

1996

Colonel John McCrae: From Guelph, Ontario to Flanders Fields

Bev Dietrich
Guelph Museums

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dietrich, Bev (1996) "Colonel John McCrae: From Guelph, Ontario to Flanders Fields," *Canadian Military History*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol5/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Colonel John McCrae

From Guelph, Ontario to Flanders Fields

Bev Dietrich

John McCrae played several roles throughout his remarkable life, often simultaneously. He was a world renowned poet, an artist, a respected physician, a son and a brother, an active member of the community and church, and a soldier.

He took great pride in serving his country and the British Empire as a soldier. Today, it is difficult to comprehend the tremendous sense of duty he felt and his belief that evil should be fought wherever it was evident. These strong motivational forces urged him to start his military career early in life and to ultimately serve in two wars. They are rooted in family tradition and in his immediate upbringing in Guelph, Ontario.

John McCrae was a proud descendant of the "wild McCraes" in Scotland, who were known as the Mackenzie clan's guards. In 1511, Christopher McCrae was appointed the first constable of Eilean Donan, a Mackenzie stronghold on Loch Duich. The McCraes retained this distinction for generations, and the Castle became the rallying place of the clan McCrae.

Throughout Scotland's history, the McCraes played prominent roles in numerous battles and gained an unshakeable reputation for courage and their uncanny ability to fight. Their name is listed among those Highland Scots who fought in the Jacobite Uprisings of 1715 and 1745, the last stand of the Highland Scots against English rule.

The third of November 1715 found the McCraes posted on the left flank of the Highland Army as it battled the British government forces. During the battle, the McCraes suffered heavy losses as most of them fell where they stood. Today, the Clan Memorial Cairn celebrates the location where the McCraes were defeated in battle though not in honour.

The 1745 rebellion continues to be colourfully relived in Scotland. However, after the actual rebellion the supporters were given two choices to ensure their survival - emigration or military service. The McCraes chose to pursue their military honour and serving in the English army became a well respected McCrae tradition.

Yet, due to economic strife and a strong desire for independence, emigration continued to be a choice taken by many Scots well into the 19th Century. Finally, John McCrae's grandparents decided to try their fortunes in Canada, arriving in Guelph in 1849.

David McCrae, John's father, was four years old when his family emigrated to Canada from Scotland. In September 1864, the 20-year-old David went to Hamilton in order to join the British Regulars of the 47th Foot Highlanders. While in Hamilton, David received his second Officer's Certificate qualifying him to drill a Company of Infantry. In 1866, David organized the No.1 Guelph Company of Wellington Rifles. He organized this company into a garrison battery of artillery in response to the threat of the Fenian Raids. The Fenians were Irish nationalists, who thought that attacking Canada would cause the British to divert troops away from Ireland to defend Canada. However, the Canadian Militia succeeded in quelling this threat and the Fenians ultimately ceased attacking border towns such as Windsor and Sarnia. David rose to the rank of Captain and served in this capacity until the end of the raids. After the Fenian raids, he organized the Wellington Field Battery, the successor of the Wellington Rifles.

From 1866 until 1879 David McCrae was the Assistant-Adjutant at Deseronto which was the headquarters of the Artillery in Ontario. In 1879



Left: *Second Lieutenant John McCrae outside Royal Military College, Kingston, Ontario, 1893.*

(McCrae House, Guelph Museums)

Above: *John McCrae (back row, on left) with fellow members of the Royal Canadian Artillery.*

(McCrae House, Guelph Museums)

he resigned from the regular army and became the Commanding Officer of the militia unit in Guelph, known as the 1st Brigade of Field Artillery. McCrae stayed very active in local military

actions, to the point that in 1915, at the age of 70 he recruited and trained the 43rd Battery before leading them to England. One of the greatest disappointments in his life occurred at this time when he was not allowed to take the unit to France. The army considered him too old to serve actively in the First World War.

John McCrae was born in 1872 and his early years were spent listening to his father's military tales and watching his involvement in military affairs. David McCrae preferred soldiering as a way of life, and passed on his passion of military life to John. At the time of John McCrae's birth, the British empire was at its zenith. Patriotism was high and the defense of the Empire was a

noble calling for any young Canadian. Therefore, by age 14, John was active in military organizations. He joined the Guelph Highland Cadets, which was associated with his high school, Guelph Collegiate High School. The Highland Cadets were organized by Captain Walter Clark, a Crimean War Veteran. At the time, the Highland Cadets were a unique school cadet corps in Canada. Captain Clark taught bayonet drills and marching. John was a very enthusiastic and eager participant in drilling, and won a gold medal for best drilled cadet in Ontario. This medal was awarded by the Department of Education. It must be noted, however, that his enthusiasm for the military was balanced or tempered with a love of learning and for the arts. He began drawing exquisite depictions of the world around him, as well as writing poetry. These arts accompanied him throughout his medical career and military campaigns.

At age 15, McCrae was a bugler in his father's unit, the 1st Brigade of Field Artillery. By age 18, John was a gunner in the No.2 Battery, First Brigade, Field Artillery. In 1891 he rose to the rank of Quarter-Master Sergeant.

While studying science at the University of Toronto, McCrae remained active in the militia. He joined "K" Company of the Queen's Own Rifles

of Canada and eventually rose to the rank of Company Captain.

After completing an artillery course in Kingston in 1893 McCrae received his commission in the Artillery as 2nd Lieutenant of No. 2 Battery of the First Brigade, Field Artillery, Guelph. By 1896, McCrae had risen to the rank of Lieutenant.

When the Boer War broke out in 1899, McCrae was a House Officer at John Hopkins Hospital. He originally thought of joining the war effort as an Army Medical Officer. He would have gone to England at his own expense if offered a commission. McCrae was disappointed that he missed the First Contingent and wrote his mother about his feelings:

I see by to-night's bulletin that there is to be no second contingent. I feel sick with disappointments and do not believe that I have ever been so disappointed in my life for ever since this business began I am certain there have not been fifteen minutes of my waking hours that it has not been in my mind. It has to come sooner or later.

I shall not pray for peace in our time. One campaign might cure me, but nothing else ever will, unless it should be old age. I regret bitterly that I did not enlist with the first, for I doubt if ever another chance will offer like it. This is not said in ignorance of what the hardships would be. I am ashamed to say I am doing my work in a merely mechanical way. If they are taking surgeons on the other side, I have enough money to get myself across. If I knew any one over there who would do anything, I would certainly set about it. If I can get an appointment in England by going, I will go. My position here I do not count as an old boot in comparison.¹

In order to take advantage of a renewed opportunity to join the war effort, McCrae postponed the fellowship awarded to him by McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Militia Order 272 issued on 29 December 1899 named the officers selected for the 2nd Contingent to

Officers of the Kenhardt Column, South Africa, 1900. McCrae is on the left side of the middle row.

(McCrae House, Guelph Museums)

South Africa. Lieutenant John McCrae was assigned to the 16th Field Battery, Royal Canadian Artillery. McCrae was in charge of the "2nd (Right) Section of D Battery," while Lieutenant E.W.B. Morrison commanded the left section. The Militia Armoury in Guelph was made the recruiting point for the Royal Canadian Artillery. Fifty-four men belonging to Guelph's 11th and 16th Field Batteries joined "D" Battery. Guelph was proud that one of their own sons was selected as an officer, and the following passage appeared in the local newspaper of the day:

McCrae - both from his proficiency as a soldier and knowledge and skill in medicine - should make a model officer for service in South Africa.²

On 4 January 1900, the Guelph Section left for Ottawa. During a half day holiday declared in the City of Guelph, McCrae drilled the men in public both in the morning and afternoon. A special ceremony with speeches was held reminding the men about obeying orders and acquitting themselves to the credit of Canada and the Empire. As officer of the Battery, McCrae was presented with a set of field glasses and all the men received a copy of the *New Testament*. "D" Section marched to the railway station along with school boys and their teachers, Artillery officers, the Wellington 30th Rifles, 1866 Veterans, members of City Council, Highland Cadets and the Fire Brigade. The 2nd Contingent left Halifax



for South Africa on 20 January 1900 aboard the S.S. *Laurentian*.

McCrae's Battery arrived in Cape Town, South Africa on 18 February 1900. McCrae enjoyed the sights, sounds and hard work associated with military duty. He wrote home that he was "getting used to soldiering and felt born to it."³

McCrae's Battery marched throughout South Africa. When the Battery was not marching, McCrae and his men found it very frustrating not to be active, especially when fighting could be heard a few kilometres away.

Eventually the "D" & "E" Batteries were attached to General Cunningham's brigade and fought near Pretoria. After a few weeks of inactivity, they were ordered to the front at Belfast and immediately went into action. "D" Battery's last assignment before leaving South Africa was guarding a railroad near Machadodorp. The troops returned to Halifax in early January 1901. Upon his arrival in Guelph, McCrae received a hero's welcome, and was awarded the Queen's Medal with three clasps for his effort in the war.

McCrae earned special praise for his conduct during the Boer War as expressed in the following statement:

An exceptionally clever officer and perfect gentleman. I cannot speak too highly of the service rendered by Lieutenants McCrae and Morrison. Men described McCrae as a constant companion and friend. The life of the camp, sang songs and kept the boys cheerful where there was little to feel cheerful about. The boys think he is alright...The most popular officer of the lot.⁴

After returning from South Africa, McCrae received a number of consecutive military promotions. In 1901 he was promoted to Captain of the 16th Battery, and in 1902 to Major in the 1st Brigade of Artillery. Finally, in 1904 he resigned, although he was placed on the list of Reserve Officers of the Canadian Artillery with the rank of Major in 1905. He dedicated the following decade to his medical career and to teaching younger physicians. He gained an outstanding reputation as a physician, teacher, and author of medical journals. On 9 September 1914 John McCrae returned to the Active List of duty as soon as the First World War commenced.

Actually, McCrae was in England when war was declared. He immediately cabled his friend Lieutenant-Colonel E.W.B. Morrison, the Director of Artillery of the Permanent Force in Ottawa, to inform him that he was available as a "combatant or medical if they need me." Before long McCrae was posted to the First Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery that was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Morrison. Morrison's brigade was made up of four batteries. Morrison wanted McCrae to be Lieutenant-Colonel and command his own artillery brigade. This proved impossible because of his age and his lack of recent artillery experience.⁵ McCrae was 41 years of age at the outbreak of the First World War. Therefore, he was named Brigade Surgeon with the rank of Major, as well as second-in-command of the brigade. McCrae really never accepted this title, refusing to wear the Red Cross armband of a non-combatant medical officer and insisting on wearing his revolver and sword.

McCrae eagerly anticipated being in combat again, with his well worn sense of duty and belief in doing good. He sincerely wrote:

It is a terrible state of affairs, and I am going because I think every bachelor, especially if he has experience of war, ought to go. I am really rather afraid, but more afraid to stay at home with my conscience...we have fifty-four (18-pounder) field guns in three Brigades, besides heavier guns - perfectly equipped.⁶

On his way to training at Camp Valcartier, McCrae stopped in Montreal and visited with friends Andrew Macphail and John Todd who presented him with his horse Bonfire. Bonfire would accompany him overseas and become a constant companion during McCrae's darkest moments.

After the initial training, McCrae left for England with the First Brigade on 3 October 1914 and arrived on the Salisbury Plain where additional training took place. In February of 1915 McCrae's division moved to France.

At first McCrae and his unit were involved in stalemated trench warfare. Initial casualties were light. McCrae directed the care of wounded and occasionally commanded the gunners. However, it was noted that his artillery experience dated to the Boer War, and that military technology and

In Flanders Fields

Despite his medical training, the casualties that came through John McCrae's field hospitals clearly weighed heavily on his mind. As the war progressed, he became painfully aware of the fact that he was outliving many of his old friends and acquaintances, including a good number from the well known K Company at the University of Toronto. But it was the death of one friend which moved McCrae to write one of the most enduring poems to come out of the Great War.

On 2 May 1915, Lieutenant Alex Helmer, an officer of the 2nd Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, was killed by a shellburst near his unit's gun positions. McCrae had met Helmer, a graduate

of McGill and the Royal Military College, soon after enlisting, and the two developed a close friendship over the few months that they knew each other. McCrae appears to have been particularly moved by Helmer's death, and it seems likely that he snatched a few minutes' rest from his duties to put his thoughts down on paper. It probably took him only about twenty minutes to write the fifteen lines which comprise 'In Flanders Fields.'

McCrae initially thought little of the poem, and cast it aside without giving it further consideration. Indeed, he was always more partial to another of his poems, 'The Anxious Dead,' which was published by *The Spectator* in

1917. Nevertheless, a fellow officer (there is disagreement about the identity of the individual) persuaded McCrae to submit the poem to the English magazine *The Spectator*. The editor rejected it, but the magazine *Punch* accepted the poem and published it, unsigned, on 8 December 1915.

'In Flanders Fields' caused an immediate sensation, and soon joined Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' and Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen' as the most quoted poems of the war. It placed the poppy firmly into Great War iconography, and inspired countless 'replies' from amateur poets around the Allied world. It appeared on recruiting posters, Victory Bond advertisements, and election billboards, and provided a much-needed boost to civilian morale at a time when there was little to cheer about. McCrae took his newfound fame in stride, despite the inability of the press to spell either his name or the poem's title correctly, but he probably would not have predicted the poem's longevity. If he had, John McCrae would have been pleased and, perhaps, a little amused.

Jonathan F. Vance

In Flanders Fields

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

John McCrae

'Punch'
Dec 8 1915



Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae with his horse Bonfire and his dog Bonneau, c.1916.

(McCrae House, Guelph Museums)

strategy had advanced significantly over the previous 15 years.

On 17 April 1915 McCrae was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel. Five days later, after the German chlorine attack, McCrae's unit was called into action. McCrae established a first-aid station. He frequently defied regulations and displayed a great deal of courage by leaving the safety of his post to attend the wounded in the field. The intensity of the fighting and the sheer number of casualties were unlike anything he had previously experienced. McCrae penned the following lines to his mother:

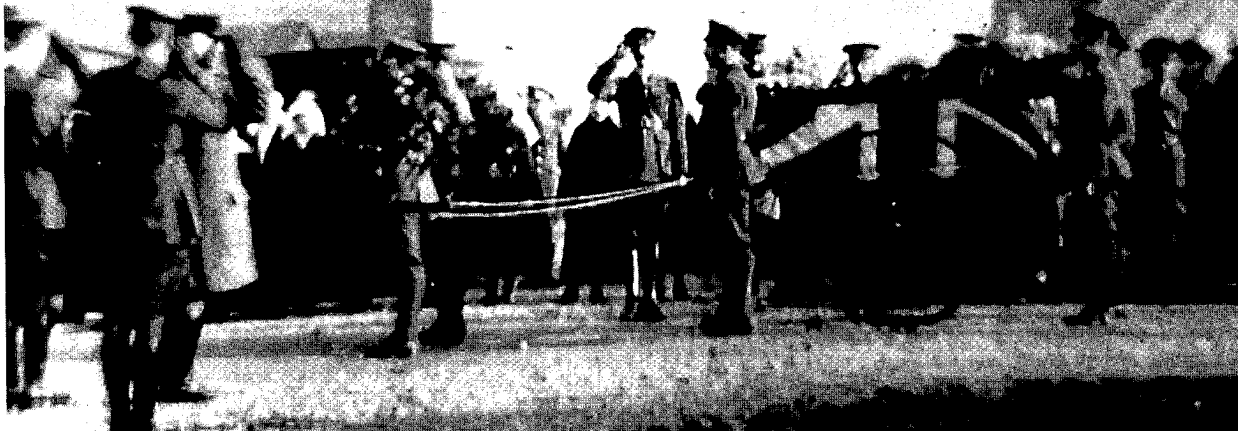
Northern France, 10, May 1915

We got here to refit and rest this morning at 4, having marched last night at 10. 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 it was sticking to our utmost by a weak line all but ready to break, knowing nothing of what was going on, and depressed by reports of anxious infantry. The men and the division

are worthy of all the praise that can be given. It did not end in four days when many of our infantry were taken out. It kept on at fever heat till yesterday.

This of course is the second battle of Ypres, or the Battle of the Yser. I do not know which. At one time we were down to seven guns, but those guns were smoking at every joint, the gunners using cloth to handle the breech levers because of the heat. We had three batteries in action with four guns added from other units. Our casualties were half the number of men in the firing line...I have done what fell to hand. My clothes, boots, kit, and dugout at various times were sadly bloody. Two of our batteries are reduced to two officers each. We have had constant accurate shellfire, but we have given back no less. 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 away.⁷

In June, McCrae was ordered to leave the artillery and join the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Indeed, McCrae preferred to stay with the artillery, however, his sense of duty prevailed and he became a bona fide Medical Officer.



The funeral procession of Colonel John McCrae, 30 January 1918.

(McCrae House, Guelph Museums)

The dreadful impact of the slaughter of friends and half his brigade at the 2nd Battle of Ypres, coupled with the anxiety caused by the fight, exhausted McCrae. The battle changed him. The optimistic man with an infectious smile would never return. He felt deeply that he should have made greater sacrifices. He insisted on living in the tent like his comrades at the front and rarely took leave. To his comrades and those who worked beside him on a daily basis, McCrae gave the impression that he felt he should be with his old artillery brigade. On 24 January 1918 McCrae was appointed consulting physician to the First British Army. He was the first Canadian to be so honoured. However, McCrae did not live to fulfil the appointment. He died on 28 January 1918 of pneumonia and meningitis and was buried with full military honours on 30 January 1918. The ceremony was attended by some of the most important Allied officers. Attired in the regulation white ribbon and with McCrae's boots placed backward in his stirrups, Bonfire performed his final act of loyalty to his beloved master by leading the coffin and the firing party. Over 75 nursing sisters in caps and white veils lined up at both the hospital and the grave site. The full military funeral given Colonel John McCrae was a show of honour and respect for the soldier, doctor and poet that he was.

John McCrae was a good soldier. His sense of duty and patriotism is to be commended. However, McCrae was also a humanitarian. The injustice and the slaughter he witnessed lay heavy on his heart and caused phenomenal conflict with

his desire to do "what is right." His delicately executed drawings and his meaningful poems reflect his sensitivity to the environs he experienced and his deep concern about the useless waste and brutality of war.

Notes

1. John McCrae, Boer War Letters. National Archives of Canada (NAC), Microfilm reel A-1102.
2. Boer War Ledgers. Guelph Museums, McCrae House Collection, 968450.1.
3. John McCrae. Boer War Letters. NAC Microfilm reel A-1102.
4. John Prescott, *In Flanders Fields, The Story of John McCrae* (Erin: Boston Mills Press, 1985), p.41.
5. *Ibid.*, p.76
6. Oscar Klotz - John McCrae Letters. National Archives of Canada.
7. John McCrae. First World War Letters. NAC Microfilm reel A-1103.

Bev Dietrich is Curator of Guelph Museums in charge of a large collection that includes John McCrae artifacts and archival material, all exhibitions, and the supervision of volunteers and students. Guelph Museums is a museum complex comprised of both McCrae House and the Guelph Civic Museum.