



In Flanders Fields was first published in England's *Punch Magazine* in December 1915. Within months, this poem came to symbolize the sacrifices of all who were fighting in the First World War. Today, the poem continues to be a part of Remembrance Day ceremonies in Canada and other countries throughout the world.

The poem was written by a Canadian, Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, a doctor and teacher who served in both the South African War and the First World War.

A BIT OF HISTORY

On August 4, 1914, Britain declared war on Germany. Canada, as a member of the British Empire, was automatically at war, and citizens from across the land responded quickly. Within three weeks, 45,000 Canadians had rushed to join up. John McCrae was among them. He was appointed Brigade-Surgeon to the First Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery with the rank of Major and second-in-command.

In April 1915, John McCrae was in the trenches near Ypres, Belgium, in the area traditionally called Flanders. Some of the heaviest fighting of the First World War took place there, referred to as the Second Battle of Ypres.

On April 22, the Germans used deadly chlorine gas against Allied troops in a desperate attempt to break the stalemate. Despite the debilitating effects of the gas, Canadian soldiers fought relentlessly and held the line for another 16 days.

In the trenches, John McCrae tended hundreds of wounded soldiers every day. He was surrounded by the dead and the dying. In a letter to his mother, he wrote of the Battle of Ypres.

The general impression in my mind is of a nightmare. We have been in the most bitter of fights. For seventeen days and seventeen nights none of us have had our clothes off, nor our boots even, except occasionally. In all that time while I was awake, gunfire and rifle fire never ceased for sixty seconds..... And behind it all was the constant background of the sights of the dead, the wounded, the maimed, and a terrible anxiety lest the line should give way. (John Francis Prescott, *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae*, Boston Mills Press, 1985, p98.)

The day before he wrote his famous poem, one of McCrae's closest friends was killed in the fighting and buried in a makeshift grave with a simple wooden cross. Wild poppies were already beginning to bloom between the crosses marking the many graves. Unable to help his friend or any of the others who had died, McCrae gave them a voice through his poem. It was the second-to-last poem he was to write.

On January 28, 1918, after an illness of five days, McCrae died of pneumonia and meningitis. The day he fell ill, he learned that he had been appointed consulting physician to the First British Army, the first Canadian honoured with that position.