

What is it for? Was *Flanders'* glorification of death in time of war solely a patriotic gesture? No. All poets are trying to work out for themselves their own true feelings. McCrae is working out for himself a means of preparation for death. Indeed, a few months before he died, McCrae was thought to be suffering from depression. It would go too far to say that he had lost faith with those who died, but perhaps not too far to say he certainly despairs for them. Prescott writes that "After the battle of Ypres he was never again the optimistic man with the infectious smile. His friends spoke of his change in temperament in subdued voices, feeling, as one said, that an "icon had been broken."<sup>1</sup>

McCrae was a church-going man and is recognized as having a profound faith. Yet the poetry is remarkable in that despite being steeped in death, only two poems make an explicit claim that there is an afterlife: *The Dying of Pere Pierre* and *The Dead Master*. Prescott says that "He never seems to have questioned Christianity,"<sup>1</sup> but perhaps, once again, it is in his poetry that McCrae is most honest.

This poet/soldier/doctor conceived of nobly won death as its own reward, that the dying soldier achieves perfection. And 91 years after his death, playing that very old death-soaked game of looking for posthumous clues, it seems as if McCrae achieved it, dying of pneumonia — in fact declaring that he "knew it was the end"<sup>1</sup> — and provoking an outpouring of grief across the empire. As McCrae foretold in the last line of *The Pilgrims*: "And this was death." The point is made again with the poppy every November 11th.

**Shane Neilson MD**  
Family physician  
Guelph, Ont.

#### REFERENCES

1. Prescott JF. *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae*. Guelph (ON): Guelph Historical Society; 2003.
2. MacPhail, A. *In Flanders Fields and other poems by Lieut.-Col John McCrae, MD with an essay in character*. Toronto (ON): William Briggs; 1919.
3. Macphail A (ed). *The book of sorrow*. London (UK): Oxford University Press; 1916.
4. Graves D. *A crown of life: The world of John McCrae*. St. Catharines (ON): Vanwell Publishing Limited; 1997.

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.091789

#### POETRY

## Sons and mothers

Little Ali falls from his tree  
Hard grounded by Sir Isaac's gravity.  
His Afghan mother bears him to Grace Emergency.  
Slender arm greensticked  
Split his ripe cherry lip  
Nose bloodied, his lashes tear dipped.  
English makes him old, her young  
She who was once the harness maker's most beautiful daughter  
Now greyed by worry and by war.  
Lip stitched, face washed, arm in a plaster sleeve  
Mother and son, hand in hand, hand in sling  
Take their leave.

That Kandahar day  
Zach Barkman is blown from life's tree  
He of Patricia's own Canadian Infantry  
She who was once granddaughter to an Empress Queen  
But all our Queen's medics and all our Queen's men  
Can not bring Barkman to life again.  
Nor can all the acred lowland poppies  
Nor a single highland piper  
Make the pain go.  
On the low road to Shilo  
Of his fathers love begotten  
Baby Barkman rocks, anchored to his corded roots  
He can not hold his mother's hand, yet  
Hercules will gently bear the fallen father home  
Under a blood red leaf.  
And ancient Eden's apple tree  
Is lifted up again.

**Larry Reynolds MD**  
Professor  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Man.

