

## Florence Nightingale — Expanding Societal Limits 1810-1856 (Part 1)

Widely hailed for transforming health care, Florence Nightingale is an enigma. Family, friends and colleagues either loved and idolized her or totally disagreed with her and, on occasion, both. Publically she revealed her ideas, thoughts and desires for change through the important men of the day. Personally, she revealed her secret innermost feelings, thoughts and desires in her diaries and family letters. Perhaps Miss Nightingale's friend Mary Mohl expressed this puzzlement best in a February 1853 letter written to Miss Nightingale's sister Parthenope Nightingale writing: "I study Flo as if she were a language and as she is a deep one I have not mastered it by any means."<sup>1</sup> To "study" and gain some understanding of Miss Nightingale, it is best to start at the beginning.



A

Florence Nightingale was born in Florence, Italy on May 12, 1820. At that time, upper class Victorian society functioned under the concept of "separate spheres." Under the law, women lived under the legal rule of their husbands known as "femme covert." Their domain was home and hearth, raising children and as previous discussed, teaching their daughters the ways of domesticity and running a household. Men, on the other hand, carried all the family's legal power, voted, and worked in the cruel and dangerous outside world—the "separate spheres" for women and men.

Miss Nightingale's parents, William Edward Nightingale and Fanny Smith Nightingale, were members of upper-class Victorian society. Her sister Parthenope was one year old. Wealth and privilege were not the only benefits awaiting the Nightingale sisters. Their father and mother both belonged to the Unitarian Church and believed in equal education for both boys and girls. Several maternal aunts were activists in the fledgling woman's movement. "Feminism was part of Florence Nightingale's intellectual birthright."<sup>2</sup> Her aunts, Patty and Julia Smith often shared their radical views with "young Florence" and this may be a reason that an elder Miss Nightingale held her own counsel on the women's rights issues—as a "defense mechanism against the zeal of female relatives."<sup>3</sup>



B

Mrs. Nightingale managed the household and taught her daughters the social skills needed in Victorian society: embroidery, needlepoint, piano lessons, inventorying the household silver, personal

hygiene and dress, and planning of social events. She also made certain that neither of her daughters were ever left alone. Young Florence played in the family gardens, rode ponies and horses, and had a succession of pets from dogs and cats to birds.

Mr. Nightingale, or WEN as he preferred to be addressed, loved learning. He imbued both his daughters at early ages with a zest for learning. Florence exceeded his wildest dreams when it came to studies. She was always intellectually curious; a voracious reader and became an equally prolific writer. Growing up as one of the eldest of twenty cousins, young Florence, through her private notes and letters, chronicles the highs and lows of learning and life in an extended Victorian family.<sup>4</sup> She learned French, Italian, German, Latin and Greek with ease and was a facile translator of these languages. WEN's tutelage and travel abroad to the Continent resulted in Florence's love of history, philosophy, music and art. WEN taught his youngest daughter mathematics and statistics. Throughout her life as the first nurse researcher, Miss Nightingale effectively used statistics to validate her reasons to enact health care reform in Britain and in India. Adroit use of statistics and "behind the scenes preparation" of those who spoke in Parliament on her behalf illustrated another of her father's valuable lessons: how a woman could successfully navigate in a male-dominated society – a skill contrary to the mores of the day.

Because of WEN's place in society, noted figures such as Lord Palmerston, a Member of Parliament, and Sir Sidney Herbert, future Secretary of War, often frequented the Nightingale home to discuss politics and current events. Contrary to the Victorian principle that children were expected to be "obedient, respectful, affectionate [and quiet]," young Florence expressed her own opinions and observations openly and asked rather pointed questions of guests in her parents' home.<sup>5</sup>

Cecil Woodham-Smith writes that despite a privileged childhood, "Flo was not happy. She was strange, passionate, wrong-headed, obstinate, and miserable. [She records that] as a very young child she had an obsession that she was not like other people. She was a monster. That was her secret which might at any moment be found out." Knowing she was "different" led to long periods of introspection as well as feelings of "overwhelming terror and guilt."<sup>6</sup>

Miss Nightingale displayed a vivid imagination as a child. According to author Hugh Small, one of her self-admitted faults was "dreaming" as a means of escaping and coping with her familial and external environment. She noted that a lot of her day was filled with dreaming and this often created strife between her mother, her governess, and social acquaintances. In her youthful dreams, she lived a meaningful life filled with heroic actions. In 1837 while a young woman of seventeen, she heard God's voice "call [me] to His service."<sup>7</sup>

Much to the vexation of her parents, their second daughter did not take kindly or readily to learning the social lessons young Victorian women were expected to embrace. Unlike her older sister Parthenope, the young Florence found that while she enjoyed nice clothes, opera, and cotillions, on balance, she found most social activities trivial and meaningless. She found life more meaningful when tending to sick family members, friends or animals, teaching the children of lower class families in her town, or engaging in political discourse. She wanted to fulfill her childhood and adult dreams. Florence Nightingale wanted to be a nurse. For years she had been preparing for this career path by surreptitiously reading all the hospital

statistical reports she could access. In an 1841 visit to the Nightingale home by American philanthropist Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe and his wife Julia Ward Howe, Dr. Howe offered these words of encouragement to young Florence:

My dear Miss Florence, it would be unusual, and in England whatever is unusual is thought to be unsuitable; but I say to you 'go forward,' if you have a vocation for that way of life, act up to your inspiration and you will find there is never anything unbecoming or unladylike in doing your duty for the good of others. Choose, go on with it, wherever it may lead you and God be with you.<sup>8</sup>

Her parents tried to dissuade her from this path. In fact, her parents encouraged her many suitors. For nine years, poet and politician Richard Monckton Milnes pursued the young, attractive, and intelligent Miss Nightingale finally insisting on her answer about marriage. Even though she admittedly loved him and was conflicted by those feelings, she said "No." She sacrificed their future happiness for her calling. Putting her private thoughts on paper, she wrote,

I don't agree at all that a woman has no reason for not marrying a good man who asks her. I think He has as clearly marked out some to be single women as He has others to be wives. ... Today I am thirty – the age Christ began his Mission. Now no more childish things, no more vain things, no more love, no more marriage. Now, Lord, let me only think of Thy will.<sup>9</sup>

In 1844, seven years after she heard God's call to service, Miss Nightingale sensed God's second calling on her life: "to care for the sick in public institutions—municipal hospitals, orphanages, fever hospitals, lying-in wards...."<sup>10</sup> This declaration for nursing caused Fanny Nightingale cases of "the vapors." Parthenope became hysterical and took to her bed whenever the subject of nursing and separation from her beloved "Flo" was broached. In a letter to her older sister, Florence wrote, "You will have me for all your life, for I shall never die & never marry."<sup>11</sup> Her immediate family insisted she give up her foolish notions. Nursing was not proper for a young, upper class Victorian woman. Working as a nurse meant exposure to "dangers of immorality and drunkenness."<sup>12</sup> But Miss Nightingale remained determined.

While traveling abroad with friends in 1851, she spent a fortnight at Kaiserswerth Anstalt welcomed by hospital's founders, Pastor and Mrs. Fliedner.<sup>13</sup> When Mrs. Nightingale learned of her daughter's sojourn to Kaiserswerth, family discord resumed. All of Miss Nightingale's frustrations about the constraints placed on Victorian women poured out as a treatise on the lives and aspirations of Victorian women in *Cassandra* published in 1852:

Awake ... all ye that sleep, awake. The time is come, when women must do something more than tend the 'domestic hearth.' Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?<sup>14</sup>

Later, as an elder stateswoman, she demurred from the vehement positions she ascribed in *Cassandra*.<sup>15</sup>

In 1853, Miss Nightingale became the Superintendent at the Institute for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen, Upper Harley Street, London. She wrote to her cousin,

"I am living in an ideal world of lifts, gas, baths and double and single wards." She renovated the Institute, installing innovations such as hot water piped to each floor, a "windlass installation" – a dumbwaiter – brought patients' food to each floor, and call bells that rang out near the nurse's door on each floor.<sup>16</sup> Within one year, her sentiments changed. She wrote her resignation letter citing a lack of stimulating patient cases and a desire for "a more challenging medical facility."<sup>17</sup> Little did she know the biggest challenge of her life waited just around the corner.



In 1854, hostilities broke out in Crimea. England was at war with Russia. Soon the newspapers were

filled with reports of the conditions of the military hospital at Scutari. Almost immediately, two letters crossed in the mail: one from Florence Nightingale to Sidney Herbert, Secretary at War, requesting posting to the Crimea and one from Sidney Herbert to his friend Florence Nightingale "officially" requesting she dispatch to the Crimea and take thirty-eight nurses with her. She arrived at Scutari in November 1854 without an official commission "in writing." Immediately, what she found assaulted all her senses and sensibilities:



Want, neglect, confusion, misery – in every shape and degree of intensity – filled the endless corridors...

[which] contained four miles of beds. Hugh sewers and cesspools underlay it. The stench was indescribable. I have been well acquainted with the dwellings in the worst parts of most of the great cities in Europe, but never have been in any atmosphere which I could compare with that in the Barrack Hospital at night.<sup>18</sup>

Miss Nightingale observed what needed to be done: procuring proper linens and nursing supplies, instituting proper laundry and dietary services, increasing ventilation, moving beds away from the cesspool, expanding the capacity of the hospital and treating the wounded soldiers with dignity. This she accomplished mostly through the use of her own personal funds and with supplies she brought with her from France. She would not let her nurses deliver patient care until the physicians asked for their assistance. She did not allow her nurses to care for the soldiers during the night. Miss Nightingale herself undertook those rounds carrying her now-famous lamp. As previously stated, some loved and revered Miss Nightingale and others expressed a strong dislike. It was no different at the Barrack Hospital. The wounded soldiers looked on her as an "Angel of Mercy" and "the Lady with the Lamp." From the vantage point of most of the surgeons, it was quite different:

It was not by gentle sweetness and womanly self-abnegation that [Nightingale] brought order out of chaos in the Scutari Hospitals;... it was by strict method, stern discipline, by rigid attention to detail, ceaseless hours of labor, a fixed determination [and] an indomitable will.<sup>19</sup>



Miss Nightingale held a high standard for her nurses and she held herself to a higher standard as their leader. Her stern discipline and uncompromising philosophy of care and ethics created

rifts between herself and many of her nurses. Miss Nightingale dismissed and shipped back nurses to England for "cause." Others questioned her supreme, official authority over the nurses in other hospitals in Scutari. One such woman, Mrs. Bridgeman, the Reverend Mother in the Crimea, questioned her authority as she had no commission in writing. "Reverend Brickbat," as Miss Nightingale called her, angered Miss Nightingale who immediately dispatched a request for a written commission to come from the Secretary at War Sidney Herbert. The commission came, but the damage was done. Miss Nightingale's authority was undermined. She survived a serious struggle with either Crimean fever or brucellosis, long nights nursing soldiers, administering a hospital, battling the bureaucracy, advocating for patient care and military hospital reform, lobbying against supply mismanagement, and firing off report after report to the Secretary at War. But she could not withstand the assault on her authority by Reverend Mother Bridgeman or Miss Nightingale's civilian protégé Mary Stanley, who in Miss Nightingale's eyes, had turned from "loyal disciple ... to challenger to her position."<sup>20</sup> Although she knew her days in the Crimea were numbered, she would stay until the last of "her boys" went home to England.

April 29, 1856 dawned to the Declaration of Peace. However Miss Nightingale despaired that the public's memory of the soldiers' sufferings would be short-lived. She had to bid farewell to her injured friend, Reverend Mother Bermondsey, writing, "What you have done for the work no one can ever say. My love and gratitude will be yours dearest Reverend Mother wherever you go ... I do not presume to give you any other tribute." On July 16, 1856, Miss Nightingale bid farewell to the last patient leaving the Barrack Hospital. Now her work was complete and she could return to her beloved England.<sup>21</sup> What did her future hold?

In the next issue of *Courier*, we will focus on Miss Nightingale's future – her extraordinary contributions to the British Military Hospital system, the U. S. Sanitation Commission hospitals during the Civil War and to the nursing profession and humankind. ☺

The History Column is contributed by Cathryne A. Welch, EdD, RN, Director, Bellevue Alumnae Center for Nursing History, Central NY Nurses Center for Nursing Research, Institute for Nursing: NYS Nursing Workforce Center; and by Gertrude B. Hutchinson, MA, RN, Archivist, BACNH, Foundation of New York State Nurses.

#### Article Photos:

**A)** Florence Nightingale. Lithograph of a drawing by Hilary Bonham-Carter, Circa 1854 **B)** Athena, Florence Nightingale's stuffed pet owl, displayed at the Florence Nightingale Museum in London, England where it is noted that "the Little Owl was rescued in Athens, hand reared and became Florence's constant companion, traveling everywhere in her pocket. The owl was stuffed after it died while Florence was in Scutari Hospital **C)** Selimiye Barracks, also known as Scutari Barracks, is a Turkish army barracks located in the Üsküdar district on the Asian part of Istanbul, Turkey across the Bosphorus. The barracks was converted into a temporary military hospital during the Crimean War. Photo by DJ Mancino © 2010 **D)** Florence Nightingale in the Military Hospital at Scutari. One of the wards of the hospital at Scutari / W. Simpson del. ; E. Walker lith. ; Day & Son, Lithrs. to the Queen. Retrieved February 17, 2011 from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hospital\\_at\\_Scutari\\_2a.jpg#globalusage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hospital_at_Scutari_2a.jpg#globalusage) **E)** Turkish folding concertina lantern similar to the one used by Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War that originated the legend of "The Lady with the Lamp." Photo by DJ Mancino © 2010

#### (Endnotes)

- 1 Mark Bostwick, *Florence Nightingale: The Making of an Icon*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), vii.
- 2 Gillian Gill, *Nightingales*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 43.
- 3 Gill, 44
- 4 Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale 1820-1910*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1951), 12.
- 5 Gill, 103.
- 6 Woodham-Smith, 6.
- 7 Hugh Small, *Florence Nightingale Avenging Angel*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 10.
- 8 Bostwick, 85.
- 9 Small, 12.
- 10 Gill, 191.
- 11 Small, 11-13; Bostwick, 77
- 12 Small, 14.
- 13 Gill, 252,253.
- 14 Nightingale, Florence, *Cassandra* (©1852), (1979 ed.), 13, 25.
- 15 Irene S. Palmer, "Florence Nightingale: Reformer, Reactionary, Research," *Nursing Research* March-April 1977, 26:84-89 as cited in *The Genesis of the Nurse Registration Movement in the United States, 1893-1903*, Doctoral Dissertation, Nettie Sodikow Birnbach, (New York: Teachers College-Columbia University, 1982), 29, 30.
- 16 Woodham-Smith, 74
- 17 Gill, 289; Small, 13.
- 18 Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1918), 142, 143.
- 19 Stachey, 151.
- 20 Bostwick, 240.
- 21 Woodham-Smith, 177.