

Commemorate Canada - John McCrae

Overview:

In this activity, students will learn about soldier, doctor, and poet John McCrae and his iconic poem *In Flanders Fields*. After learning about the history and inspiration behind *In Flanders Fields*, students will write their own poem on the theme of war.

Time:

75 mins (can be divided)

Subject/topic:

History, Geography, Social studies,
Language arts

Grade:

4-12

Materials:

- *Canadian Geographic's Guelph's famous son: The legacy of John McCrae* (print or digital)
- *Canadian Geographic's GeoMinute: John McCrae: soldier, surgeon, poet*
- *Canadian Geographic's In Flanders Fields* (print or digital)
- *The Anxious Dead* by John McCrae
- A projector, SMART board, or another way of sharing the article and video
- Devices with internet access for research
- Paper
- Writing utensils

Learning goals

- Students will learn about John McCrae and his impact on Canadian and world history.
- Students will analyze John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*.
- Students will create a poem on the theme of war.

Lesson Description

Minds on:

Students will be introduced to John McCrae and discuss what they already know about this key Canadian figure. They will then read McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields* and learn about the history, inspiration, and impact of this poem and its author.

Action:

Students will read a second John McCrae poem and compare it to *In Flanders Fields*. Students will then choose a theme related to war and write a poem inspired by that theme. Poems will be shared with a classmate for constructive feedback.

Conclusion:

Poems will be shared as a large group and students will reflect on McCrae's inspiration and emotions associated with writing *In Flanders Fields*.

Lesson Implementation

Minds on

Begin the lesson by asking your students what they know about John McCrae. Note the extent of their knowledge. Explain to the class that today, they will be learning about John McCrae, who was born more than 150 years ago but whose impact on Canada and the world is still felt today because of his poem *In Flanders Fields*.

Distribute writing utensils and paper (or electronic devices). Have your students read John McCrae's poem using the image featured in the *Canadian Geographic* online article *In Flanders Fields* (or distribute printed copies). Ask students to note answers to the following questions as they read the poem:

- When do you think this poem was written?
- What was McCrae's possible inspiration?
- Why has this poem become a symbol for Remembrance Day?
- How does the point of view used in the poem affect its impact?
- What emotions are brought up by this poem?

Next, as a class or individually, read the *Canadian Geographic* articles *Guelph's famous son: The legacy of John McCrae* and *In Flanders Field*, and watch the *GeoMinute: John McCrae: soldier, surgeon, poet*. Ask students to note things they find important or interesting and create a class list. Ask them to revisit their answers from the previous activity. Do they feel differently about how they answered?

Action

Students will now have the opportunity to write their own poem. First, have them read another John McCrae poem, *The Anxious Dead*. Ask them to compare it to *In Flanders Fields*. What is similar and different in content, structure, word choice, and emotions evoked? Does one poem affect them more than the other?

Students will be writing a poem on the theme of war. Ask students to choose a theme from the suggestions below. The poem can be in the form of their choosing



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Connection to the Canadian Geography Framework:

Concepts of Geographic Thinking

- Interrelationships
- Geographic perspective

Inquiry Process

- Communicate
- Reflect and respond
- Evaluate and draw conclusions

Geospatial Skills

N/A

(e.g., haiku, blank verse, free verse, rhyme). Alternatively, the teacher can instruct students in which form their poem should be written if a certain type is being taught. Students should think about what inspires them about their theme and what emotions, images, and impact they hope to achieve with their poem. Encourage students to research images and stories relating to their theme as inspiration. For younger students, suggest some kid-friendly websites or have a selection of pre-selected images and videos to show.

Possible themes:

- Remembrance Day
- Soldiers
- Families on the homefront
- Poppies
- Loss
- Separation
- War
- Peace
- Hope

Have students share their poems with a partner. Students can discuss how the poems made them feel and offer constructive feedback.

Conclusion and Consolidation

Once students are comfortable with the final copies of their poems, ask if any students would like to read them to the class and share how they felt writing them. As an exit ticket, ask students to write an answer to the following prompt: How do you think John McCrae felt when writing *In Flanders Fields*?

Extend your geographical thinking

- Students can use the map journal in the *Canadian Geographic* online article, [Mapping John McCrae's life beyond the battlefield](#) to learn more about John McCrae.
- Using Google Earth, students can virtually visit the [McCrae House](#) and the [Essex Farm Cemetery](#).
- Students can read other poems written during and about wartime from different eras.

Modifications

- Requirements for student poems can be adapted based on needs.
- Extension: Have students create a visual art piece to accompany their poem.
- Teachers can have poem templates and graphic organizers to help guide students' writing.
- Teachers can choose one theme for the entire class.



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Assessment Opportunities

Students can be assessed on the following:

- Reflections on In Flanders Fields
- Discussions throughout the lesson
- The writing process (e.g. drafts, revisions, developing, classifying and organizing ideas)
- Final poems
- Exit tickets

Assessment as learning: Students exchange their poems and offer peer feedback.

Sources and additional resources

- McCrae House
- Essex Farm Cemetery
- The Canadian Encyclopedia: John McCrae
- *Canadian Geographic*, Mapping John McCrae's life beyond the battlefield
- *Canadian Geographic*, Guelph's famous son: The legacy of John McCrae (print or digital)
- *Canadian Geographic's* GeoMinute: John McCrae: soldier, surgeon, poet
- *Canadian Geographic's* In Flanders Fields (print or digital)
- The Anxious Dead by John McCrae
- Veterans Affairs Canada: John McCrae