Flanders Fields Essay, Research Paper

In Flanders FieldsIn Flanders fields the poppies blow Between the crosses, row on row,That mark our place; and in the skyThe larks, still bravely singing, flyScarce heard amid the guns below.We are the Dead. Short days agoWe lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,Loved, and were loved, and now we lieIn Flanders fields.Take up our quarrel with the foe:To you from failing hands we throwThe torch; be yours to hold it high.If ye break faith with us who dieWe shall not sleep, though poppies growIn Flanders fields.

John McCrae s In Flanders Fields as a Canadian Cultural Artifact

The poem, In Flanders Fields written by Canadian John McCrae remains one of the most important and memorable pieces of war poems ever written. John McCrae came from a respectable family and became a soldier/ doctor/ author/ teacher. Though he wrote textbooks on medicine and numerous poems he will be forever remembered as being the voice of the many who had fallen during WWI. In Flanders Field, stirred the hearts of soldiers and their family s everywhere- not just Canada. In a simple language and with flowing verse it vividly evoked the situation and emotions of the front line troops. John McCrae s poem later inspired the poppy to become the symbol of Remembrance and sacrifice.

John McCrae was born in Guelph, Ontario on November 30,1872 to two established, respectable and hardworking Scottish parents, David McCrae and Janet Simpson Eckford. The McCraes were staunch Presbyterians with the resilience and self-reliance of second-generation pioneers in Canada. David McCrae instilled a strong sense of duty and healthy respect for military values in his two sons. John McCrae was offered a scholarship from the University of Toronto in 1888 where he went on to study physiology and pathology as well, McCrae wrote poetry for the school paper The Varsity. From there he graduated from medical school with a gold medal for his outstanding academic performance. In 1899 he moved to Montreal to accept a fellowship in pathology and to study at the McGill University School of Medicine. Although McCrae was devoted to his medical career; when the Boer War erupted he was one of the first volunteers who wished to go and contribute to the defense of the Empire.

John McCrae had been brought up to cherish the duty of fighting for one s country and was eager to do his part. The Boer (in 1899) war was his first experience where his military skills as a soldier came before his role of doctor. When Britain declared war in 1917 and joined forces with the Allied powers, Canada followed suit immediately. McCrae had seen first hand the deadly effects of war and had no illusions of what to expect. McCrae was assigned to be surgeon to the 1st Field Artillery Brigade. He felt he was one of the most qualified doctor-soldiers in the country and felt his obligation to the country and to the Empire. McCrae s greatest test would come when his Canadian contingent were sent to the Ypres Salient.

Up to this point the Canadians were not regarded as fighting soldiers and were thus given the assignment of occupying this relatively quite sector of the front. The importance of Ypres would soon be realized when on April 22, 1915 the German line used the first poisonous gas attack in war against the Canadians and Algerians troops to gain access to the important roads that intersected in Ypres. The Algerian troops fled leaving a gap of six kilometers along the trench system. Now the German side had the ability to take control of the area. Somehow the gap was filled with the Canadians who even managed to counterattack, a strategy that came as a complete surprise to the Germans. John McCrae s post was near a particularly dangerous section of the road. The Germans had it covered with artillery fire for seventeen days of battle. McCrae would later write:

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 be done.

After the Second Battle of Ypres there was no longer any doubt of the courage and strength of the Canadian troops. On May 2nd, McCrae s close friend and one time student, Lieutenant Alexis H. Helmer was killed by a German shell. McCrae performed the burial himself in the absence of a chaplain service that night to avoid any enemy detention. The next day during a lull in the fighting, McCrae took a break and stared at the cemetery where his friend was buried the day before. He noticed that each day the rows of white crosses grew longer and the field of Flanders was carpeted with blood red poppies. John McCrae then spent twenty minutes scribbling fifteen lines of verse on a scrap piece of paper. When he was done he took the piece of paper and gave it to Cyril Allinson, a twenty-two year old sergeant major who was delivering mail that day. Allinson describes the seen:

The poem was exactly 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.

General Morrison wrote, this poem was literally born of fire and blood during the hottest phases of the 2nd Battle of Ypres. The poem was eventually sent to England. The Spectator in London rejected it but Punch published it on December 8, 1915.

The poem In Flanders Fields commemorates the death of thousands of soldiers who died in Flanders during the grueling battles there. Over 57000 Allied troops were wounded and over 10000 were killed at Ypres. The poem quickly became the poem of the British army when the soldiers learned it with their hearts, which is quite different from simply committing it to memory. It circulated first as a folksong from mouth to mouth. The lyrics enshrined the inner thoughts and hearts of all soldiers. John McCrae was their voice and everyone who heard it was deeply touched. Almost immediately In Flanders Fields gained worldwide recognition because it struck a chord with all those who were directly or in directly involved in the war effort. For soldiers it was an anthem of encouragement as well as a reminder to all of our debt to the dead. For those at home it was viewed as an expression of the cause for which their country was fighting for. The popularity of the poem only continued to grow after the war. It was translated into several languages because its theme is one that could be understood by people of almost all nationalities.

In Flanders Fields was an important Canadian contribution to one of the most distinctive literary forms of the twentieth century, the literature of war. His poem unified Canada when Canada needed a thread to string the young country together. Even the French Canadians who regarded the war in Europe as something foreign and that did not affect Canada were proud of John McCrae and his famous poem. When the need for volunteer troops was overshadowing the supply in Canada many thought conscription was needed. The country, except Quebec, voted in favour and it was said that:

In Flanders Fields did more to make this Dominion persevere in the duty of fighting for the world s ultimate peace than all the political speeches of the recent campaign.

Later it would be used as a recruiting tool during the War and in 1917 the first Victory Loan Bonds were floated in Canada using lines from In Flanders Fields to advertise them and proved to be extremely popular. Sadly, many see In Flanders Fields as an anachronism; a poem no longer relevant to today; it is only dusted off for lip- service to dead heroes, or to be learned as an exercise by school children. Many however, read the poem today with as great of an admiration as it was read years ago.

John McCrae s poem was responsible for the Great War Veterans Association of Canada to officially adopt the poppy as the Symbol of Remembrance in 1921. The poems great fear is that the dead will be forgotten and the symbol of the poppy belies that fear. In 1921 the first poppies were distributed in Canada and millions wear them each November to honour those who fought for our freedom. Today, whenever you see a Legion sign or read of those who fought for freedom in any war, the poppy usually accompanies the picture. John McCrae gave us this blood red visual so that the pain and suffering of hundreds of thousands who died would never be forgotten.

John McCrae represented much of the spirit that kept the men fighting. His sense of duty to Canada and to the Empire never weakened. On January 28, 1918, exhausted by years of overwork, John McCrae died from pneumonia. His funeral was held at the military cemetery at Wimereux and was attended by military personnel of all ranks. John McCrae was mourned by a multitude of people who had been inspired by In Flanders Fields and now with his own death the poem was even more poignant. He was remembered by his friends not only for what he had accomplished, but for what he might have done. McCrae s friend and colleague at McGill, Professor Stephen Leacock praised him for:

his vitality and splendid vigour, his career and honour and marked distinction, his life filled with honourable endeavour and instinct with a sense of duty.

At the medical school of McGill University, a stained glass window commemorated John McCrae with this simple description: Pathologist, Poet, Soldier, Physician, Man Among Men.

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