



It's Our History, Our Country

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Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae's In Flanders Field



No history column should forget one of the most influential Canadians who ever lived. On this day there are only a handful of Canadians who changed the world over. I am of course talking about Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae who wrote "In Flanders Fields" which is read aloud the worldwide on this day.

McCrae was born in Guelph, Ont., in 1872 a few kms. away from my hometown of Kitchener, Ont.

It's been noted that McCrae was a man of high principles and strong spiritual values. While studying at Guelph Collegiate Institute, he took up writing poetry, a subject which was big at the time.

Even as a young boy, McCrae was interested in the military. He joined the Highfield Cadet Cops at 14 and at 17 he enlisted in the Militia field battery commanded by his father. In 1894 he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Toronto.

As well as expressing himself in words, McCrae also drawn small detailed pencil sketches of scenes on his trips, mostly in South Africa, the United States and Scotland.

Before he died McCrae had the satisfaction of knowing that his poem had been a success. Soon after its publication, it became the most popular poem on the

First World War.

The poem was translated into many languages and used on billboards advertising the sale of the first Victory Loan Bonds in Canada in 1917. Designed to raise \$150 million the campaign raised \$400 million. In part because of the poem's popularity, the poppy was adopted as the Flower of Remembrance for the dead of Britain, France, the United States, Canada and other Commonwealth countries.

Today, people continue to pay tribute to the poet of "In Flanders Fields" by visiting McCrae House, a limestone cottage in Guelph, Ont., where he was born. The house has been preserved as a museum. Beside the cottage there are a memorial cenotaph and a garden of remembrance.

On Jan. 28, 1918, at the age of only 46 and after an illness of five days, he died of pneumonia and meningitis.

The day he fell ill, he learned he had been appointed consulting physician to the First British Army, the first Canadian to be honoured.

McCrae was buried with full military honours of Boulogne, not far from the fields of Flanders. His death was met with great grief among his friends and contemporaries. A friend wrote of McCrae's funeral:

The day of the funeral was a beautiful spring (like) day; none of us wore overcoats. You know the haze that comes over the hills at Wimereux. I felt so thankful that the poet of 'In Flanders Field' was lying out there in the bright sunshine in the open space he loved so well."

<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/first-war/mccrae>

<http://www.histori.ca/minutes/minute.do?id=10200>

<http://www.spock.com/John-McCrae/websites/frame?h=da4e08bde5&title=Guelph+Civic+Museum+McCrae+House&url=http%3A%2F%2Fguelph.ca%2Fmuseum%2F>