

The McCraes of Guelph

By Rev. R. G. MacBeth, M. A.

The Poet's Mother

The passing the other day at her home in Guelph, Ontario, of Mrs. David McCrae, mother of Colonel John McCrae, the famous poet who wrote "In Flanders Fields" gives rise to many thoughts. It was my privilege to know the family in their own home. And I have amongst my prized possessions a very beautiful letter sent to me by Mrs. McCrae, on behalf of herself and her husband, in far too kind appreciation of something I had written in a Toronto paper regarding their famous son. The letter, in faultless English, reveals a talent which no doubt came out in fuller splendour in her author-son, but at the same time it breathes the exquisite reticence which is characteristic of a certain type of Scottish mind and which almost disclaims merit in one's own folk. Mrs. McCrae was herself a gifted woman. She had splendid conversational powers and possessed a faculty for public address which made her one of the most effective speakers on the missionary and patriotic platform in Canada. Doubtless the loss of her son told heavily upon her, and here again is an example of the toll the war exacted from the older people who were in perpetual strain and suspense at home.

The Poet's Letters

It is interesting to know that Colonel John McCrae wrote home regularly throughout his life time, and that the tremendous stress of his work in war-time did not prevent the flow of his correspondence with his mother. His war letters commenced from South Africa, where he went as a combatant with the artillery. For he came of a race that, if necessity arises, can fight as well as pray. His father, Colonel David McCrae, albeit he is an elder of the kirk and a right good elder too, can fight for a principle with tremendous zeal either in a church court or on the field. McCrae, the elder, was a well-known artillery commander in the Canadian militia, and though along to three score and ten, raised and trained a field battery and took it overseas in the late war. So John McCrae, with his father's training around him and the tales of Highland gallantry part of his early education, took to the soldier life naturally enough. All his letters to his mother from the various battle fronts are delightfully spontaneous and natural. There is no indication that these were written, as some were, with the public in view. They were never intended for publication as some letters evidently were. But they are classic in their language and splendid in their descriptive power. He writes much of animals and flowers amid the carnage of war. His horse "Bonfire" and his dog "Bonneau" crop up here and there all along the line of his correspondence. For he loves the animals and the flowers. His great poem glorifies the spot in Flanders "where poppies grow between the crosses." His poetic power came out often in the apparent prose of his letters. In one letter he is telling his mother about shells and describing the difference between them. Once he writes, "The large shrapnel—air-burst—have a double explosion, as if a giant shook a wet sail for two flaps." One can hardly imagine a more vivid way of putting it. Verily the more we read them the more we realize how much we are under abiding obligation to the poet's mother for preserving his sweetly humorous, nobly pathetic and splendidly illuminating letters.

The Poet's Habits

Perhaps I should call this paragraph "the poet's creed," but probably it is safe to say that a man's life habits are the outcome of his creed. "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he," is the word of the greatest Book. John McCrae was

brought up carefully in a somewhat strict but affectionate home. His father and mother both saw to that. And he never forsook the path he began to tread early in life. His biographer says: "He was an indefatigable church-goer." Once when a boy he wrote from Edinburgh, "On Sabbath went to service four times." And, referring to McCrae, there is a letter extant from a chaplain in which "a certain mild wonder is expressed at the regularity in attendance of an officer of field rank." On Easter Sunday, 1915, McCrae wrote: "We had a church parade this morning, the first service since our arrival in France. Truly, if the dead rise not we are of all men most miserable." On the funeral service of a friend he wrote: "Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God—what a great summary that is." On many occasions he officiated in the absence of the chaplains. And at the memorial service in Montreal, where McCrae had been one of the most famous and well-beloved medical men, Professor McNaughton very beautifully said: "He never lost the simple faith of his childhood. He was so sure about the main things, the vast things, the indispensable things, of which all formulated faiths are but a more or less stammering expression, that he was content with the rough embodiment in which his ancestors had loved to bring those great realities to bear as beneficent and propulsive forces upon their own and their children's minds and consciences." To his students once John McCrae quoted the legend from a picture to him "the most suggestive picture in the world": "What I spent I had, what I saved I lost, what I gave I have,"—a splendid declaration of faith. And his services to the end attest its reality. To my mind his grave in Boulogne is one of the citidals of the nation.

The Poet's Father

I knew Colonel David McCrae first of all in the family, meeting him at some General Assembly and travelling with him at the week-end to spend Sunday at the homestead and take the services in the home church. David McCrae was and is an alert, clear-eyed man with florid complexion, which also was part of his famous son's equipment. It is interesting to read Sir Andrew McPhail's account of his meeting with McCrae, the elder. It was on the Thames on one June evening. And McPhail says: "A man of middle age was standing by. He wore the flashings of a Lieutenant-Colonel and for his badges the Artillery Grenades. He seemed a friendly man; and under the influence of the moment, which he also surely felt, I spoke to him.

"'A fine river,'—that was a safe remark.

"'But I know a finer.'

"'Abana and Pharpar?' I put the stranger to the test.

"'No,' he said. 'The St. Lawrence is not of Damascus.' He had answered to the sign, and he looked at my patches. 'I have a son in France myself, he said. 'His name is McCrae.'

"'Not John McCrae?'

"'John McCrae is my son.' Then I saw the resemblance."

David McCrae, strong and clear in his own faith, has been through the heavy casualties of war. He has another son, a very brilliant physician and a collaborator with Sir William Osler in medical publications. He has also a married daughter living in the West. But they are both away from home and our sympathies go out to him in his great losses, within a few months, first of the singer of the immortal "In Flanders Fields," and now of the noble woman who was his true helpmate throughout the years.

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