

“In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae

Before Reading:

- Write down everything you know about World War I – causes, people involved, events, writings about, etc. What single thing do most people know? Why?
- Most of the young men fighting the Great War were born just before the change of the century. With what expectations of the future would their parents have entered the new century? With what expectations did you enter the 21st century? If you think these expectations are different, how and why?
- List some of the things that torches symbolize? What are the origins of some of this symbolism?

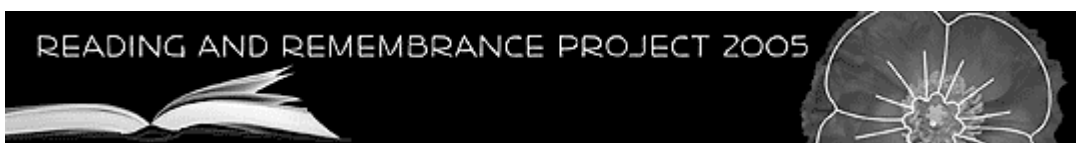
In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
 That mark our place; and in the sky
 The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

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.

During Reading:

- Many versions of the poem end after two stanzas. If this were the end of the poem, what would be its major themes?
- What are the many contrasts upon which this poem is built?

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.



This poem first appeared anonymously in *Punch* magazine December 8, 1915. John McCrae composed the poem in May of that year. He described it as, "literally born of fire and blood during the hottest phase of the second battle of Ypres." McCrae was a surgeon attached to the First Brigade Canadian Artillery, posted to a dressing-station near the Yser canal. From his dugout entrance he saw row on row of the white crosses of the military cemetery and in the distance the smouldering city of Ypres.

McCrae also saw poppies. Poppies flower when everything else in their direct neighbourhood is dead. Their seeds lie on the ground for years and only when there are no more competing flowers or shrubs in their vicinity will the seeds sprout. In May 1915 there was a great deal of rooted up soil on the battlefields of the Western Front and as a result, when McCrae wrote his poem, the poppies blossomed as never before.

Poppies can be used to derive opium from which morphine is made. Morphine, as a strong painkiller, was used to put wounded soldiers to sleep. Some medical doctors used high doses of morphine to aid the incurably wounded in their misery. Although McCrae had been a doctor for years and had served in the Boer War in South Africa, he found it difficult to get used to the suffering, screams and blood in his small dressing station in the Ypres salient. He wrote, "I wish I could embody on paper some of the varied sensations of that seventeen days ... seventeen days of Hades! At the end of the first day if anyone had told us we had to spend seventeen days there, we would have folded our hands and said it could not have been done. For 17 days, wrote McCrae, "gun-fire and rifle-fire never ceased for sixty seconds."

One death in particular affected McCrae. A young friend and former student, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer of Ottawa had been killed by a shell burst on May 2, 1915. Lieutenant Helmer was buried later that night in a little cemetery just outside McCrae's dressing station. McCrae performed the funeral ceremony in the absence of the chaplain, reciting from memory some passages from the Church of England's "Order of Burial of the Dead". This happened in darkness as it was forbidden to make light for security reasons. The next evening, sitting on the rear step of an ambulance parked near the Yser Canal, just a few hundred yards north of Ypres, Major McCrae took twenty minutes of precious rest time to scribble fifteen lines of verse into a notebook.

A young soldier, Cyril Allinson, was delivering mail and stood nearby as McCrae wrote. "His face was very tired but calm as he wrote. He looked around from time to time, his eyes straying to Helmer's grave." When McCrae finished writing, he took his mail from Allinson and without saying a word, handed his pad to the young NCO. Allinson was moved by what he read. "The poem was an exact description of the scene in front of us both. He used the word blow in that line because the poppies actually were being blown that morning by a gentle east wind. It never occurred to me at that time that it would ever be published. It seemed to me just an exact description of the scene."

Allinson's account corresponds with the words of the commanding officer at the spot. Lieutenant Colonel Edward Morrison reported, "A couple of hundred yards away, there was the headquarters of an infantry regiment and on numerous occasions during the sixteen day battle, we saw how they crept out to bury their dead during lulls in the fighting. So the rows of crosses increased day after day, until in no time at all it had become quite a sizeable cemetery. Just as John described it, it was not uncommon

early in the morning to hear the larks singing in the brief silences between the burst of the shells and the returning salvos of our own nearby guns.”

The poem, initially called “We shall not sleep” nearly went unpublished. Dissatisfied with it, McCrae tossed the poem away. Morrison retrieved it and sent it to newspapers in England. *The Spectator* rejected it but *Punch* published it.

McCrae was born in Guelph, Ontario in 1872. After graduating from the University of Toronto and John Hopkins University in Baltimore, he joined the staff of the Medical School at McGill. McCrae died of pneumonia in 1918 while on active service.

McCrae’s small volume of verse titled, *In Flanders Fields* was first published in 1919, after McCrae’s death.

After the Readings

1. McCrae wrote his poem before the end of the war. Eventually the “quarrel with the foe” ended. Is this an appropriate reason NOT to include the third verse? If you were an editor of a poetry book would you include the third stanza? Why or why not?
2. Are there any parallels of theme or style between Canada’s national anthem, *Oh Canada*, and McCrae’s *In Flanders Fields*. List and describe any parallels you can find.
3. In form, *In Flanders Fields* is called a rondeau. This French form consists of 13 lines divided into three stanzas with a refrain consisting of the first half of the first line, repeated at the end of the second and third stanzas. The effect of the refrain is to bind the ideas into a neatly tied parcel of thought. The rhyme scheme is a b b a, a a b, a a b b a. These features of the rondeau form indicate the tight framework that McCrae used. Considering what you have read from eyewitness accounts of McCrae writing the poem, what is remarkable about the poem’s composition in this form?
4. Stanza one is in the voice of the observer/poet. The other two stanzas are in the voices of the Dead. In your opinion, which is the most effective use of voice? Response Journal
5. What new knowledge or insight has this close reading of *In Flanders Fields* brought to you?