

To write poetry, you must be willing to dig deep down into your soul. You must write the truth. You must write your feelings and views with a passion.

In Flanders Fields

On May 3, 1915, about 7 A.M., it was a bright spring morning near Poperinghe, Belgium - the first spring of the First World War. The sky was deep blue, the larks were singing and circling, and a gentle east wind was blowing the poppies about. Maj. John McCrae, a 42-year-old doctor/soldier with the Canadian Field Artillery, was sitting on the rear step of an ambulance, composing poetry. In about 20 minutes, he wrote "In Flanders Fields."

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Some notes:

- The previous night, Major McCrae had buried his best friend, 25-year-old Lt. Alexis Helmer, who had been a medical student at McGill University when the poet was a professor of pathology. The young man, one of the brigade's best-liked officers, had been blown to bits by an artillery shell the previous day. (He was buried under cover of darkness for fear of attracting more enemy fire.) The barrage of The Second Battle of Ypres was in its ninth day.
- As the poet wrote, Sgt. Maj. Cyril Allinson arrived on horseback, bringing mail and supplies from the rear. "I saw (Major McCrae) sitting on the ambulance step, a pad on his knee. He looked up as I approached but continued to write," recalled Mr. Allinson, who was the first to read the work. "His face was very tired but calm



Poetry must set the scene. Your reader must be able to step into the poem. They must be there with you, so you must describe it. In your head, watch the story unfold.

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as he wrote The poem was almost an exact description of the scene in front of us both."

- Major McCrae (who had been promoted to lieutenantcolonel in 1914, though the news did not reach him until June 1, 1915) made several copies of "In Flanders Fields," with slight variations, and gave them to friends. He sent a copy to Punch magazine, which ran the poem on December 18, 1915, with no byline.

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- The verses were reprinted around the world, but the author's name was not known. By the time it was, Colonel .McCrae's "perfect war poem" was famous. It has been called the bestknown Canadian poem.
- Colonel McCrae, who had been at the front from the beginning, was made consultant physician to the British 1st Army in January 1918. Five days later, he was dead from pneumonia and a cerebral infection.
- "In Flanders Fields" was used in the first observance of Armistice Day in 1918, and this poem and poppies have been part of the November 11 ceremonies since. "It never occurred to me at the time that it would ever be published," Mr. Allinson admitted. "It seemed to me to be just an exact description of the scene."