigade Canadian Field Artillery and had become good friends with John McCrae. On the morning of Sunday 2 May Alexis left his dugout and was killed instantly by a direct hit from an 8 inch German shell. What body parts could be found were later gathered into sandbags and laid in an army blanket for burial that evening.

Alexis was 22 years old and a popular young officer. Lieutenant Helmer was buried on 2 May. In the absence of the chaplain, Major John McCrae conducted a simple service at the graveside, reciting from memory some passages from the Church of England's 'Order of Burial of the Dead'. A wooden cross marked the burial place. The grave has since been lost.