



John McCrae, MD

An accomplished military medical clinician and leader, John McCrae was one of the best trained physicians of his generation and his research advanced our understanding of tuberculosis, scarlet fever, nephritis and lobar pneumonia. He co-authored the influential Text-Book of Pathology for Students of Medicine with George Adami, and was known for his commitment to literature and the humanities. At the outset of the First World War, Dr. McCrae put aside his promising academic career to serve as a medical officer with the 1st Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, a brigade critical to the heroic and historic defence of the line in the Second Battle of Ypres. He faced casualties on a scale that is unimaginable today. Following the battlefield burial of Lt. Alexis Helmer from Ottawa on May 2, 1915, he wrote "In Flanders Fields", which gained international recognition and led to the use of the poppy as the symbol of remembrance.

Dr. McCrae was born in Guelph, Ontario and won a scholarship to the University of Toronto at 16. He did his residency at the Toronto General Hospital and worked for a short period at Johns Hopkins University with Dr. William Osler. He wrote poetry during this time, winning a Saturday Night short story competition in 1894. His poems were published in The Canadian Magazine, The Westminister and Massey's Magazine. In 1899, he accepted a pathology fellowship at McGill University, but postponed this opportunity to join the second contingent of Canadian soldiers in the South African War. He served with the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery and demonstrated conspicuous bravery as an artillery officer.

Returning to Montreal in January 1901, Dr. McCrae went on to complete specialist training under Dr. Adami. He was one of the first Canadians to receive formal training in laboratory research, and invented new processes to aid his study of agglutination of several bacteria. He authored more than 30 papers with research that included almost 1,000 autopsies, held academic appointments at McGill University, taught at the University of Vermont Medical College and conducted a private medical practice.

In the First World War, Lt. Col McCrae served as the chief medical officer of the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill). He was an inspirational leader who worked to exhaustion in this role for two and half years, tragically succumbing to pneumonia in January 1918. Prior to his death, his extraordinary medical contribution to the war effort was recognized by Britain when he became the first Canadian-appointed consultant physician to the British Army.