

Reviews / Comptes rendus

IN FLANDERS FIELDS VISUALIZED

In Flanders Fields: The Story of the Poem by John McCrae. Linda Granfield. Illus. Janet Wilson. Lester Publishing, 1995. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-65-5.

Decried by modern critics as maudlin and jingoistic, McCrae's poem nevertheless remains the most recognized piece of Canadian writing to emerge from the First World War. It was praised by contemporaries as the finest war poem in any language, and has been committed to memory by generations of Canadian schoolchildren. Even eighty years after it was first published, the rondeau still retains a hold on the imagination thanks to its strong metre and powerful images.

In a beautifully produced book, Linda Granfield has provided a biography, not only of John McCrae, but of his famous poem as well. The description of the Guelph, Ontario native's life, both before the war and on the Western Front, is clear and concise, as are the details of the soldiers' life in the trenches. Her account of the poem's creation and its considerable legacy is also useful in putting "In Flanders Fields" in context. Granfield's historical sketch is enlivened by photographs, sketches, and ephemera from the period.

Janet Wilson's illustrations give the book its power. Each line of the poem has its own full-page illustration, and Wilson succeeds admirably in conveying far more of the war experience than McCrae's fifteen lines did. Her choice of images, from a grieving mother clutching the fateful telegram in her soldier-son's bedroom ("and now we lie / In Flanders Fields") to Canadian soldiers going over the top in the pre-dawn gloom ("Take up our quarrel with the foe"), is almost always unerring. The opening tableau, a blaze of poppies entwined around barbed wire, is particularly striking, and only one illustration, of larks flying over the burning city of Ypres, misses the mark.

Critics of the immediate postwar years were fond of asserting that "In Flanders Fields" could not be improved upon. With this book, Wilson's illustrations have done just that. By using McCrae's lines as windows into the war experience, they have given the poem much greater breadth than it ever had. They take what was only implied or suggested by the poet, and render those sentiments in vivid and very human scenes.

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