Florence Nightingale: Nurse, Writer, and Consummate Politician

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Until the 19th century, nursing was dominated by religious orders, and there was no structured nurse training. In France, the order of the Sisters of Charity, established in 1630 by St. Vincent de Paul, predated the development of the nursing profession. They were the first nuns able to leave the convent to do work on the outside. In Britain, however, Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in 1536, and no equivalent source of nurses was available (1). The precursors of nursing within the Protestant sphere were a German pastor, Theodor Fiedner (1800–1864), and his wife Frederike. In 1836, they established the Deaconess Institute in Kaiserswerth, near Düsseldorf (2). The Institute’s nursing sisters cared for the poor and the sick, both in the hospital and in the community—by today’s standards combining nursing with social work. In England, Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845) was active in the caring for prisoners and fighting for penal reform. After visiting Kaiserswerth, she established the Institute of Nursing Sisters in London (1). Fiedner’s and Fry’s work in turn influenced Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), whose subsequent achievements exerted enormous impact on the nursing profession and on hospital design.

Florence Nightingale was born in the Italian city of Florence (thus her first name) to a wealthy family (3, 4). She decided to devote herself to nursing at the age of 24 years. Despite strong opposition from her family, she visited Kaiserswerth in the 1840s and hospitals in France in 1852. Later she made a detailed study of the sanitary conditions of hospitals. In 1853, Nightingale became superintendent at The Institution of the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances, in London’s Harley Street.

During the Crimean War, which started in 1854 with Russia and Turkey fighting against France and Britain, damning reports on the condition of the British wounded appeared in The Times newspaper. The British Secretary at War at the time, Sidney Herbert, invited Miss Nightingale to take a team of nurses to Turkey to remedy the situation. She led the group of 38, which included several of Elizabeth Fry’s nurses. She reorganized the field hospital at Scutari in Turkey, and within 6 months patient mortality there decreased from 40% to 2% (5, 6). This achievement gained her heroine status at home. A public collection was established to support her further work. She used the money to found the Nightingale Nursing School at St. Thomas’ Hospital, which opened in 1860 and soon became a model for similar schools in the British Empire and beyond. Florence Nightingale was a miasmatist, believing that diseases spread by emanations given off by the environment (essentially bad air) and particularly by poor hygiene. Interestingly, she never accepted the then-emerging germ theory.

The image of Florence Nightingale in the public mind is that of the “The Lady with the Lamp,” from her practice of making late-night rounds of her hospital at Scutari to check whether everything was in order. What is less well known, however, is her profound expertise in sanitation (today’s public health) and hospital design, as well as the broad scope of her writing. Two of Nightingale’s books, Notes on Nursing (7) and Notes on Hospitals, remain relevant today. She was also deeply religious and wrote extensively on spirituality and theology. Her collected works have been appearing since 2010 under the editorship of Lynn McDonald from the University of Guelph in Canada (8). Nightingale was also extensively involved in the reform of the military medical service through interacting with politicians and stimulating legislative changes. Among other jobs, she served as advisor to the Secretary of State for War from 1863 to 1867.

Miss Nightingale has been represented in paintings, sculpture, and drawings. There are plenty of photographs, because photography was quickly developing at the time. Fig. 1, however, is a simple sketch of young Florence by her cousin and close friend, Hilary Bonham-Carter (1821–65). Bonham-Carter was regarded as an able artist, and she was encouraged to go to Paris to study. In contrast to career-oriented Florence, however, she never pursued professional training (9).

The drawing works through its simplicity. It is a delicate piece with subtle shading and is timeless in its style, although it fits the predominant trends in Victorian art, which favored realism (10). Early Victorian
painters rejected the emotions and symbolism of Romanticism. In retrospect, probably the most important art movement of the period was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, with Dante Gabriel Rosetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and William Holman Hunt being its leading artists. Pre-Raphaelites took inspiration from late medieval painting and produced art that enriched realism with decorativeness and sophisticated colorism, while remaining within the Victorian moral themes. Later, there was a revival of neoclassicism and, in the late Victorian period, aestheticism, which promoted art for art’s sake and included such artists as James McNeill Whistler.

The 19th century in Britain was a period of affluence, but it was also one of profound social changes associated with fast-growing industries and the consequent increase in the urban population and urban poverty. These changes required major adjustments in public health measures. Florence Nightingale is a prominent example of a 19th-century woman reformer, who combined total dedication with remarkable administrative and political skills, and made a lasting contribution to the entirety of healthcare.

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**References**


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