

Historica Canada Education Portal

John McCrae

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the [John McCrae Heritage Minute](#), which shows Canadian Army surgeon John McCrae writing the famous poem, "In Flanders Fields."

Aims

Students will discuss the meaning, imagery, language and message of the poem, "In Flanders Fields."

Students will study the poem, "In Flanders Fields" and discuss its language, imagery, and message. They will compare this poem with other poems about the First World War, and discuss whether they contain realistic portrayals of war or whether it is idealized for propaganda purposes.

Background

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.

Activities

McCrae's Famous Poem

After watching "John McCrae," distribute copies of "In Flanders Fields" to the class. Ask questions to help the students follow the poem. What is the setting? Describe what you see in the first stanza. Who are the speakers of the poem? What does the "passing of the torch" in the last stanza mean? What does the speaker mean by the last three lines?

Once students understand the poem, discuss why it is still one of the most famous Canadian poems. What is its appeal in terms of language and imagery? Why does its subject matter and "message" continue to

affect people?

The Arts of War

Students may be familiar with some of the paintings that war artists contributed during the First World War. Some were brutally realistic; others served as propaganda to encourage the war effort. We may look at wartime literature in a similar way.

Discuss whether McCrae's poem is a realistic portrayal of war. What is realistic about it and what is not? Compare the poem with some other First World War poems (such as those by Wilfred Owen). Do the poems make similar statements about the war? How do they differ in their treatments and their intentions?

Could McCrae's poem be used as propaganda for the war effort? How might it affect civilians on the home front? It might be useful to compare the poem with paintings by war artists.

Resources

- [Heritage Minute: John McCrae](#)

- [Heritage Minute: Vimy Ridge](#)

- [The Canadian Encyclopedia: John McCrae](#)
- [The Canadian Encyclopedia: In Flanders Fields](#)