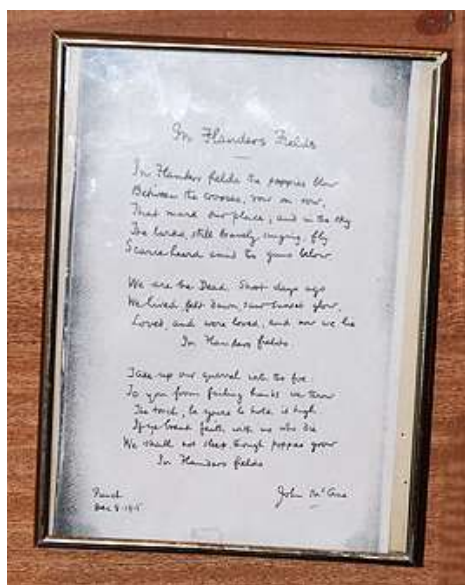


# IN FLANDERS FIELDS

Jean Cameron-Smith  
(1871-1942)

On the wall of the Township of Nipissing Museum, southwest of North Bay, Ontario, hangs a framed photocopy of the manuscript of John McCrae's iconic poem *In Flanders Fields*. The original document, part of a collection of McCrae's papers, is said to have reached this remote northern Ontario spot among the personal effects of Nursing Sister Jean Cameron-Smith. Family lore holds that Cameron-Smith worked with Lieutenant Colonel McCrae (1872-1918) and that it was she who "sent his famous poem to a publisher and from there it became a piece of WWI history".<sup>1</sup>



Born September 22, 1871 in Bathurst Township, to Robert Ralph Cameron-Smith and Helen Mason, Jean grew up on the family farm and spent several years as a rural schoolteacher before graduating from the Nurses Training School at Kingston General Hospital. From 1895 until 1902 she served as an Anglican Church medical missionary in Japan helping the church develop a training school for nurses. While Jean was in Japan her father died and her mother and siblings<sup>2</sup> moved from Perth to live with her uncle, Robertson Mason, at Christian Valley near Nipissing Village in the Township of Powassan, Ontario<sup>3</sup>.

On her return from Japan Jean briefly returned to school teaching, but when war broke out in Europe, she made her way to England where her brother, Dr. Andrew Harvey Cameron-Smith (1882-1947), was already serving with the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC)<sup>4</sup>. On February 24, 1915, at London, Jean Cameron-Smith enlisted as a Nursing Sister in the CAMC. When she did so she lied about her age, giving a birth date of September 22, 1876, because 38 years was the cut-off age for women accepted into the Army Nursing Corps. Even at 38 she would have been among the oldest nurses to enlist with the CMAC during World War One; at her true age of 44 she was very likely the oldest<sup>5</sup>. Of her monthly salary of \$112, she authorized \$17 be paid directly to her widowed mother in Canada.

In mid-March of 1915 Cameron-Smith was taken on the strength of CMAC No.1 General Hospital at Netheravon, Wiltshire, in southwest England. She worked at the Netheravon until May 1, 1915 when she was posted to the Defense Medical Service Office. Over the next seventeen

<sup>1</sup> 'WW1 Veterans Remember', By Doug Mackey - *Heritage Perspectives*, September 15, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Jean (1871-1942), Alfred (b.1880), Andrew Harvey (1882-1947) & Margarite (b.1891)

<sup>3</sup> Nipissing Village is 40 kilometers southwest of the City of North Bay, Ontario.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Cameron-Smith had enlisted on September 28, 1914.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Cameron-Smith's birth was apparently not registered in 1872, but in 1933 she filed a declaration, sworn to by her mother, to the effect that she had been born in Bathurst Township, Lanark County, on September 22, 1871.

months, in the capacity of historian of the Canadian Army Nursing Service, she visited hospitals at Ramsgate, Margate, Taplow, Orpington, Shorncliffe and Buxton. On October 9, 1916 Cameron-Smith was assigned to 'duty overseas' and made a similar tour of hospitals staffed by Canadian nurses in France.

Returning to England in March 1917 she was assigned to the Red Cross Special (Shell Shock<sup>6</sup>) Hospital at Buxton, Derbyshire. She worked at Buxton until about May when she was granted leave and travelled home to Canada. On June 12, 1917 Cameron-Smith presented a paper, entitled 'The Preparation of Nurses for Military Work' at the 10<sup>th</sup> annual conference of The Canadian Society of Superintendents of Training Schools for Nurses assembled in Montreal. In their August 1917 report on the conference the *American Journal of Nursing* titles Cameron-Smith with the rank of 'Matron'. Promotion to that rank, equivalent to Captain, did not however become official until September 28<sup>th</sup> when Cameron-Smith was back in England at the CMAC Depot. With the promotion came an increase in salary from \$112 to \$155 per month.



*Matron Jean Cameron-Smith (1871-1942)*

On October 17, 1917 Cameron-Smith was briefly attached to the strength of CAMC No. 16 General Hospital at Orpington near London<sup>7</sup>, before being sent to CAMC Convalescent Hospital Bearwood at Workingham, Berkshire, then back at No. 16 Hospital and then to No. 14 Hospital at Eastbourne in East Sussex in December 1917. After nine months at Eastbourne Cameron-Smith was posted to No.13 General Hospital at Hastings effective October 4, 1918. While serving at Hastings she was awarded the Royal Red Cross Medal 1<sup>st</sup> Class on April 9, 1919. The dress she wore to her investiture by King George V is also in the collection of the Nipissing Township Museum.

The war ended in November 1918 but care for the victims of the conflict continued and Matron Jean Cameron-Smith followed her calling to the end. On May 17, 1919 she was taken on the strength of the CAMC casualty convoy command and assigned to the care of troops returning to Canada via the RMS *Carmania*<sup>8</sup>. On July 5, 1919 she landed in Canada and on July 17<sup>th</sup> was discharged from the Canadian Army at the age of 48.

Cameron-Smith was not 'demobilized' with the bulk of the Canadian Army, rather she was medically 'discharged' "*for general disabilities*"<sup>9</sup> which made her unfit for further service. Specifically, she was suffering from synovitis of the knees, probably associated with arthritis. In June of 1915, little more than a month after she had enlisted with the CAMC, she "*slipped on a tile floor and fell on both knees*". She was off duty "*unofficially*" for two weeks and then "*had to*

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<sup>6</sup> 'Shell Shock' equates today's diagnosis of Post Traumatic Shock Syndrome (PTSD).

<sup>7</sup> Originally known as Ontario Military Hospital.

<sup>8</sup> RMS *Carmania* was a Cunard liner converted to armed merchant cruiser early in the war and by 1919 was serving as a troop transport.

<sup>9</sup> Discharge medical report July 17, 1919.

use a stick for two months". In March of 1916 her injuries had again confined her to "bed for three weeks while on leave". From that point on she had frequently resorted to her 'sticks' and had "received medical attention from time to time, having to lay-up for a few days at a time ... the condition affected by damp and cold".<sup>10</sup> For nearly five years however, despite her age, chronic pain and reduced mobility, Matron Jean Cameron-Smith had 'soldiered on' keeping faith with the Army Nurse credo of 'never complain, never quit'.

Back in Canada Jean Cameron-Smith still did not quit, put her feet up and rest those battered knees. Within a year she was back at work as Matron at the Edom Hospital near North Battleford, Saskatchewan. She was 50 years of age but being less than honest about her age had become a habit. When they hired her, the Edom Hospital administrators had probably been misled about her age, because she told the 1921 census enumerator she was only 46.<sup>11</sup>

Exactly when Jean Cameron-Smith finally retired is uncertain, probably around 1930, but when she did so at to Christian Valley, Nipissing Township, Ontario, with little reduced energy. A poet in her own right, her readings and lectures at Red Cross and Women's Institute meetings, about the war and nursing in general, were widely popular along the south shore of Lake Nipissing and beyond. She also organized the first chapter of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE) in Powassan and was instrumental in the founding of the first Powassan Library.

Matron Jean Cameron-Smith, aged 71 years, was killed on the night of March 28, 1942 in a fire that destroyed her home, Burnbrae Cottage, at Christian Valley. The cottage and all its contents were completely destroyed, including Cameron-Smith's papers which are said to have included a manuscript copy of John McCrae's iconic poem *In Flanders Fields*.

Cameron-Smith may well have known soldier-poet John McCrae, but that she played a role in publishing *In Flanders Fields*, or brought a manuscript copy back to Christian Valley, is an unsubstantiated part of the legend of a remarkable woman.

The famous poem is believed to have been written in early May 1915, a month before McCrae left the trenches when he was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel and transferred to CAMC No.3 General Hospital then at Dannes-Camiers, France. No.3 General Hospital and McCrae moved to Boulogne, France, in January 1916 where he served until his death there from pneumonia and meningitis on January 28, 1918. Between October 1916 and March 1917 Cameron-Smith was on an inspection tour of front line hospitals in France and probably met McCrae at Boulogne at that time. Because Cameron-Smith was something of a poet herself, that McCrae could have given her a manuscript copy of *In Flanders Fields* is conceivable, but that she was in possession of a larger collection of his papers seems most unlikely. McCrae died nine months after Cameron-Smith left France and returned to



Lt. Col. John McCrae (1872-1918)

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<sup>10</sup> The doctor who conducted her discharge examination also noted that as a child Cameron-Smith had contracted measles, chicken pox and whooping cough; had suffered from dysentery in 1899 (while she was in Japan); and had been diagnosed twice with pneumonia, once at age 12 and again at age 32.

<sup>11</sup> Although she had been an Anglican missionary and gave her church affiliation as Anglican on her army records, in the 1921 census she is recorded as a Roman Catholic. This could be a census error or she could have converted.

her postings in England. That she played any part in publishing *In Flanders Fields* seems even more unlikely. The poem was first published in *Punch Magazine* on December 8, 1915, nearly a year before Cameron-Smith went to France. Furthermore, given that photocopy technology was not developed until the late 1950s, using that technology to copy a document destroyed in a 1942 fire would have been impossible.<sup>12</sup>

Jean Cameron-Smith's grave at Powassan, and that of her brother Major Andrew Harvey Cameron-Smith, went unmarked for more than 60 years until the local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion had stones, funded by the Legion's Last Post Fund, erected in September 2007.<sup>13</sup>

- **Ron W. Shaw (2014)**

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<sup>12</sup> That McCrae could have given Cameron-Smith a copy of the poem during a visit to England remains a possibility. Surviving manuscript copies of McCrae's famous poem are in the collection of Library and Archives Canada and the Osler Library at McGill University.

<sup>13</sup> 1876 is engraved on the stone as her year of birth vs 1871 as sworn to by her mother in the 1933 declaration.