

Medicine in Stamps

Florence Nightingale (1820-1910): founder of modern nursing

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Known as the domestic age of excellence, the nineteenth century equated femininity to motherhood, family and respectability. A woman's place was in the home, not the rough and tumble of the workplace. Onto this Victorian stage appeared Florence Nightingale, born in Florence, Italy on May 12, 1820 to rich British parents on an extended honeymoon. Some writers have portrayed Nightingale as a radical and a feminist for daring to defy the social constraints of her age. This portrayal, however, may be too narrow a construct for such a woman of courage and conviction. Since her father was without a son, Nightingale's education included Latin, Greek and mathematics instead of needlepoint, singing and domestic activities. She had decided at an early age to shun marriage, so there was no point in learning to run a household. Nevertheless, many suitors had attempted to court her, one in particular named Richard Moncton Milnes. Her refusal to wed this rich and eligible bachelor angered her mother, but in her diary, she told of her reasons: *"I have a moral, an active nature which requires satisfaction and that I would not find in his life. I could be satisfied to spend a life with him in combining our different powers to some great object. I could not satisfy this nature by spending a life with him in making society and arranging domestic things."*

A Call to Nursing: Florence Nightingale believed that her destiny was to serve a higher authority. Even as a child, she had heard God's call, yet she remained unsure of her fate. In her youth, she had experienced feelings of failure and worthlessness. Dr Wisner, a present day expert in mood disorders, has opined that *"Florence heard voices and experienced a number of severe depressive episodes in her teens and early 20's – symptoms*

consistent with the onset of bipolar disorder." The manic phases of her condition were postulated to imbue her with creativity and productivity in her eventual nursing career.

Growing up, Nightingale enjoyed tending to sick animals at her parents' estate, and delivering food to the poor and needy neighbours. These experiences set the stage for her desire to become a nurse. At the age of 25, she shared this dream with her parents, who promptly rejected her request. Their belief that nursing was an occupation unfit for a lady of her status was underscored by the fact

that nurses were generally unschooled, unemployed and disreputable women. Who else would wish to work among the sick and dying, dealing with dirty bodily functions? Yet through her persistence, she was finally able to convince her father that as a nurse, she could change the world for the better. England, at the time, was without a training school for nursing, thus her father sent her to school in Kaiserwerth,

Germany. Two years later in 1853, she returned to London as Resident Lady Superintendent of a hospital for invalid women at the Institute of Protestant Deaconesses.

The Crimean War: In March 1853, Russia invaded Turkey. England and France joined battle with Turkey in the Crimea, a peninsula abutting the Black Sea. During this conflict, the death rate became extremely high. Soldiers died not only from direct battle wounds, but also from supervening diseases such as typhus, cholera and dysentery. Battlefield hygiene was atrocious, and both healthcare supplies and support were inadequate. It was under these circumstances in 1854 that Sidney Herbert, Minister at War, appointed Nightingale to lead 38 women to take over the management of the barrack hospital at Scutari,



a large village on the shore of the Bosphorus. The British government took this action following an exposé in *The Times* revealing the incompetence of the Army and the resultant suffering of the common soldier.

Nightingale was appalled at the unsanitary conditions of the hospital. The men were kept in rooms without blankets or decent food. Unwashed, they wore their army uniforms that were “*stiff with dirt and gore.*” She and her nurses quickly equipped the hospital with vital supplies that had been withheld from the sick and wounded. They spent considerable energy cleaning the facilities, and an equal amount of time fighting the obstructive army medical corps. Nightingale was on her feet, working 20 hours a day, and her nurses too suffered from overwork.

During her first winter at Scutari Hospital, there were many deaths. Early in 1855, a defective sanitation system greatly increased the number of cases of cholera and typhus fever, and claimed the lives of seven army doctors and three nurses. Moreover, frostbite and dysentery further filled the wards, and the death rate rose to 42%. Recognising that sanitation and ventilation greatly impacted patient recovery, Nightingale appealed to the British government to send a three-man Sanitary Commission to flush out the sewers underneath the hospital and to improve ventilation. This promptly and dramatically reduced the mortality rate to 2%.

As supervisor, Nightingale was the only woman allowed on the wards after eight at night – hence the fond refrain, “*The Lady of the Lamp.*” In his poem, *Santa Filomena*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned these lines in her praise:

*Lo! in that house of misery
A lady with a lamp I see
Pass through the glimmering gloom,
And flit from room to room.
And slow, as in a dream of bliss,
The speechless sufferer turns to kiss
Her shadow, as it falls
Upon the darkening walls.*

Florence Nightingale began the tradition of remaining with a dying soldier until his death, to help him write his last words home. Such compassion and caring endeared her to the soldiers. The lady with the lamp was never without a smile. A Catholic sister at Scutari Hospital recalled that she never seemed tired, that “Her voice was always soft. Her smile was always beautiful. She kept us all working together.”

Nursing as a Profession: In 1855, the Allies won the war but Nightingale was stricken with Crimean fever (Brucellosis), and her health deteriorated noticeably. Her work done in the Crimea, she returned to England under an assumed name. During much of the remainder of her accomplished life, the general public had assumed she was dead. She actually encouraged this misinformation, wishing to continue her work in peace and quiet, refusing photographs and interviews. She concentrated on health matters in the British Army, and was the motivating force behind the work of the Royal Commission to reform military healthcare, which was based on her 800-page report to the War Department.

Nightingale was influential in improving upon modern hospital designs in Europe and India. But her most significant peace-time contribution was the founding of the Nightingale Training School for nurses at St. Thomas’ Hospital in London. With a \$150,000 gift, she personally counselled on all subjects of admissions, training and discipline. Other nursing schools bearing her name sprouted all over Europe, and the nursing profession as we know it today became rooted in history. In 1859, she published “*Notes on Hospitals,*” and wrote the first nursing textbook “*Notes on Nursing: what it is and what it is not.*” Single-handedly, this remarkable woman had turned a day-job for prostitutes into a respected vocation that emphasises caring, service and compassion.

Florence Nightingale lived to the age of 90 years, and died in her apartment on August 13, 1910. She requested a simple funeral, and willed her body to medical science. However, her wishes were ignored and a grand funeral service was instead held at St. Paul’s Cathedral. Sergeants from regiments that had served in the Crimea carried the coffin, which then proceeded slowly by train through the grounds of Embley Park. It was here, in the winter family home that she, as a child, first heard God’s call. Buried in the pouring rain, she was put to rest underneath a tombstone with the simple inscription “*F.N.*”

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