John McCrae and his masterwork, “In Flanders Fields”

By Jeff Ball, Theta Xi '79

Prominently featured in Zeta Psi's Pledge manual is a grainy picture of a rather serious-looking fellow with a penetrating gaze. It is the same picture that hangs in the front hall of the Theta Xi chapter of Zeta Psi in Toronto, where it *is* flanked by 2 bronze plaques, bearing the names of the 25 Theta *Xis* who died in the Two World Wars.

Why is this picture of Dr. John McCrae, Theta Xi, 1894, given such prominence in our fraternity's pledge manual and in Theta Xi's hall of honour? The simple answer is "He wrote a poem: 'In Flanders' Fields'" – but there is more to it than that.

In the pages that follow, I hope to illuminate for those interested in the history of our fraternity something of the character of John McCrae and to suggest why this poem is relevant to us today.

For the Zete chapters in Toronto and Montreal particularly, the First War was a turning point in our fraternity's history. Zeta Psi had been at the top of the fraternity world at both campuses since Theta Xi's historic founding in 1879 and Alpha Psi's establishment in 1883. We had weathered strong opposition from establishment and radical alike, but we had thrived and grown and led the fraternity movements at Toronto and McGill through the turn of the century into the oughts and the teens.

The First War posed a major threat to our success. From the declaration of war in August 1914, the young men of Canada flocked from every walk of life to enlist. By war's end, approximately one fifth of Canada's male population had entered the service of King and country.

Zeta Psi's two Canadian chapters were no exceptions to this rule, signing up *en masse* right from the start:

> The brothers of Theta Xi are proud to say that the only cessation in the chapter's history was when the entire active chapter went to war in 1916 and the Chapter House was rented to the Royal Flying Corps.
>
> In Alpha Psi's case, reduced numbers forced them to move from a rented house to a small apartment for a while. A handful of actives, awaiting their orders to ship out overseas, barely kept the flame of fraternity burning in Montreal.

In The Story of Zeta Psi, published in 1932, we read:

> *It was in February, 1916, that Kenelm Winslow wrote from McGill: "The Chapter* continues *to grow smaller each week, and it*

is almost certain that, if the war lasts much longer, Alpha Psi, as an active chapter, will cease to exist."

The very next month, March, 1916, the chapter letter from the Theta Xi read: "For *the last time until after the war the Theta Xi Chapter sends greetings to* our *sister chapters and bids farewell to the Circle of Zeta Psi. The call of* our *country has been heard by the whole chapter, and in a few months there won't be anyone left.... There are now almost a hundred Zetes from the Theta Xi in active service, a record far ahead of any other fraternity at the University..."*

To put some American perspective on this, hear what the Phi Alpha of the day, Howard D. Briggs of the Epsilon Chapter (at Brown University), wrote back to Theta Xi:

"...Our *sympathy for* you *at this time is all the keener because fifty years ago some of* our *sister chapters here were undergoing, for country and humanity, the same trial that* you *are undergoing today.*

History affords no finer example of vigour, fortitude *and* true *patriotism than the action of* our *two Canadian chapters in this, a* crucial *time for the whole world. We are glad indeed that this is such stuff* as *Zetes are made of.*

I cannot close without being so *personal* as *to recall the experience of my own chapter, which enlisted to a man during* our *Civil War. An experience which* seemed *a calamity at the time has proved to be one of* our *noblest memories."*

Brother Briggs put it well. Despite the deaths of 19 Theta Xi brothers, and 27 of Alpha Psi, the calamity of the Great War indeed proved a noble memory for the two Canadian chapters.

Upon returning, Alpha Psi re-established itself as the premier fraternity at McGill and soon built their first owned chapter house – a magnificent memorial to the war record of the chapter – which was opened in 1924.

A core group of Theta Xi's returning officers chose Zeta Psi over beginning their careers for the first crucial year or two. They reopened the chapter house, rushed a new class, re-established the chapter, fully renovated the House they had bought in 1910 and rose again to the top of the heap at U of T.

Our two chapters, generally, have thrived but the houses we built to last - or rebuilt - are no longer with us.

Alpha Psi's was sold, tragically, when the chapter was temporarily closed during tough times in the 1970s. Just after the Chapter was re-established in 1979, and as negotiations were coming to a head, the building was gutted by fire and the dream of

the Alpha Psi again presiding at 3637 University Avenue was dashed.

Theta Xi's is a happier story. Though the Chapter House owned since 1910 at 118 St. George Street was expropriated in the 1960s by the University, it was not before four appeals were fiercely fought that the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Theta Xi was entitled to twice the University's initial offer. Thus in 1966 a new property even nicer than the old was purchased, just north of campus, and out of the reach of the University's eminent domain.

But as it turns out, the one most lasting memorial to the Zeta Psi brothers who gave their lives in the First War – or in any war - is a simple, 15 line poem.

It is not just dear to us in Zeta Psi, in fact, but is a lasting memorial for all the British, Americans and Europeans who fought on the Allied side.

That poem, ofcourse, is "In Flanders Fields", by Brother John Alexander McCrae, Theta Xi '94.

Let me give you an introduction to Brother McCrae, and to the times in which he lived.

He was born in Guelph, about 50 miles from Toronto, on November 30, 1872 to a middle-class family of Scottish immigrants.

McCrae inherited much from his family background - not money - but a feeling for service to his country (his father was a decorated military man), a love of literature (his mother was uncommonly well-educated for a woman of her time), and a deep religious devotion (the family was rock-ribbed Presbyterian).

To this he added a keen intelligence and wide-ranging academic curiosity. He won a scholarship to the University of Toronto at the age of16 and qualified to teach high school mathematics and English before graduation.

At first it looked as if the young McCrae would study for the Presbyterian ministry, but his aptitude for biology won out and he enrolled in natural sciences.

He did very well academically, but had to withdraw from university for 2 years due to illness. He had always been troubled by asthma, and the polluted air of 1890s Toronto - much worse than it is today due to coal fired heating and gas illumination - was no help.

Sadly, his first girlfriend succumbed to disease (probably tuberculosis) just before he returned to the University of Toronto. The shock of her death was reflected in the poetry he began to write in the next few years, showing the struggle between his rather strict, Calvinist understanding of Christianity and the attractions of love, materialism and

worldly pleasures. For the rest of his life, McCrae apparently never gave another thought to marriage.

He threw himself into his studies, and into the activities of the Theta Xi chapter of Zeta Psi.

McCrae in Zeta Psi

The Theta Xi Chapter is fortunate to have intact many of its records reaching back to the founding of the Chapter in 1879, so I was able to dig up the minute books from the 1890s to see what John McCrae actually did while an undergraduate, active Zete.

Imagine my surprise when the first item I read from October 19, 1891 that "Bro. Armour expressed Mr. McCrae's regrets at not being able to join the chapter."

I thought "My God! have we been claiming John McCrae as a Zete all these years for naught?" But it was his older brother Tom who declined membership at first, though he was initiated a year later, on November 5, 1892.

John McCrae was proposed for membership almost immediately upon his return to U of T, undoubtedly through his brother's influence, and he was initiated on November 18, 1893. This is confirmed by his signature in Theta Xi's register for that year.

Both McCraes were "made elder" within scant months of joining the Theta Xi Chapter, chiefly because each had joined in his last year of his undergraduate studies - but John particularly remained an active participant in the life of the chapter. From the minute book of the Theta Xi chapter, we see him presenting readings in meetings and discussing the business of the Chapter, including the planning of the 1895 International Convention in Toronto with his brothers.

At a meeting in November 1895, for instance, he was reported to have sung a "sentimental song" - so sentimental that he felt compelled to preface the performance with an apology. In February 1897 McCrae was honoured to propose "the toast to Tau Kappa Phi at the annual banquet."

At what seems to be his last meeting before leaving for McGill for his post-graduate studies, McCrae urged the brothers to keep the secrets of Zeta Psi and to "keep all other fraternity men at a distance."

Meetings

Zete meetings were in some ways different one hundred years ago. There were many more songs (mostly humorous) and musical presentations - most brothers either could play an instrument or

sing, and there seems always to have been a piano in the meeting room. As well, there were literary readings and debates among the brothers. Some of the debating subjects are no longer heard of:

> Resolved that the British Empire be reconstituted as an Imperial Federation.

Some retain support only among the purse-lipped social engineers, bureaucracy fanatics - and the government of Ontario:

> Resolved that the government should have a monopoly in the traffic of distilled liquors.

Some, however, sound familiar to a modern Canadian ear:

> Resolved that the French Canadian element is prejudicial to the federation.

And some would ring a bell with any man:

> Resolved that marriage is a failure. (This resolution carried)

But the meetings held during John McCrae's time in Toronto reflect fraternity business being transacted in a way that sounds quite familiar today. Names of prospective brothers were suggested, names withdrawn, names passed, and brothers initiated one by one throughout the year, not all in group as is our custom today.

Many of their routines are our routines. Many of their problems are ours today, in character if not in scope.

Here are just a few items of business from 120 years ago in the Theta Xi chapter:

> "It was resolved to brace up the initiation ceremonies by rehearsals and making the officers familiar with their parts." (The executive still needs reminders about this.)
>
> "Bros. Moore and Glassco gave good excuses for their order from the Grand Chapter" convention. (I'll bet they were good excuses - Conventions in those days seemed to be nothing much more than a 2-day, mid-winter drunk!)
>
> "It was resolved that the floor be stained by the brothers, it being deemed too expensive to employ a man." (The brothers always hate doing the work themselves, but sometimes there's just no money for hired help.)
>
> "Brother Moss having cold feet wished the fires be kept lighted during the week", and "Brother Robinson asked if the [storm] windows had been put up yet." (Complaints about the lousy heat and the storm windows to the stingy House Manager were weekly events when I was active.)

New members were treated with becoming respect:

"Resolved that the neophytes by appointed a committee to clean up the billiard room." (A polite way of getting the new boys to do all the work)

Games of Chance were not unknown:

"Brother Armour was shocked at "the continual gambling permitted in the Chapter, and moved that all gambling be prohibited."

(This motion didn't go far: Brother John McCrae suggested that discussion of the matter be postponed for 4 weeks, which it was, when it was quietly forgotten.)

Sometimes brothers made generous gifts to the Chapter:

"Elder Bros. Clayes, Moran and McAllister came in early in the evening and, having dined downtown, presented the Chapter with several souvenirs in the form of napkins, forks, knives and spoons."

And hardly a meeting went by without a new proposal for charging for use of the billiard table. Should it be 5 cents a cue? 10 cents a game? Free during the week and a quarter a game on weekends? Whatever it was, there was always a new money-raising scheme, because - surprise, surprise - the brothers were behind on their bills!

(Of course, that never happens today)

Then, as now, the Treasurer's report was a highlight of proceedings. Active fees were $12.50 a year and Initiation fees $5.00 -- and it was sometimes difficult to collect these sizable sums.

"Legal proceedings are being threatened by Michie's [the liquor purveyors]. Brothers are urged to settle their accounts with the Gamma."

"The Gamma said that the chapter had never been in a better financial condition - which wasn't saying much."

"The Gamma read a most disheartening report."

So. Nothing much different from the 1890s to the 2010s! Indeed, one of the most common features of the Theta Xi minutes in those days was evidence of an ongoing fascination with and devotion to one thing held dear then and now.

Beer

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A series of entries in the fall and winter of 1892 show the chapter much absorbed with the beer question.

Some spoilsport "Moved that beer be absent from rooms except on Saturday" - fortunately this proposal was defeated.

An amendment proposed "that beer be provided during the week and a book be on hand to register names" of those consuming. This motion was passed but nothing much seems to have been done in consequence.

"Moved that beer be reduced to 10 cents a bottle" -Nov12

"Usual discussion of the beer question". Nov 26

In December, "Brother Gilmour inquired of Elder Brother Armour about his promised keg of beer." After prolonged discussion, "Elder Brother Armour promised 5 dozen ale to chapter after Christmas in early January".

But, on Feb. 4, "The Gamma was commissioned "to interview Elder Brother Armour as to his forgotten promise."

And - when it came to their beer - the brothers were no respecters of their elders and betters: In March, "A motion of censure was passed against Brother Armour for failing to supply the promised brew."

Two years later, in 1895, there was a debate on whether new men should be admitted into the Chapter House at all before initiation (a motion which failed). Some brothers felt the secrets of the fraternity might be compromised by such action, but our by-then Elder Brother Gilmour irreverently stated that "beer was the secret of our society."

Beer was not just consumed on chapter premises, either. Brothers were also warned by the Phi not to "parade the streets in an unfit condition" when coming to the chapter from other entertainments. This warning was issued more or less quarterly during the 1890s.

The Phi himself was a bit of a handful at one meeting: "The Phi fined himself three times, first 25 cents for inebriation, next 50 cents for giggling and, last, $1.00 for emitting strange sounds."

The brothers were frequently in high spirits at the House and elsewhere:

> The fourteenth annual banquet was deemed "undoubtedly a most successful evening" at the meeting of Feb 25, 1893...

But on Mar 18: "Most Worthy reported that the expenses of the banquet, including breakages, were very heavy...Brother Gilmour promised to have the window mended."

Sporting events were planned:

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> "Brother Boyd moved that the active brothers should play a game of hockey against the elders - a splendid scheme if we could get 7 actives who could skate and stay sober."

And brothers went on road trips:

> "The meeting then came to an end with the singing of the closing ode. Twelve brothers only [were] standing in the Circle, the absent brothers probably drunk and incapable at Kingston."

This was the lively Zeta Psi world of one hundred years ago in which John McCrae studied and socialized.

He graduated in 1894 with a B.A., majoring in Natural Sciences and followed his brother Tom into U of T's Medical School, graduating in 1898 with a gold medal in pathology and physiology.

After moving to Montreal in 1899 for further medical studies, he volunteered for service in the Boer War after obtaining permission to postpone his fellowship at McGill.

He embarked for South Africa in December 1899, where he served with distinction as Lieutenant in charge of a battery section - not as a medical officer, as I always had thought. Apparently he also had the good fortune to meet Rudyard Kipling, one of Britain's best known poets and a staunch proponent of the imperialist policies that were driving the Boer War.

McCrae returned to Montreal a year later, singing the new century in with three of his Alpha Psi brethren who were taking the same ship. He resumed his research at McGill's Medical School, working towards a specialty in pathology - the study of the causes of disease and death which involves dealing with scores of autopsies and cadavers.

All too soon he would have to use that specialty.

McCrae had felt the power and size of the Empire during his time in South Africa, and found the actual fighting exhilarating, even as he was bored by the day-to-day grind of soldiering. He was deemed an excellent officer, "the most popular of the lot", and promoted to captain and then to major after returning from the war.

He was also a staunch supporter of the Empire and the Queen who reigned over it. But his true feeling about war - and a

faint foreshadowing of 'In Flanders Fields' can be found in an article he wrote for the Montreal-based University Magazine:

> "In the field there are a thousand things that speak of the cost of war, the cost in treasure; but there *is* an echo, even at home, in the rows of boyish faces, that appear week after week, in the illustrated magazines, with the inscription 'Killed at...', or 'Dead of wounds...' in sickening regularity..."

Yet this gloomy theme of death which infuses most of his poetry was not echoed, by all reports, in McCrae's own public character. He is unfailingly described by his friends and fraternity brothers as charming, jovial, kindly, sparkling.

McCrae's Theta Xi Zete brother Stephen Leacock, Canada's best-known humorist of the first half of this century, described him in the following terms:

> *"No man of our circle worked harder than John McCrae. Yet he seemed to find time for everything, and contrived somehow to fill in the spare moments of a busy life with the reveries of a poet...*
>
> *He was in great demand at Montreal dinner parties...his fund of stories never exhausted ...He was the treasure of his hostess..."*

He had been from the start close to many brothers of the Alpha Psi chapter of the fraternity, as Zeta Psi at McGill produced a truly remarkable number of medical men, and one biographer reports that:

> *"Nearly every Saturday evening John would appear at the zeta Psi house. Although older, he was popular for showing a lot of interest, giving wise advice and telling stories 'as only he could tell them.'"*

Although he remained a devout Presbyterian, he seems to have enjoyed more than the occasional dram with his friends. One of his colleagues received a letter in which McCrae expressed his hope that his friend was "getting a Chair of Drink established at the University of Pittsburgh".

By 1911, McCrae was one of the more senior and respected teachers and physicians in Montreal working at McGill University and the Royal Victoria Hospital - but his busy life was once again to take a military turn.

One day after the British Parliament declared war on Germany in August, 1914, Canada followed suit. Our Prime Minister of the day stated that this separate declaration

> "determines absolutely once and for all that we have passed from the status of the protected colony to that of the participating nation."

McCrae volunteered immediately upon hearing the news and was appointed brigade surgeon to the First Canadian Field Artillery. He trained in England through the fall and winter, while both sides locked themselves into a network of trenches stretching from the Swiss frontier to the North Sea.

By the end of 1914 there was deadlock on the western front.

McCrae was posted to Flanders in April 1915 - just in time for the second battle of Ypres and the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans.

The tale of tragedy that the Great War provides is too overwhelming for a short essay such as this.

Suffice it to say that within McCrae's first two weeks in Flanders he had treated hundreds of soldiers for every type of wound – including the ravages of chlorine and mustard gas - and had buried most of them. It *is* perhaps appropriate for McCrae that the most terrible experience of his life brought forth the best poem he would ever write.

While at U of T, he had written humorous short stories for the Varsity student newspaper - (which was pretty much controlled by Zetes at the time) and for other well-known Canadian periodicals like Saturday Night and the University Magazine.

He seems to have written only 29 poems, writing only (as one author has suggested) "to vent those experiences with which – psychologically- he had not been able to come to terms."

Such as death.

Frequently it was death that prompted him to write poetry - as a young man when his girlfriend died, later in his medical career when his patients died, and particularly when he encountered death on the battlefield.

On the day before he wrote In Flanders Fields, McCrae wrote to his mother:

> "Heavy gunfire again this morning. Lieutenant Helmer was killed at the guns. His diary's last words were, 'It has quieted a little and I shall try to get a good sleep.' I said the Commital Service over him, as well as I could from memory. A soldier's death!
>
> At 3 the Germans attacked, preceded by gas clouds. Fighting went on for an hour and a half, during which their guns hammered heavily with some loss to us. The French lines are very uneasy, and we are correspondingly anxious. The infantry fire was heavy, and we fired incessantly, keeping on into the night."

McCrae was clearly very moved by the death of his friend and fellow officer Lieutenant Helmer, who had been blown to bits by an 8-inch shell. The next day, May 3, 1915, John McCrae wrote ' In Flanders Fields'.

He later said he wrote it for himself and his trenchmates, never really thinking of having the work publicized. However, McCrae was shortly reassigned from the front as Lieutenant-Colonel in charge of medicine at the Number 3 Canadian General Hospital, nicknamed the McGill Zete Hospital) because of the thirteen fellow Zetes he joined on staff.

The work was continuous and demanding, and McCrae was initially reluctant to take any time to submit ' In Flanders Fields' to the London magazines. However, after some convincing by his fellow officers, he did so and the popular newsmagazine Punch published the poem - anonymously - on December 8, 1915.

It became a huge success immediately. Punch was a favourite magazine of the English-speaking soldiers on the Western Front and they copied the poem and quoted it in the trenches. Some sent copies home to their families, who then sent it to others. And so it became famous.

'In Flanders Fields' was printed to great effect in The Circle Of Zeta Psi, our fraternity's own magazine, in March, 1916, and in many other North American periodicals of the time.

Why was this poem so successful? Why has it become the classic poem of war, loss and redemption - and more?

I'm no English professor - but here are a few ideas:

To begin, he creates an idyllic, peaceful backdrop - “In Flanders Fields... where pastoral activities are the norm - “Where poppies blow...”

This pastoral idyll is not what it seems, however. The verdant fields have become graveyards - “Between the crosses, row on row / That mark our place...”

And there is a mad juxtaposition of peace and war - of sweet birdsong and dreadful artillery -'And in the sky, The larks still bravely singing fly / Scarce heard amid the guns below...'

He identifies the speaker, the narrator, as a sort of collective soldier's Everyman - not some warrior prince; not a poetic hero - just 'We...are the Dead.'

And... “We” were young.

This was a very "young" war - the youngest to date, some say. The average age of the recruits and volunteers was 17 to 23 - not the professional soldiers in their late 20s and 30s as in the 19th Century.

And the middle stanza particularly speaks to these young troops, to these green officers, I think…the wasted promise, the fond memories of pre-war life...

'Short days ago, we lived / Felt dawn, saw sunset glow /
Loved and were loved...'

But our narrator knows this is all past ..

'And now we lie in Flanders
Fields...'

McCrae gives a strong feeling that the fighting is for one's own reasons, human reasons, for one's fellow man - not for the King and Country we know McCrae revered, not for some ideal of Glory -

'Take up our quarrel with the
foe...'

All he speaks of is a quarrel - not the battle of right against the beastly Hun – not some great ideological fight – just generically, the quarrel...

He knows that he and his fellows cannot continue, but someone must:
'To you from failing hands we throw / The torch / Be yours to hold
it
high!...'

And because the cause is a good cause, there is a punishment for betraying the dead, for not doing your utmost in the pursuit of this good cause, <u>for not holding that torch high:</u>

'If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep...'

...when the world returns to normal, because it <u>will</u> return to normal...

'Though poppies grow / In Flanders Fields.'

The language is simple - the rhetoric not too high-flown. It is composed of simple, almost austere Anglo-Saxon words - no flowery Latinate adjectives as was the fashion in the Victorian and Edwardian poetry of the time.

The poem was immediately successful - with the military rank and file and with the civilian public as well. 'In Flanders Fields' also received endorsement from the military brass and politicians, being used in recruiting and fundraising for the war effort most successfully in Britain, Canada and later, in 1917, in the U.S. As well.

The military brass liked the message of "Take up our quarrel"... "If ye break faith..." as a way of to keeping the men coming to the trenches, month after month, year after year, in this dreadful war.

Meanwhile, as his poem grew in popularity, John McCrae continued to work in French hospitals or on the front through 1916 and 1917. After the terrible casualties of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, however, his friends say McCrae found it increasingly difficult to face up to the suffering and carnage that he daily was witness to.

His health began to fail - due to exhaustion, depression and the effects of chlorine gas on his asthmatic lungs from the German assaults at Ypres, two years previously.

Through 1916 and 1917, he continued to run the Number 3 Canadian General Hospital, dealing with low morale, bad weather, bureaucratic controversy and the never-ending waves of casualties - particularly from the Battle of the Somme, which involved 3 million combatants over 2-1/2 months.

Of this time, one of McCrae's friends wrote:

> "He felt the war intensely, and it had changed him. Loyal and straightforward as ever, he was no longer the cheery, light-hearted companion of good sayings. Now the war was with him night and day..."

He had continued to insist on living in a tent through the year, like his comrades at the front, rather than in the officers' huts - and it took its toll. He rarely took leave and by the end of 1917, he was just about worn out.

In January 1918 an exhausted McCrae was hospitalized on suspicion of pneumonia and his condition worsened quickly.

On January 28 he died. He was 45 years of age. He was buried with full military honours in Belgium and is memorialized in several places in the towns and churches which lie in Flanders Fields. His birthplace is a museum and the poppy which he used to such great effect in his poem is now internationally recognized as a symbol of remembrance.

Until the 1960s, most Canadian children learned "In Flanders' Fields" in school - until, that is, memories of our fathers' and grandfathers' wartime sacrifice became too politically incorrect for government and educational bureaucrats to countenance. Despite this neglect, the poem continued to hold a special place in the hearts of all Canadians over the age of 40 - and particularly in the hearts of all Canadian Zetes.

And eventually, perhaps as we realized that though we had no First War men left, we did have a huge debt of gratitude to our Second War men - our fathers, and grandfathers - no better way of remembering their sacrifice was to reconsider 'In Flanders Fields'. It is recited, or sung, today - again - at just about every service of Commemoration or Remembrance in North America and Great Britain today.

One of Theta Xi's proudest possessions is a beautiful illumination of "In Flanders' Fields", which was commissioned by a Zete family whose son survived the war but died of influenza in

1920 - too soon to make his life work, as he had pledged, the commemoration of the life of his fellow Zete: John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" is a poem not just for war and remembrance - but for the ages, and for Zeta Psi, because of the universal truths it deals in.

In its short 15 lines, there is much to be mined by us - McCrae's Zete brothers.

In this day and age, war imagery is almost appropriate to describe what we in Zeta Psi are up against. University administrations are often indifferent, but frequently downright hostile. Insurance companies, fire inspectors, police and our neighbours seem to want to put us out of business altogether and are increasingly using their clout to do so.

We face a student body that is - or thinks it is - much more discriminating than in the past. Their money is tight and they believe good jobs will be scarce. We are told they are more worried about their future than any generation before - yet this is a generation that faces the least threat of a major war this century. They are asking hard questions of those of us who have gone before: "What on earth do I want to do with a fraternity? How can I justify the time and expense? What will it do for me?"

McCrae's poem does not give us pat answers. It does not spell out in detail: "Here's what you're joining for" any more than it told its audience 80 years ago 'Here's what we're fighting for". But what "In Flanders Fields" does do is tell us all that whatever is worth doing is worth doing well.

The third stanza is the one that we as elders want you as actives particularly to take heed of. Let us as elders who have gone before exhort you to...

'Take up our quarrel with the foe
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch. Be yours to hold it high!'

Who is the foe today? Not the Germans this time, but just the world outside our mystic circle: the people who do not, cannot or stubbornly will not understand why fraternity is important to us. Secret societies like ours will always attract foes - the ignorant, the pig-headed, the jealous - and sometimes, sadly, we manufacture new adversaries, new enemies, because of our own poor behaviour. To battle our new foe effectively - and to attract the new blood our chapters require to thrive - we must ensure that our behaviour reflects our true selves, so that we may be left free to pursue our lives, guided by the ideals of Zeta Psi.

And what of the torch? How about the light that beams from the five-pointed star of Zeta Psi fellowship? The torch we elders have thrown to you actives provides the light for your own path in Zeta Psi - but it can do much more than that.

If you put the extra effort in and hold that torch high enough, it will provide light, not just to you and your fellow Zetes... but to those who would join us and to others who would strike us down.

Light to a new, sceptical generation of students that is wary as never before of such intangibles as fraternity membership.

Light to our universities that often despise us, our classmates who misunderstand us, our neighbours who are sometimes fed up with us, and our families who sometimes distrust the motives of Zeta Psi.

And there is a warning from us to you undergraduates as well:

If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep...

Some of us elders may seem dead to you - I hope you'll take it as a metaphor - but one way or another, we have passed our beloved Zeta Psi on to you undergraduates.

Much as we grumble from time to time about how much better it was in the old days - and how bad the new generation is - take it with a grain of salt. We know that new men are needed, every year, and new ideas too, for Zeta Psi to thrive. We have put our faith in you - our trust in you - to ensure that these new men are deserving and these new ideas are worthy.

But we shall not sleep unless we know our faith has been well placed. If succeeding generations of Zetes do not grasp that torch and hold it high, our noble order will die.

Unlike the poppies that grow in the fields of Flanders - which bloom every year no matter what – Zeta Psi needs new men to quarrel with the foe, to catch and to bear the torch, and to keep the faith EVERY YEAR to keep healthy and alive.

John McCrae has left a treasured artifact to Zeta Psi in his reminder that if our endeavour is worthwhile – and it IS worthwhile - we need to soldier on...

Through minefields of political correctness, of risks to be managed, of personalty clashes, of generational disagreements between active and elder, between neos and senior classmen, we must soldier on. We must do our best. We must always reach beyond our selves in search of the greater good.

We must ensure that there are new generations to take up the quarrel, a new group to whom we can throw the torch - so that we may rest easy that our cause is in good hands - that our purpose is being met - that our great order is being protected and advanced.

We must be sure to follow Brother McCrae's advice. Whether he knew it or not, he showed the way - for our fathers and grandfathers, for us today, and for those who will claim the new century, as we claimed the last, for Zeta Psi.