

SCRIPT

Two actors playing Robert McConnell and Margaret Boal stand in front of a large suitcase/trunk. On top of this trunk sits an army jacket and officer's cap. Margaret Boal is dressed in a skirt, blouse and coat of the period and Robert McConnell wears a school cap and blazer over an army shirt and trousers. The actor playing Margaret Boal plays different characters as directed. Both characters address the audience directly.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: I was born Robert Wallace McConnell on 8th January 1896 at Mont Royal, Bloomfield, Belfast. The second son of Rev James McConnell and Annie Duffield McConnell. I was enrolled at Mountpottinger School before transferring – at the age of 10 ½ to Campbell College Belmont Road.

MISS BOAL: A Campbell College education would provide boys with not only a preparation for University but also, in the fullest form, the special training for passing boys from school into modern, practical life. Bob excelled at school.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: I was a 'day boy' and walked to school every day from my home at 94, Hollywood Road in Strandtown. I studied subjects such as English, Arithmetic, Latin and French as well as natural and physical sciences, drill and gymnasium. The first report of the Classical Head Master said...

MISS BOAL: *(as the Classical Headmaster)* 'Work and progress excellent; considering his age he shows great promise.' *(as Margaret Boal)* The timetable of a typical Campbell School day was so well organised that, in theory at least, no boy ever had half an hour to himself. Boarders would rise at 7am.

ROBERT MCCONELL: On cold days, they lay in until 8

MISS BOAL: Breakfast was at 8.30 and lessons started at 9 and ended at 4pm. Homework was done in the prep room. Clubs and Societies ran after prep before dinner and lights out. The purpose of Campbell College was to develop the boys in body, mind and above all character and prepare them for the duties of life as a useful citizen of the Empire. I, Miss Margaret Boal joined the staff at Campbell College in 1915. I was 32 years of age and still lived with my parents in Hollywood. The College at that time was a world of men and boys and as a female teacher I was not allowed in the private common rooms so it was quite a lonely experience. Other members of staff included Headmaster McFarland.....

ROBERT MCCONNELL: We called him 'Billy', but never to his face.

MISS BOAL: The Classics Master, Lewis Alden

ROBERT MCCONNELL: Called 'The Octy' because when he was angry, his eyes would swell like those of an octopus.

MISS BOAL: Senior Maths teacher, William Allison

ROBERT MCCONNELL: We named him 'Julius' because he looked like Caesar.

MISS BOAL: And Mathematics Master, Raymond Beaven.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: Who was called 'Spitter'. While we worked hard at our studies, time could always be found for some fun, as long as one could avoid the watchful eyes of the prefects.

MISS BOAL: (*as the Prefect*) The role of the Prefect is to ensure promptness of boys at meals, to make certain that permission is given before leaving studies during prep time and to enforce, by example, good behaviour at meals.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: Punishments handed out by the Prefects included copying out lines of Latin text books. James Atkinson was given 11 pages of Ovid for....

MISS BOAL:trying to attract, by his movements, the attention of girls who were passing on the footpath outside the College.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: And brothers, Ronald and John Hunter were given 200 lines of Virgil each

MISS BOAL:for mocking the school song by indulging in disorderly conduct during a special school assembly arranged by Mr Yates.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: Head Prefect, Bert Greacen always said....

MISS BOAL: The severest measures should at once be taken to enforce gentlemanly behaviour on the slovenly disposition of the boys.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: But the canings were the worst. Even if you padded up, it was still rotten sitting down. Jolly sore! On Friday 24th July, 1914 when I took my seat in the Central Hall on my final day at Campbell College to hear Headmaster MacFarland give his address, I was looking forward to starting University in a few weeks time. But the Headmaster's observation that 'we might find ourselves in the midst of the horrors of war' compelled me to look around at the faces that surrounded me. McKee, Rogers, Allison and Moore. Would we be prepared to fight for the principles of patriotism, self-sacrifice and devotion to duty? On October 1914, I entered the Honours English School at Queen's University, Belfast. In my first year, the University Magazine wrote.....

MISS BOAL: (*In a University Lecturer voice*) His knowledge of English Literature is remarkably extensive and he gives promise of a very successful career.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: But the Great War had begun and I was keen to do my 'bit'. My father gave consent and after passing my medical examination, I joined the Officer's Training Corps of Queen's University before being commanded to proceed to Cambridge for further training. My interest in books did not stop when I joined up and reading was a saving grace in a humdrum but contented life. While the military life quite agreed with me, I would not have had it as a life's work and when the war ended, I planned to live quietly among my books. On 20th October 1915, I received orders for active service.

'Auld Lang Syne' is sung here by Miss Boal while slowly waving a white handkerchief. While this is being sung, Robert McConnell removes his school cap and blazer and puts on the army jacket and captain's hat.

MISS BOAL: At Campbell College, while lessons continued as normal, food was rationed for the war effort. Fresh egg was replaced with dried, 'yellow egg' which had to be rehydrated with water and potatoes were planted in the school grounds on Sunday afternoons. 'Remember the men in the trenches' became the Headmaster's famous phrase which he used to rebuke the slightest misdemeanour. To those whose uniform was considered slovenly, 'Remember the men in the

trenches' If any boy arrived late at prep, 'Remember the men in the trenches.' If someone talked during prayers...

ROBERT MCCONNELL: Remember the men in the trenches. On the first of July, 1916, one of the bloodiest battles in human history began. On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 12 of my school friends from Campbell College perished. Over a million men were wounded or killed in 141 days of fighting and the war continued on. I wrote home whenever I could. *(he sits down on the edge of the suitcase/trunk and takes out a pen and paper, writing while he narrates)* Well, I sit here alone, or rather, not alone. I am with those whom I love who are far away. Sometimes I feel homesick and the separation seems too bitter...

MISS BOAL *(takes out a letter from her pocket and continues reading the letter)* Somehow at nights, when I say my prayers, they seem more to me than they used to. It is then I think most of you all, and think that, perchance, you think most of me then. Indeed, I think of you all always and but for the knowledge that you are thinking of me I would scarcely stand the separation. But perhaps I am making you sad. I do not want you to think I am unhappy. Sadness and gladness are so near akin to each other that one cannot sometimes tell where the one merges into the other. I am happy and contented, and though, sometimes a little homesick, I usually shake it off by writing home. Perhaps you think me silly to write thus. But it is not so. It acts as a safety valve, and now I feel far better and more contented than if I had left unsaid what I have written above.

ROBERT MCCONNELL: *(continuing the letter)* None of you are ever out of my mind and when I do go into the fray, God will not be very far away from me and you can leave me to him. *(He puts the letter back into his pocket)* I was now attached to the 6th Battalion of the King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment and became part of the Indian Expeditionary force. We were sent to relieve General Townsend and his beleaguered comrades in Kut-el-Amara 120 miles south of Mesopotamia's major city, Baghdad. The town had been under siege from the Turkish army and the weather was bitterly cold. On 5th April, I was wounded in the chest by a splinter from a Turkish bomb.

MISS BOAL: Communications home from Robert during this time were short post cards, often written by moonlight. The last postcard was written on 7th April two days after he was wounded. It said...

ROBERT MCCONNELL: We have seen some fighting out here. I hope I will soon be home, our work finished.

MISS BOAL: He did not mention his injury in his words to us. Two days later on 9th April, Robert died of his wounds. He had left home a boy and expected to return a man. His death prompted numerous tributes to his life and his character. Preaching in Megain Memorial Church, Rev Dr MacMillan praised his great gifts and promise. Robert McConnell was possessed of the gift of speech which would, had he been spared, have proved a magic power in his life. Those who have read his letters know that he wielded a graceful pen, which we mourn has been laid down forever. His fellow classmates and his teachers all grieve to think that his voice is still. But he still speaks and he will speak on earth for years to come.