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historical [2]



In the 19th century, Florence Nightingale followed her calling to fight class division, gender stereotypes and chronic illness—and changed the course of history.

Most famous as “the lady with the lamp”, walking the dark corridors of the military hospitals in Turkey [3] during the Crimean War, Florence had sensed that nursing [4] was her vocation since the age of six. Beginning at the bedside of dying relatives, neighbours and friends, Florence later observed nursing in Germany, with a Lutheran sisterhood of charitable ladies. She then ran a small hospital in Harley Street and volunteered in a Middlesex hospital during a cholera outbreak.

Taking 38 nurses with her to the Crimean War, Florence described the four miles of beds on vermin-infested wards as “the Kingdom of Hell”; Queen Victoria took a personal interest in Florence’s superhuman efforts. Often working 20-hour shifts, Florence saved lives through hands-on care, and through addressing the urgent problems of "diet, dirt and drains [5]".

Shattering stereotypes

Born into a world where education for women was rare, Florence received, through her father, an extraordinary education, becoming a serious scholar. Befriending Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in America [6] to receive a medical degree, both women showed themselves more than capable of meaningful work, pursuing professions in a man’s world.

Coming from a well-to-do, well-connected family, Florence wanted nothing more than to escape the prison of the drawing room and live and work alongside those in need. Nursing at the time was considered unsuitable, unbecoming and unladylike for someone like Florence. Her place was in the home; her longing was for liberation and striving for a life of service unprecedented.

Florence turned down several marriage proposals, dedicating her life to her work, and expending her motherly feeling towards wounded soldiers and, later, student nurses. In her letters, she sees herself as “mother”, weeping

as she left Crimea. “I feel I have been such a bad mother to you to come home and leave you lying in your Crimean grave,” she wrote [7].

The respect was mutual; soldiers took comfort in her presence, “kissing her shadow [8]” as it fell during her nightly rounds. Thousands wept bitterly when she died.

Social reform

“The sheer scale, depth, and detail of the reforms Nightingale set out to initiate in army health, nursing, hospital construction, workhouse infirmaries, the War Office, India [9], and much else is staggering. She permanently changed the relation between government and public health not only in the UK but ultimately across the globe,” writes historian Julia Boyd in The Lancet [10].

Constantly aware of the sick and the poor, and making her connections count, Florence challenged bureaucracy, campaigned for cleanliness and completely changed attitudes to the common soldier and nurse, replacing a reputation for drunkenness and immoral conduct with one of skill and respect.

School of Nursing

Considering it “best to educate the children who are already in the world and can’t be got out of it, than to bring more into it”, Florence founded Nightingale’s School of Nursing [11] in 1860, at St Thomas’ Hospital. Until then, nursing of the poor was performed by nuns or prostitutes (with the wealthy being nursed at home); now nurse training became secular and highly skilled.

Florence’s book, *Notes on Nursing,* became the bedrock of the new nursing profession, with wisdom that has stood the test of time. Her teaching that “the first rule of nursing is to keep the air within as pure as the air without” would have been timely in the early days of COVID-19 [12], when emphasis was placed on hand-washing rather than face-coverings. Fresh air [13] is now said to be the most important mitigation, with use of ventilation to reduce the spread of the virus.

Serious illness

Upon returning from the Crimea, Florence became reclusive from the age of 36, re-emerging into the world at 60, and living until she was 90. Suffering from “Crimean fever”, her symptoms included fever, fatigue and severe chronic pain [14]. Stricken also with insomnia, palpitations and depression, Florence was often confined to her bed—yet continued to work prodigiously.

Sir George Pickering, professor of medicine, wonders whether Florence’s extended illness was exaggerated, perhaps unconsciously, through something akin to the “nocebo” effect [15], to keep unwanted visitors at bay, and to allow her to concentrate on her work of correspondence and campaigning.

Spiritual journey

In 1837, at the age of 16, Florence—like the teenage Joan of Arc, more than 400 years previously—heard the voice of God calling her to service. Each morning she prayed, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord—give me this day my work to do—no, not my work but thine.” Believing herself to be on a divine mission, she was critical of the Church of England, and its lack of social action. Florence, in contrast, lived out her faith and put it into action in a world in need of service.

*On May 15, 2022, the Calling Window stained glass [16] was officially unveiled and blessed at Romsey Abbey. It depicts the moment when Florence received her calling from God.

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