

John McCrae's War

In Flanders Fields





STUDY GUIDE FOR THE FILM *JOHN McCRAE'S WAR: IN FLANDERS FIELDS*

ABOUT THE FILM

John McCrae's War: In Flanders Fields

The First World War's terrible Second Battle of Ypres has just broken out in Belgium. Canadian troops, stationed along the Yser Canal, are under heavy fire... and the number of casualties is mounting.

Among the dead is young Alexis Helmer, killed early on the morning of May 2, 1915, the victim of a direct hit from a German shell. Dr. John McCrae, a friend of Helmer's, is there to pick up the pieces of the body and deliver a burial service over the gun blasts. Rocked by the death, McCrae would later pen one of the war's most famous poems, "In Flanders Fields," while looking out upon Helmer's grave.

John McCrae's War: In Flanders Fields chronicles McCrae's life from his childhood in Guelph, Ontario, to the battlefields of Belgium. It tells the story of his famous poem and pays tribute to the Canadian soldiers who died fighting over a few feet of Belgian soil.

ABOUT THE GUIDE AND TEACHER PREPARATION

This guide accompanies the film *John McCrae's War: In Flanders Fields* and engages students in critically examining the historical evidence presented through the six Historical Thinking concepts.

The guide provides textual and visual excerpts from the film as well as supplemental information that can extend student engagement and learning.

OBJECTIVES FOR GUIDE

The film has been divided into chapters of 3 to 10 minutes. Each chapter uses the film and one of six historical thinking concepts to explore historical issues and remembrance. The film can be viewed in its entirety, or each chapter can stand alone as an opportunity for students to engage with the concept and the historical content.

TARGETED AGE LEVEL AND SCHOOL LEVEL

The guide was developed with secondary students in mind but could be adapted to younger grade levels, and many sections would be appropriate for grades 4 to 8. Some chapters of the film might be inappropriate for younger viewers due to graphic/disturbing content related to war.

SUBJECT AREAS

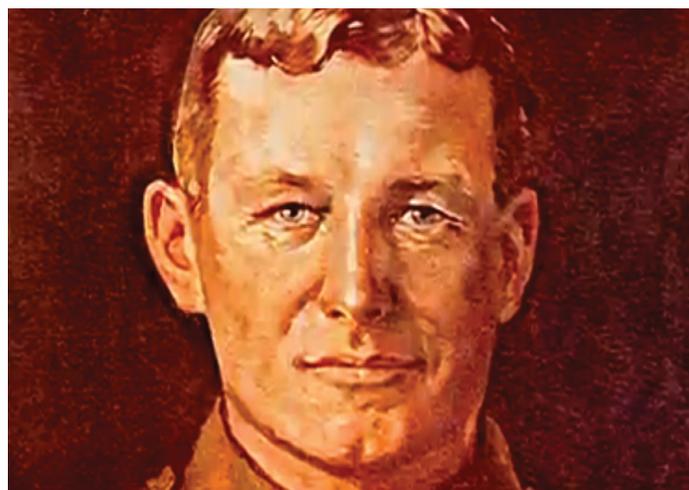
History
Social Studies
Civics
Literature
Medicine and Society
Psychology

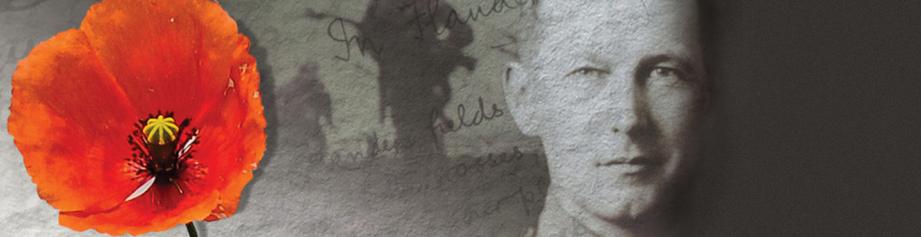
PREVIEWING TIPS

It is a good idea to preview any film that you plan to show to students. Note that if you are planning to show a part of this film to younger students as part of Remembrance Day activities, some sections are quite graphic and may not be appropriate to that audience. You may also find points of connection with your own curriculum other than the ones presented here. The questions and ideas associated with each of the historical thinking concepts overlap significantly, and you may find it more appropriate to your own classroom to select different questions and areas of focus for each section.

AMOUNT OF TIME OR NUMBER OF CLASSES NECESSARY TO COMPLETE THE ACTIVITIES IN THE GUIDE

Full film: 46 minutes plus discussion time from 10 to 75 minutes
Chapter activities: As little as 20 minutes including viewing and discussion





Chapter 1: Introduction [0:00–5:02]

Inquiry Focus: Asking Questions

Chapter 2: Biography of John McCrae [5:02–10:40]

Inquiry Focus: Change and Continuity

Chapter 3: War Begins, 1914 [10:40–16:15]

Inquiry Focus: Historical Perspectives

Chapter 4: A Difficult Decision? [18:00–22:57]

Inquiry Focus: The Ethical Dimension

**Chapter 5: McCrae's 17 Days of Hades [22:58–25:45
(to 23:55 for younger audiences)]**

Inquiry Focus: Primary Source Analysis/Historical Perspectives

Chapter 6: Why Write a Poem? [25:45–29:50]

Inquiry Focus: Cause and Consequence

Chapter 7: Why So Popular? [29:50–35:09]

Inquiry Focus: Historical Significance

Chapter 8: What Happened to McCrae? [37:15–41:07]

Inquiry Focus: Asking Questions/Cause and Consequence

Chapter 9: McCrae's Legacy [41:07–46:12]

Inquiry Focus: The Ethical Dimension

KEY THEMES/CONCEPTS

The film explores Canada's role in the First World War, Canada's role on the world stage in the early 20th century, the social history of Montreal, and the conditions of war for soldiers, officers and medical officers.

The six historical thinking concepts will be explored and developed through the activities in this guide. These concepts are based on recent research into the construction of history and are designed to give students and teachers tools for the examination of the past in meaningful and critical ways.

Here are some of the key critical questions that each concept asks. More information can be found at the [Historical Thinking Project](#).

→ **Historical Significance**

Who or what is significant? What impact did a person have on their own time? On our time? Why are some people more remembered or widely known than others?



→ **Primary Source Evidence**

How do we know what we know? What evidence of the past exists? What questions do we need to ask about the evidence to understand it? Why does the context and purpose of the creation of the evidence matter?

→ **Continuity and Change**

What has remained the same and what has changed? How are conditions in the present different from conditions of the past? What were the turning points of historical periods or events? When does a historical era begin or end?

→ **Cause and Consequence**

What are the short-term and long-term causes of historical events? What are the underlying factors that led to events? What are the intended and unintended consequences of events? What are the short-term and long-term consequences of historical events?

→ **Historical Perspectives**

People of the past lived in a different world and had different ideas, values and goals than we do today. What was their reality? How can we understand their actions and words as they would have? To truly understand historical perspective, we must also try to see, and then account for, our present-day attitudes and beliefs.

→ **The Ethical Dimensions of History**

What do we do once we know about the past? Do we commemorate it? Remember it? Apologize for it? Build museums, monuments, hold ceremonies? Where is the line between remembering and glorifying the past? How do we act as citizens in the present? How should our governments and institutions act?



CONTEXT AND IMPORTANT FACTS AND FIGURES

Canada in the First World War

When Canada went to war in September of 1914, it was a colony of Great Britain and had little authority over its own participation in the conflict. Most people thought the war would be over by Christmas. Many of the 600,000 Canadians who served signed up for war because they were young and they believed it would be an adventure. As a veteran of the Boer War, McCrae was neither young nor believed in adventure, but seems to have been motivated by a sense of duty.

The second battle of Ypres in April of 1915 was Canada's first major engagement of the war. It was the battle during which John McCrae wrote the poem "In Flanders Fields." The reality of trench warfare and the powerfully destructive effects of the new weapons of war were felt by all involved. McCrae was a medical officer who saw first-hand the devastating effects of shells, shrapnel, machine guns, gas and the unsanitary living conditions of the trenches.

After four years, the war ended on November 11, 1918. McCrae was one of the more than 60,000 Canadian casualties: he died of pneumonia in January of 1918, while serving at a field hospital in France.

Life of John McCrae

- 1872: Born November 30 in Guelph, Ontario
- 1887: Named the best-drilled cadet in Ontario, in the Highfield Cadet Corps
- 1888: Graduated from Guelph Collegiate Institute at 16 with a scholarship to the University of Toronto
- 1894: Graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts degree; had to take a year off due to asthma
Reportedly fell in love at age 18, but the girl died of illness
- 1898: Graduated from medical school, University of Toronto
Published 16 poems in a variety of magazines
- 1899–1901: Served with the Canadian Field Artillery in the South African War as a soldier
- 1901: Continued his studies in pathology at McGill University in Montreal
- 1904: Appointed the resident pathology fellow at McGill
Began a busy period running his own medical practice, working at various hospitals, teaching at McGill and in Burlington, Vermont, writing textbooks and continuing his interest in poetry and travel
- 1914: Volunteered for service in the First Brigade of the Canadian Artillery as brigade surgeon with the rank of Major, second in command

"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." (John Prescott, *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae*, p. 77, cited from VAC)

- 1915: April 22 – Second Battle of Ypres; McCrae writes "In Flanders Fields"
- 1918: January 28 – McCrae died of pneumonia at the Number 14 British General Hospital for Officers and was buried in Wimereux Cemetery in French Flanders

LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR MAJOR THEMES

Chapter 1: Introduction [0:00–5:02]

Inquiry Focus: Asking Questions

Questions for Discussion

As you watch the footage of the First World War in this section and listen to the poem "In Flanders Fields," what do you notice? What do you wonder about?

Teacher's Notes

Students should be in small groups to brainstorm observations and questions, perhaps in a T-chart or on a piece of chart paper. These questions can serve as a guide for which chapters students might be more interested in, and help to access any prior knowledge about the First World War.

CONTENT OF THE CHAPTER

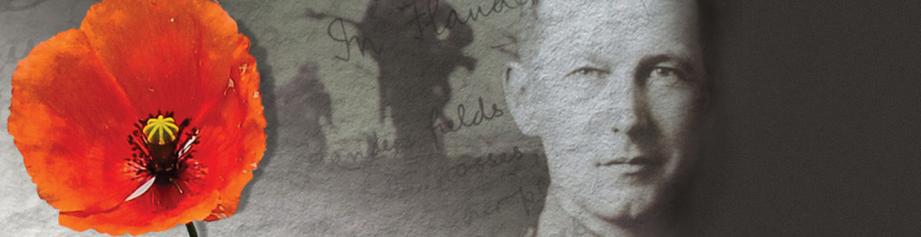
In this chapter, students will see film footage of the battlefield, nurse Clare Gass writing the poem "In Flanders Fields" in her diary, and author Martin Stephen discussing what makes the poem unique and lasting.

Chapter 2: Biography of John McCrae [5:02–10:40]

Inquiry Focus: Change and Continuity

Questions for Discussion

What has changed about Canada from the late 1800s/early 1900s to today? Make a list of all the ways that life in Canada then is different from your life in Canada today, and ways that life is the same today. Are there factors beyond historical change that make life different? For example: class, race/ethnicity, religion, or gender?



Choose the most powerful example to show the differences and the most powerful example to show the similarities. Explain why you chose these examples.

Teacher's Notes

Students should be in small groups to answer this question. They should discuss and share their most powerful examples with the class and explain their thinking.

Content of the Chapter

McCrae was born into a middle-class family in Guelph in 1872. His mother was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister and his father was a mill owner and farmer, but was known as the man who founded the local militia unit. McCrae was brought up in that unit and was the best-drilled cadet in Ontario in 1887 at 15 years old.

Like most people at the time, he went to church every Sunday and encountered the Evolution vs. God debate when he went to the University of Toronto. He first fell in love at university with a girl named Alice McCrae (no relation) who died of typhoid at 19. He was profoundly affected by her death and wrote elegantly about the event. He never married.

He went to work in pathology at McGill University in Montreal, and when the Boer War came, he went to South Africa as a soldier, not a doctor, in 1899, perhaps to see what being a real soldier was all about. He returned to Montreal during a golden age of medicine. He was a doctor, teacher, author of texts, and also a poet of some promise. He was a popular bachelor, much sought after by the hostesses of Montreal's Golden Square Mile.

Chapter 3: War Begins, 1914 [10:40–16:15]

Inquiry Focus: Historical Perspectives

Questions for Discussion

Why did people sign up to go to war? Why did McCrae sign up? Would you have signed up?

What was Canada's relationship with Britain? What's the evidence?

Teacher's Notes

Historical Perspectives asks us to consider how people of the past viewed their world and thought within the context of the time. These questions ask students to understand why people thought, believed and valued as they did in the past. They also ask students to provide specific evidence to support their conclusions.

If you are showing this chapter on its own, it's worth noting that Canada's participation in the First World War did a lot to change British attitudes toward the colonies, including Canada.

Content of the Chapter

Desmond Morton infers why McCrae signed up: he believed in the just cause of the war; he wanted to prove himself (at 42 he was much older than the average volunteer and perhaps felt he had to prove that he could still do things); and he had a background in the reserves.

The film describes the Canadians' arrival in England in October of 1914. McCrae is among 30,000 men and 7,000 horses; he is given the rank of Major and a horse named Bonfire. Despite the Canadians' training at Valcartier, Quebec, the British felt they weren't ready yet and sent them to train on Salisbury Plain. Canadians had to deal with some arrogant British attitudes toward them (see Handout E, document C).

The conditions in training were unpleasant and led to sickness and some deaths from meningitis. It was a wetter winter than usual, many horses had to be shot, boots leaked, greatcoats didn't dry, kilts were caked with mud and cut their legs, rifles jammed in the mud, and no alcohol was permitted, since temperance (abstaining from alcohol) was a popular movement at the time.

As a medical officer, McCrae could prescribe alcohol if needed, despite the temperance rules in camp. There is a story that he sent two soldiers rum bottles as medicine in "jankers" (military jail) so that they would have some cheer on Christmas Day.





Chapter 4: A Difficult Decision? [18:00–22:57]

Inquiry Focus: The Ethical Dimension

Questions for Discussion

Did the commanders make the right decision in sending in the Canadians at Ypres? What information did they have available to them? How much weight should be given to emotion when making battle decisions?

Teacher's Notes

Distribute Handout B to students before viewing. Have them discuss their predictions before viewing the chapter. The ethical dimension asks us to judge the actions of the people of the past. Given the information available to them, did they make the right decisions? Students must understand and appreciate the perspectives and context of the people involved even if they do not agree with those perspectives from a modern viewpoint.

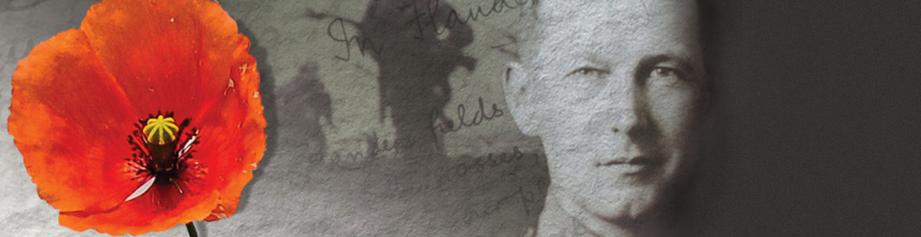
Content of the Chapter

Evidence that could go in the students' T-charts:



| ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF SENDING IN THE TROOPS | ARGUMENTS AGAINST SENDING IN THE TROOPS |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many British had already died in the First Battle of Ypres, sons of the generals – emotional territory • Last corner of free Belgium • 15 children killed without warning • British high command refused to believe such barbarism (gas attack) was possible – they thought it was a rumour • Germans had promised not to do such a thing – civilized European army | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • German POWs had confessed that canisters of poison gas were stockpiled near the front lines – irrefutable evidence |
| INFORMATION THAT WAS NOT KNOWN TILL AFTER THE BATTLE | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Germans found it was much easier than they had thought – didn't advance • 6,000 dead • Small Canadian chemical unit – advice on the urine-soaked hankie • 17 days of Hades after (according to McCrae) | |





**Chapter 5: McCrae's 17 Days of Hades [22:58–25:45
(to 23:55 for younger audiences)]**

Inquiry Focus: Primary Source Analysis/Historical Perspectives

Questions for Discussion

Before viewing:

How long do you think you could last without sleep? What do you think it might be like to be in a medical tent at the front lines? What would be the hardest thing for you? How long should doctors and nurses be expected to work at a time?

After viewing:

How do your thoughts before viewing compare to McCrae's experience on the battlefield? Can you predict how this experience might have affected him?

Teacher's Notes

This chapter only contains a reading from McCrae's diary of his description of the Second Battle of Ypres. Students could be provided a written copy of the quotation from McCrae (see Handout E, document D) to assist in their analysis of this primary source.

Content of the Chapter

"For 17 days and 17 nights none of us have had our clothes off, except occasionally for a change of socks. In all that time while I was awake, gunfire and rifle fire never ceased for 60 seconds. Our casualties are half the men on the firing line. My clothes, boots, kit and dugout at various times were sadly bloody. There was the constant background of the sight of the dead, the wounded, the maimed. None of our men went off their heads, but men in nearby units did, and no wonder. How tired we are. Weary in body and wearier in mind. And all the time, the birds sing over our heads."

For older audiences only:

[23:55–25:45] Optional addition with graphic content

This section of the film describes what it was like to work in the field ambulance unit and shows images of shell wounds and describes infection and amputation.

Chapter 6: Why Write a Poem? [25:45–29:50]

Inquiry Focus: Cause and Consequence

Questions for Discussion

Before viewing:

Make predictions: Why do you think McCrae wrote the poem? What were the factors that inspired him?

After viewing:

Compare predictions to what actually happened. Were some of your predictions incorrect? Why do you think they were incorrect?

Teacher's Notes

It's obvious from the chapter content that the death of Alexis Helmer was the short-term cause or catalyst for writing the poem, but students need to ask why Helmer's death in particular prompted McCrae, and what were the contributing background causes?

Students could use additional information from previous chapters to answer this question, but this is not required:

Chapter 1 - As a medic, McCrae was slightly removed from the battle and able to give a perspective on all soldiers

Chapter 2 - Helmer had a similar life to McCrae's, including his own lost love in youth and experience as a poet

Chapter 5 - The terrible conditions of battle pushed McCrae over the edge; he describes in his diary the irony of the birds still singing

Content of the Chapter

In this chapter, we meet 22-year-old [Alexis Helmer](#). He and McCrae knew each other—he was a student at McGill when McCrae taught there. They had a lot in common: they were both militia-raised, and from the same social stratum.

On May 2, 1915, Helmer was hit by a shell. There were only bits left of his body. McCrae supervised the collection of the fragments of his body and put them in a burlap sack that was roughly human-shaped. We hear McCrae's diary entry where he describes the burial and service (see Handout E, document E). McCrae got no sleep that night; from where he sat, he could see Lex Helmer's grave, marked by a simple wooden cross. He was seen to be scribbling in his notebook, writing the poem.

Chapter 7: Why So Popular? [29:50–35:09]

Inquiry Focus: Historical Significance

Questions for Discussion

Why has the poem been so popular for so long? Is it historically significant?



Teacher's Notes

To determine historical significance, students should compare the poem to a set of criteria for significance. You may use Handout C: Is the Poem Historically Significant? to help students structure their answers.

Reveals the Past – *What does the poem tell us about the past that we didn't know before?*

- keeps you in suspense - war is still being fought - those who died never knew the outcome of the war
- "inside the head of a soldier almost at the moment of death"

Results in Change – *What evidence is there that the poem created change?*

- for many people popular at the time among the troops (Clare Gass)
- for a long time cemented the poppy as an international symbol of remembrance
- a big or profound change not heroic, and different from other poems of the time - doesn't say we will win the war, "If ye break faith..."

Relevant to Today – *How is it still relevant to us today?*

- keeps you in suspense - war is still being fought - those who died never knew the outcome of the war
- "inside the head of a soldier almost at the moment of death"
- Still being recited every Remembrance Day

Relevant to a Historical Narrative or Question – *What historical story or question does it help us to answer or understand?*

- The poem asks us to ask: What is war for? What is our responsibility? Students may wish to connect the poem to a unit or course question that they are already working on.

Content of the Chapter

In this chapter, we hear a section of the poem and learn how the poppy became an international symbol of remembrance. We learn how the Second Battle of Ypres was a victory for neither side, with a combined loss of some 100,000 lives. McCrae was changed by the battle; some said he seemed to have aged 20 years. He became a Lt. Colonel and settled into a desk job at a hospital behind the lines.

We hear nurse Clare Gass' diary entry (see Handout E, document F) describing the wounds and the soldiers. She copied the poem into her diary in October of 1915, showing that the poem was in circulation before it was published in December of 1915.

Chapter 8: What Happened to McCrae? [37:15–41:07]

Inquiry Focus: Asking Questions/Cause and Consequence

Questions for Discussion

Before viewing:

Show the picture of Bonfire at the funeral. Have students notice and wonder as in the activity for chapter 1.

collection.mccord.mcgill.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M972.5.5.1?Lang=1&accessnumber=M972.5.5.1



After viewing:

What happened to McCrae after the Second Battle of Ypres? What were the consequences of his experience in the war?

Teacher's Notes

Before viewing, students will likely notice that the boots are reversed in the stirrups. They should make predictions or guesses as to why this might be and what it might mean. After viewing, students can sort the consequences of McCrae's experience into short-term and long-term consequences. Short-term consequences might include his declining health and probable depression, as well as his determination and the admiration of his colleagues. Long-term consequences include the grave, the poem and the street named after him, as well as his medals and kit being sent back to his mother.



Content of the Chapter

McCrae was now a famous war hero and poet; he could have returned to Canada or transferred to London, but he did not. He stayed at the military hospital and continued to work. He became remote and moody until he died of pneumonia in January 1918.

It was one of the most heavily attended funerals of the war; all the nurses were given leave to attend. Many memorials were erected. McCrae has a grave in the British officer section of the local cemetery; the poem is engraved nearby. A street in Wimereux was named after him and his personal effects and medals were sent to his mother.

Chapter 9: McCrae's Legacy [41:07 to 46:12]

Inquiry Focus: The Ethical Dimension

Questions for Discussion

Before viewing:

In 1997, McCrae's medals surfaced at auction. How much do you think they are worth? Should they be worth more or less than the poem?

After viewing:

Consider Arthur Lee's statement:

"We don't have very many Canadian heroes in Canada and we've kind of very quickly forgotten the ones that we do have, and I just want John McCrae to be remembered."

Pick two questions from the list and discuss in your small group. Be prepared to share with the class.

1. Do you agree with Lee that we tend to forget our heroes? Do we not have enough heroes?
2. Should we have heroes? What are the problems with heroes?
3. What makes a hero? Was McCrae a hero?
4. Who else is worthy of remembrance?
5. How should we remember our heroes?
6. How do we remember our heroes?
7. Is Alexis Helmer any more or less important than the 6,000 other dead whose names are inscribed on the Menin Gate? Should he be more remembered than he is?

Teacher's Notes

Another aspect of the ethical dimension is to decide how we should honour or remember or condemn the people of the past. Should we build monuments? Should we forget? Should we remember atrocities or tragedies so that they are not repeated? What is the line between remembering and propaganda?

Content of the Chapter

Arthur Lee, a Toronto businessman, bought McCrae's medals for \$506,000 and donated them to the John McCrae House in Guelph. He makes a statement about Canadian heroes (see Handout E, document B).

We see the legacies of the Second Battle of Ypres: the Cloth Hall in Ypres was rebuilt, the Menin Gate memorial was built, and every night the last post is played. The names of the 6,000 soldiers whose bodies went missing are inscribed on the Menin Gate; Alexis Helmer is among the names included. McCrae's legacy is the poem and the way he transformed our view of the poppy.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY – PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

Use Handout E: Primary Source Documents

This activity may be done before viewing as a Minds On activity before watching the entire film, or after viewing the film as a consolidation and deeper-analysis activity. All sources are in the film and are in the order in which they appear.

Distribute Handout E to each group of students. You may give each group all the sources, or just one each, depending on the level of your class. These questions are for discussion in small groups. You may wish groups to write down their thoughts or share a few of them orally or in a gallery walk.

For the analysis questions, students could select the question that most appeals to their group; alternately, you could assign all questions randomly or have all groups respond to the same question.

Minds On Questions

All of these primary sources are in the film/chapter you are about to see. What questions do you have about these sources? What connections can you make between the sources? Make predictions about what you might see in the film.



Analysis Questions

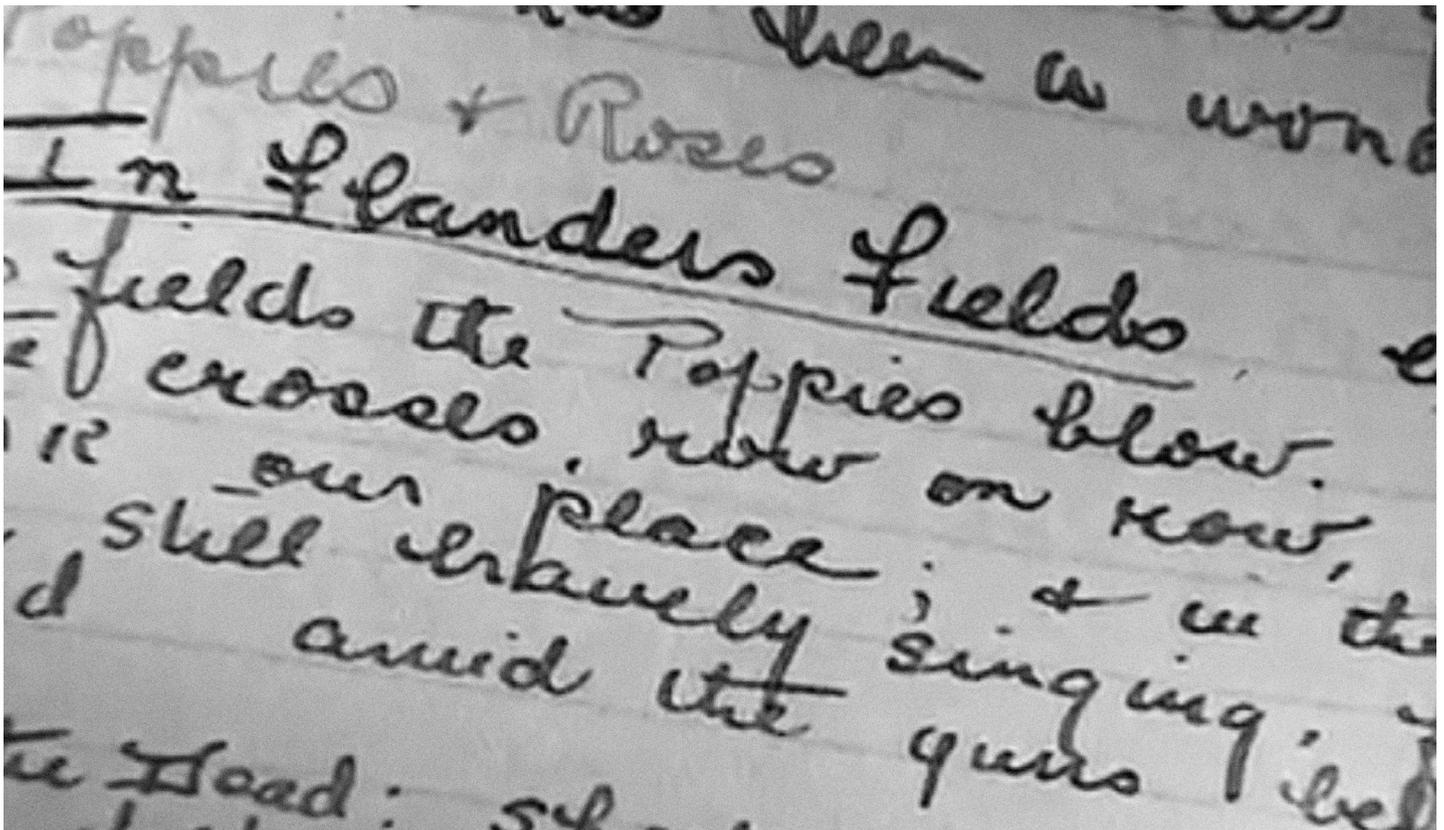
1. Make the connection between any/several of the primary sources and one or two historical thinking concepts. Explain why you chose that concept and how it is linked to the source.
2. What do we learn about John McCrae the man and his historical context from these sources? Support your answer with specific textual or visual references.
3. What do we learn about the legacy of McCrae from these sources? Support your answer with specific textual or visual references.
4. What are some problems related to using primary sources? Why do you need to use more than one source to understand a historical question or issue?

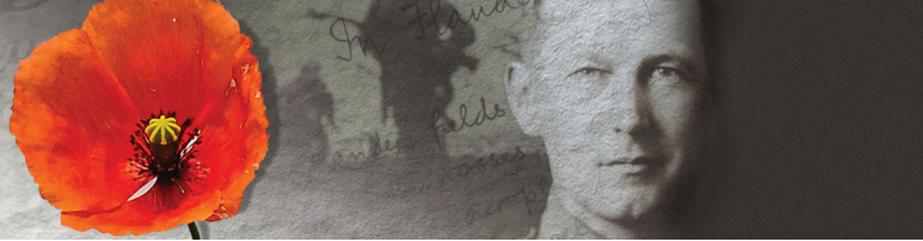
LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To understand some of the context in which the poem "In Flanders Fields" was written
- To practise using the historical thinking concepts to understand the past
- To analyze the significance of the poem and its author
- To understand what has changed and what has remained the same in the Canadian medical corps

LEARNING APPROACHES

These activities are designed for discussion in small groups, with students collaborating to develop their answers. These are complex, inquiry-based questions that are challenging for most students to answer on their own. The goal is for students to practise the skills of inquiry and historical thinking and to develop confidence in these areas. For most activities, there is a Minds On question or activity. This is critical to hooking students into the content and for deriving meaning from it for themselves. When students are the ones asking their own questions, they will be more engaged and have more meaningful discussions.





RELATED RESOURCES: FILMS, BOOKS, ARTICLES, WEBSITES, ORGANIZATIONS

The Historical Thinking Project

English: historicalthinking.ca

French: penseehistorique.ca

The Canadian War Museum

English: warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar

French: museedelaguerre.ca/premiereguerremondiale

Veterans Affairs Canada

English: veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war/mccrae

French: veterans.gc.ca/fra/remembrance/history/first-world-war/mccrae

McCord Museum – search including partners

English: musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/keys/collections

French: musee-mccord.qc.ca/fr/clefs/collections

Canadian Virtual War Memorial: Alexis Helmer

English: veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/1592956

French: veterans.gc.ca/fra/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/1592956

Canadian Virtual War Memorial: John McCrae

English: veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/84214?John%20McCrae

French: veterans.gc.ca/fra/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/84214?John%20McCrae

Student Worksheets

- a. A timeline of the life of John McCrae
- b. Did the commanders make the right decision? (chapter 4)
- c. Is the poem historically significant? (chapter 7)
- d. Arthur Lee and the Ethical Dimension (chapter 9)
- e. Primary source analysis activity
- f. All questions for full viewing



TIMELINE OF THE LIFE OF JOHN McCRAE

- 1872: Born November 30 in Guelph, Ontario
- 1887: Named the best-drilled cadet in Ontario, in the Highfield Cadet Corps
- 1888: Graduated from Guelph Collegiate Institute at 16 with a scholarship to the University of Toronto
- 1894: Graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts degree; had to take a year off due to asthma
Reportedly fell in love at age 18, but the girl died of illness
- 1898: Graduated from medical school, University of Toronto
Published 16 poems in a variety of magazines
- 1899–1901: Served with the Canadian Field Artillery in the South African War as a soldier
- 1901: Continued his studies in pathology at McGill University in Montreal
- 1904: Appointed the resident pathology fellow at McGill
Began a busy period running his own medical practice, working at various hospitals, teaching at McGill and in Burlington, Vermont, writing textbooks and continuing his interest in poetry and travel
- 1914: Volunteered for service in the First Brigade of the Canadian Artillery as brigade surgeon with the rank of Major, second in command
"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." (John Prescott, *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae*, p. 77, cited from VAC)
- 1915: April 22 – Second Battle of Ypres; McCrae writes "In Flanders Fields"
- 1918: January 28 – McCrae died of pneumonia at the Number 14 British General Hospital for Officers and was buried in Wimereux Cemetery in French Flanders

DID THE COMMANDERS MAKE THE RIGHT DECISION?**Chapter 4: A Difficult Decision?**

Inquiry Focus: The Ethical Dimension

Questions for Discussion

Did the commanders make the right decision in sending in the Canadians at Ypres? What information did they have available to them?

Complete the following T-chart as you watch the chapter:

| ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF SENDING IN THE TROOPS | ARGUMENTS AGAINST SENDING IN THE TROOPS |
|---|---|
| | |
| INFORMATION THAT WAS NOT KNOWN TILL AFTER THE BATTLE | |
| | |

Discuss the evidence with your partner/group.

1. Did the commanders make the right decision? Why or why not?

2. How much weight should be given to emotion when making battle decisions? Why?

IS THE POEM HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT?

Chapter 8: Historical Significance

| SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA | MEETS THE CRITERIA? YES / NO | EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT YOUR ANSWER |
|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Reveals the Past <i>What does the poem tell us about the past that we didn't know before?</i> | | |
| Results in Change <i>What evidence is there that the poem created change?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - for many people - for a long time - a big or profound change | | |
| Relevant to Today <i>How is it still relevant to us today?</i> | | |
| Optional criteria: Relevant to a Historical Narrative or Question <i>What historical story or question does it help us to answer or understand?</i> | | |

Chapter 9: McCrae's Legacy

Inquiry Focus: The Ethical Dimension

Questions for Discussion*Before viewing:*

In 1997, McCrae's medals surfaced at auction. How much do you think they are worth? Should they be worth more or less than the poem?

What makes a hero? List some criteria for what or who a hero is.

After viewing:

Consider Arthur Lee's statement:

"We don't have very many Canadian heroes in Canada and we've kind of very quickly forgotten the ones that we do have, and I just want John McCrae to be remembered."

Pick two questions from the list and discuss in your small group. Be prepared to share with the class.

1. Do you agree with Lee that we tend to forget our heroes? Do we not have enough heroes?
2. Should we have heroes? What are the problems with heroes?
3. What makes a hero? Was McCrae a hero?
4. Who else is worthy of remembrance?
5. How should we remember our heroes?
6. How do we remember our heroes?
7. Is Alexis Helmer any more or less important than the 6,000 other dead whose names are inscribed on the Menin Gate? Should he be more remembered than he is?

Document A

"In Flanders Fields" by John McCrae

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.

Document B

"We don't have very many Canadian heroes in Canada and we've kind of very quickly forgotten the ones that we do have, and I just want John McCrae to be remembered."

– Arthur Lee, Toronto businessman, 1997

Document C

"A mob of farmers on a bunch of green horses"

– Said of the Canadian Expeditionary Force by the British, 1915

Document D

"For 17 days and 17 nights none of us have had our clothes off, except occasionally for a change of socks. In all that time while I was awake, gunfire and rifle fire never ceased for 60 seconds. Our casualties are half the men on the firing line. My clothes, boots, kit and dugout at various times were sadly bloody. There was the constant background of the sight of the dead, the wounded, the maimed. None of our men went off their heads, but men in nearby units did, and no wonder. How tired we are. Weary in body and wearier in mind. And all the time, the birds sing over our heads."

– From John McCrae's diary, 1915

Document E

"Lieutenant Helmer was killed at the guns. He was a nice boy. His diary's last words were: 'It has quieted a little, and I shall try to get a good sleep.' His girl's picture had a hole right through it and we buried it with him. I said the committal service over him as well as I could, from memory. A soldier's death."

– From John McCrae's diary, 1915

Document F

"June 1, 1915.

Some of the new patients have dreadful, dreadful wounds. One young boy with his face shot away, both arms gone, and a great many wounds in both legs. Troops go through almost daily and when we're able, we always wave strenuously at them. Poor lads, they seem so happy and full of life. There's a difference when they come back on the ambulance trains. Then, they are silent, and so are we."

– Diary of nurse Clare Gass, France, 1915

Document G

Photograph

Bonfire at John McCrae's funeral, January 30, 1918

collection.mccord.mcgill.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M972.5.5.1?Lang=1&accessnumber=M972.5.5.1



Before viewing:

1. How long do you think you could last without sleep? What do you think it might be like to be in a medical tent at the front lines? What would be the hardest thing for you? How long should doctors and nurses be expected to work at a time?

2. Examine the picture of the horse, Bonfire, at McCrae's funeral. What do you notice about the photo? What do you wonder?



collection.mccord.mcgill.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M972.5.5.1?Lang=1&accessnumber=M972.5.5.1

3. In 1997, McCrae's medals surfaced at auction. How much do you think they are worth? Should they be worth more or less than the original copy of the poem?

ALL QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING OF FULL FILM

After viewing:

1. As you watch the footage of the First World War in this section and listen to the poem "In Flanders Fields," what do you notice? What do you wonder about?

2. What has changed about Canada from the late 1800s/early 1900s to today? Make a list of all the ways that life in Canada then is different from your life in Canada today and ways that life is the same today. Are there factors beyond historical change that make life different? For example: class, race/ethnicity, religion, or gender?
 - a. Choose the most powerful example to show the differences and the most powerful example to show the similarities. Explain why you chose these examples.

3. Why did people sign up to go to war? Why did McCrae sign up? Would you have signed up?
 - a. What was Canada's relationship with Britain? What's the evidence?

4. Did the commanders make the right decision in sending in the Canadians at Ypres? What information did they have available to them? How much weight should be given to emotion when making battle decisions?

5. How did lack of sleep and battlefield conditions in the Second Battle of Ypres influence McCrae? What were the consequences of these conditions for him?

6. What caused McCrae to write the poem? What were the factors that inspired him? Consider both immediate events and long-term or background factors.

7. Why has the poem been so popular for so long? Is it historically significant?

8. What happened to McCrae after the war? What were the consequences of his experience in the war?

ALL QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING OF FULL FILM

9. Consider Arthur Lee's statement: *"We don't have very many Canadian heroes in Canada and we've kind of very quickly forgotten the ones that we do have, and I just want John McCrae to be remembered."*

Pick two questions from the following list and discuss in your small group.

1. Do you agree with Lee that we tend to forget our heroes? Do we not have enough heroes?
2. Should we have heroes? What are the problems with heroes?
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CREDITS:

This guide was produced by NFB Education. It was written by Rachel Collishaw. Rachel has been teaching for 17 years, in Ottawa and in New Zealand. She is a graduate of Queen's University and a recipient of the Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching. She is recognized as a leader in implementing historical thinking in the Ontario curriculum and regularly presents workshops for teachers and administrators on historical thinking and other ways of integrating inquiry into the classroom. She is the co-author of several textbooks and educational resources.