

# Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant

## Similarities and Differences

by Pierre Boissier

Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant are two names which are associated in much that has been written about the Red Cross and army medical services. Only seldom are their outstanding personalities contrasted. Where does the truth lie? In similarity or difference? Let us try to sort things out.

But first a few facts.

While our heroes enjoyed a sheltered and comfortable childhood, what was happening in a world infinitely remote from, yet very close to, their parents' elegant dwellings?

In mines, factories and mills, children less than ten years old sometimes worked sixteen hours a day, all too often under whip-wielding overseers. The mothers of those children were, of course, also at work in the factories and mines, where they dragged and pushed trolleys along galleries which were too low for ponies. When they emerged from those dark, unhealthy places of work, where they had to keep pace with the relentless machines, many of the workers, young and old, collapsed through exhaustion on the road that led to their slum dwelling.

It is often thought that nothing was or could be worse than the condition of the proletariat in the first half of the nineteenth century. This is not true.

There were the soldiers.

In the barracks of England and France, filled as they were with selected, stalwart young men, the mortality rate was twice as high as that of the population as a whole. And that was in peace time, when all was well and everything was easy. But what about armies in the field? Statistics, which were just beginning to be drawn up, showed that for every soldier killed by the enemy seven or eight died through the commissariat's carelessness, negligence and stupidity. In fact, the armies destroyed themselves. There were only a few doctors and orderlies, and hardly any medical supplies for the care of relatively few wounded and a great number of sick. In the French army, the ratio of veterinary surgeons to horses was 4.5 to 1000, and that of doctors to men 0.8 to 1000.

This was partly the result of compulsory military service which gradually spread over the European mainland after the French Revolution. Once the soldier was no longer costly, there was less concern about him; and besides the battle-field often lay far away, and no one knew what was going on. It was easy to accept the idea that all who failed to return had died a hero's death, whereas in fact most of them had perished owing to sheer neglect on the part of their commanding officers. Nowhere was the army allowed to voice any opinion whatsoever, and it lacked a spokesman. There was no Friedrich Engels for the soldier.

It was into that closed and unknown world of the army that first Florence Nightingale and, a few years later, Henry Dunant were to venture. They were to penetrate the monster's lair, pit themselves against it, fight it barehanded, and compel it to give ground. They were to transform the soldier's life.

Both of them did a great many other things.

Florence Nightingale extended her action to civilian hospitals. Enthusiastically she launched into the training of nurses. Her tireless pen covered volumes of philosophy and theology. The same thing happened with Dunant, who actively supported the cause of international arbitration, pacifism and feminism, and who also wrote a great deal.

But we shall not follow them on their various crusades. Let us confine ourselves to their great purpose in life and the field in which they were to meet: their concern for the soldier.

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Many French encyclopaedias say that Florence Nightingale was one of the forerunners of the Red Cross. Is this true? Can the work of Florence Nightingale and that of Henry Dunant be said to be complementary? This question leads us to draw a comparison between what they did. Incidentally, however, we shall pursue a second and perhaps more engaging aim: that of comparing, not two achievements, but two temperaments and two destinies.

The fact which first comes to mind is that both Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant were to be plunged into the world of war, she at thirty-four and he at thirty-one. Indeed, what could be more unexpected than that this national of a neutral country or this well-bred woman should one day find themselves on a battlefield? They themselves did not by any means expect it. And yet, had they not unwittingly prepared, in their different ways, to confront the horrors of war and thereby give their lives a new meaning?

Both of them broke away from their background.

This was harder, more heart-rending and more heroic for Florence Nightingale because she had started higher up. Of gentle birth, wealthy, attractive and witty, she had everything that could make for success and brilliance in the well planned life that opened before her. Because she was so keen, she was allowed to learn Greek and Latin, but her intended role in society was to shine in fashionable circles. Reluctantly she agreed. Flo was willing to dance and take part in quadrilles and charades, but her heart was not in it. At seventeen she knew that God called her to serve. But whom was she to serve, and how? This was not yet clear to her, but she was already a being apart.

Gradually those around her realized to their horror what that vocation was to be: to tend the sick. It was a decision which even in the humblest circles would have been unwelcome, for at that time hospital work was done by women of scant virtue, mostly drunkards, nearly always brutal.

Out of consideration for her family, Florence Nightingale first decided to keep up appearances. In secret she started to read everything that had been written about nursing and hospital techniques. Those dry books enthralled her. Who would ever have

thought that so elegant a young lady was methodically storing up immense knowledge?

Theory had to be put into practice, however, and once again she had to resort to guile. Her parents travelled a great deal, and by prevailing upon them to indulge some of her whims, she managed here and there in secret to gain admittance to hospitals. And since London society would remain unaware of what was afoot, her parents finally resigned themselves to allowing her to go to Germany for two periods of training at the Home of the Deaconesses, at Kaiserswerth, where she happily submitted to the iron discipline and appalling working hours of that model institution.

But morally and psychologically the deception became more than she could bear. Florence Nightingale made a final break to take up the position that was hers by right, that of leader. In 1853 she became the director of a big London hospital. A few hours were enough to make it clear to staff and patients alike that Miss Nightingale knew the job better than anyone else, and that her orders were not to be questioned.

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Young Dunant first went through a mystic period, partly through the influence of Pastor Gaussen, a crank and an ardent Revivalist, who stuffed his young pupils' minds with an improbable prophetic hodge-podge. Yet, like Florence Nightingale, he started quite reassuringly by training in a bank.

Geneva and accounting ledgers bored him, however. He left for Algeria, where the bank he was working for had interests in an agricultural settlement, at Sétif. And then came the break. Dunant could not tolerate the use and abuse of native labour. Very soon there were violent scenes between him and the Sétif manager. He resigned and decided to have a farm of his own.

He declared that in his employ the natives would be happy and well paid. He had taken the trouble to understand them and had grown really fond of them. He had taken lessons in Arabic and had explored, not only Algeria, but also Tunisia, about which, in 1858, he wrote a remarkable book which revealed his respect for Islam.

He decided on a well-chosen site in Kabylia: Mons Djemila. He had the best machines sent from London to grind his wheat.

All that remained to be done was obtain concessions for land and water, without which it would not be possible to produce wheat or turn the mills. As a rule, settlers obtained such concessions without the slightest difficulty, and if the local populace showed signs of resisting, the army knew how to "pacify" them.

But Dunant had been guilty of the worst imprudence by letting it be known that at Mons Djemila the natives would be well treated and well paid. The other settlers and the military government immediately realized that this trouble-maker was going to ruin the labour market. Such a man could not and must not succeed. So he was refused the concessions for which he had asked. It was the beginning of terrible tribulations.

Oblivious of the fate that was lying in wait for them, Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant were henceforth masters of their own destiny and, above all, free. Something told them imperatively that they must not allow themselves to be fettered. That was a feature of their profound nature which expressed itself, among other things, in celibacy, we may even go so far as to say chastity. It was to lay both of them open to the absolutely unjust and uncalled for mockery of those who later attributed to them the same leanings for which Oscar Wilde was to pay so dearly.

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Before the lot of the soldier could be improved, it had to be seen. Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant went straight to where conditions were the very worst: she to Crimea and he, three years later, to Italy.

The Crimean War is so well known that there is no need to recount all its vicissitudes. However, let us note a few facts.

The British and French armies which disembarked at Gallipoli in 1854 had two things in common: the courage of their soldiers and the crass stupidity of their commissariats. The latter trait was made evident by a total disregard for health and medical care. Not only was nothing done to provide the troops with suitable food, clothing and accommodation, but no provision was made to care for those stricken with foreseeable and avoidable diseases or to dress the wounds of the injured. Supplies needed by the all too few

doctors were almost non-existent, and French surgeons were seen buying old surgical instruments in the flea market of Constantinople.

The inevitable, of course, came to pass. Scurvy, the causes of which were well known and which could easily have been prevented, claimed tens of thousands of victims, as did typhus and a host of other illnesses, almost all of them due to the exhausted state of the troops. The sick, whether infectious or otherwise, were packed among the wounded in enormous so-called hospitals. Contagion and gangrene ran riot, powerfully aided in their deadly work by an administrative confusion that had a touch of genius!

But here is a contrast. The French military administration, which in this case gave proof of remarkable efficiency, took measures, that were crowned with success, to stop the dreadful scandal from getting back to France. A *cabinet noir*, a censorship office, was set up which mercilessly censored all letters, even those of generals. No criticism got through. Paris knew nothing, nor did Emperor Napoleon III. The English army, on the other hand, tolerated the presence of journalists, and the stench of "hospital gangrene" was wafted back to London.

And it reached Florence Nightingale too. Her mind was quickly made up: she would go to Crimea. She made her wish known to her old friend Sydney Herbert, Secretary for War, in a letter which crossed with one in which Herbert asked her to go out, with extensive powers.

Everyone knows what "the Lady with the Lamp" did. Working day and night under inconceivable conditions, braving the hostility of those in charge, she was to save the English army. Two figures make that clear. During the second winter of the campaign, after the fall of Sebastopol, throughout the period when active hostilities had practically ceased, the French lost 21,191 men through sickness and the incompetence of the medical services, while the English, who were only three times less numerous, lost 606. The difference was Florence Nightingale. This is one of the most extraordinary achievements in the entire military history of the world.

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How different were the circumstances that led Dunant to the theatre of war in Italy!

In 1859, the unfortunate owner of the Mons Djemila mills was in desperate straits. The Algiers offices and the ministries in Paris continued to unite against him and to refuse him his wheat fields and water. What was he to do? There was but one solution: to appeal to the highest authority, to Napoleon III himself. But, as a crowning misfortune, the Emperor was waging war against Austria, in Lombardy. Dunant had no other choice than to hasten after him, and that was how our philanthropic settler arrived at a small town called Castiglione in the evening of 24 June. This was the very spot where the wounded of the bloodiest battle Europe had known since Waterloo were being brought. The battle of Solferino was ending as Dunant arrived at the rendez-vous which fate had arranged for him.

At Castiglione Dunant found the wounded in a state of almost total neglect. There they were, 9,000 of them, lying in streets, squares and churches. Five doctors, without help, without dressings, could only give them an absurdly small measure of aid. There was no bedding, nor were there any organized food supplies. Dunant knew nothing about medicine, but he was a great-hearted man. He interrupted his journey and for almost a week did his best to help those unfortunate men. Night and day he devoted himself to their care. He brought water to those parched with thirst, cradled the heads of the dying and listened to their last wishes, and made clumsy attempts to apply dressings made out of the shirt-tails of the wounded themselves. Then he again took to the road, failed in his endeavour to approach the Emperor, and returned to Paris.

The immense difference between our two characters is obvious. Florence Nightingale went to Crimea because she wanted to care for the wounded. She had the means, a team of nurses, money and specific powers. She was highly qualified for the task which she carried out for eight months. Dunant was exactly the opposite. He arrived by chance, on a business trip. He was the very image of the incompetent amateur, and he remained with the wounded for only five days. Yet in both cases the scene was the same. Castiglione was Dunant's Scutari.

But here again we see a fundamental resemblance between our two heroes. They did not, like thousands of others who had witnessed the same scenes, return home and try to forget. No, their lives thenceforth belonged to the wounded. Their sole aim in life was to

change the established order, to substitute intelligence for stupidity, feeling for indifference. Yes, their aims were identical, but, as we shall see, they differed completely in their choice of method. From identical scenes they were to draw diametrically contrary conclusions.

Florence Nightingale's reasoning was simple: the military administration was badly organized; hence it must be reorganized. She was David fighting Goliath, and she won. She was to give English hospitals a "new look", and her influence was to spread to the Canadian garrisons at the time of the War of Secession, then to India during the Sepoy revolt.

Let us now return to Dunant. Let us go from one extreme to the other. Like Florence Nightingale, he had seen how the military administration worked and the spirit which imbued it. This was enough to convince him of two things: that reform was impossible and that a new institution must therefore be set up, one of a private nature which would make up for the deficiencies of the military administration.

His idea was simple: in every country of the world societies should be established which in peace time would train what he called "volunteer relief workers" and accumulate as much equipment as possible: surgical instruments, dressings, ambulances, etc. If war should break out, those societies would be ready for action. They would proceed at once to the scene of fighting, with all the means at their disposal. Side by side with the medical services of their respective armies, they would collect the wounded from the battlefield, tend their wounds and evacuate them to the rear.

Like Florence Nightingale, Dunant was to put his ideas on paper, in a book entitled "*Un Souvenir de Solferino*" ("A Memory of Solferino"). But the book was not meant for experts alone, for, as we know, Dunant had abandoned the idea of convincing the military authorities. He addressed himself to the public: to the fathers and mothers of present and future soldiers, and also to those fathers and mothers of soldiers who were kings and queens in Europe. His style was brilliant, his story full of colour, and his descriptions were sometimes almost unbearably vivid. The book achieved its purpose. It was feelingly discussed in drawing-rooms where, thanks to him, light had been shed on the dark side of war, on the aspect about which no one ever spoke.

To establish societies such as suggested by Dunant was beyond the powers of one man alone. So four Genevese citizens rallied round Dunant, and together they decided to invite all the sovereigns of Europe to send to Geneva experts and representatives to whom the great idea would be submitted. That conference took place in 1863. It marked the foundation of the Red Cross.

Very soon societies started to appear in every part of Europe, at first under a variety of names. It was only twenty years later that they adopted the name of Red Cross Societies and that the small group which had founded the movement became the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Dunant, who had the greatest admiration for Florence Nightingale, sent her a copy of his book. True to form, Florence Nightingale reacted with her usual vivacity and made her complete disapproval quite clear.<sup>1</sup> "A society of this kind", she wrote to Dunant in January 1863, "would take upon itself duties that are in fact incumbent on the governments of every country". And she added that it would be an error to "wish to relieve these governments of a responsibility that is really theirs and which they alone are in a position to assume". There she was wrong, for in many countries the development of the army medical services was to come about with terrible slowness. In many places, the Red Cross was to prove stronger, better equipped, better organized and quicker to arrive on the battlefield, saving hundreds of thousands of wounded who, but for its help, would have died.

A few months after the Red Cross was founded, Dunant had another idea. He realized that belligerents were quite prepared to recognize the special situation of the wounded and of those who cared for them. They were not, strictly speaking, enemies, since they took no part in the fighting. Why then should they be subjected to the rigours of war? The belligerents were, in fact, prepared to spare such people, provided there was reciprocity and that vehicles and buildings used solely for the wounded were easily recognizable. Again Dunant found a simple and practicable solution.

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<sup>1</sup> See: *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge* :

"Comment l'Europe accueille le Souvenir de Solférino", by B. Gagnebin, June 1950 ;

"Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant", by J.-G. Lossier, English supplement of May 1954.

A single symbol, said Dunant, must be introduced in all armies, a symbol that would be the same everywhere and known to all, to indicate military hospitals, ambulances and medical personnel. Under a treaty, the States would mutually undertake to respect that emblem.

No sooner said than done. In 1864, a diplomatic conference met in the Geneva Town Hall and adopted the “ Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field ”. Ambulances, military hospitals and medical personnel were thenceforth to be “ recognized as neutral and, as such, protected and respected by the belligerents ”. “ A distinctive and uniform flag ” was adopted: a red cross on a white ground.

That event marked an important date in the history of humanity. War and law had until then been regarded as irreconcilable opposites: war implying the failure of international law. Dunant and the other founders of the Red Cross maintained, on the contrary, that even in wartime law could prevail and, in some spheres, govern the behaviour of combatants. Here was the origin of all written law of war: the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Conventions.

We have seen how, starting from identical premises, Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant chose different courses. Florence Nightingale reformed the medical services she had found inadequate. Dunant set up a new organization.

One might add that Florence Nightingale worked for her own country. She was concerned about the English army and proposed to endow it with better institutions. Dunant, on the other hand, took an international stand from the outset. He spoke of “ all the countries of the world ”. Everywhere he wanted those relief societies for which he felt there was an urgent need. And the Geneva Convention, too, should strive to be universal. Here lay the antithesis: Florence Nightingale’s work was national, while Dunant’s system was of an international nature. It is only fair, however, to add that Florence Nightingale’s work was very soon to extend far beyond the limits of the Empire, even though she had not sought to achieve that. Her work was an example to others. It inspired other States, starting with the Northern States during the War of Secession.

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As father of the Red Cross and of the Law of War, Dunant experienced the joys of celebrity for a little more than two years. But the Tarpeian rock still lay near the Capitol. In dedicating himself to the welfare of the wounded, Dunant badly neglected his business affairs, which went from bad to worse, and suddenly the abyss opened. A Geneva bank which had lent him money failed. Dunant was called upon to pay and became destitute. He sought refuge in Paris, slept on benches in public gardens and in railway waiting rooms. He suffered hunger, cold and bitter humiliation. In 1870-1871, during the Siege of Paris and the Commune, he made a brave and admirable reappearance, saved wounded persons and even managed to conduct negotiations between communards and the regular troops.

Then oblivion closed over him.

One day he arrived in a small village in German Switzerland overlooking Lake Constance: Heiden. A charitable institution gave him shelter. He was so poor that, lacking any change of clothing, he had to stay in bed while his clothes were being washed. He was to spend twenty-three years in that place of exile. Everyone thought he had died long ago, when one day a young German Swiss journalist discovered that the founder of the Red Cross was living in that village, in the canton of Appenzell. He hurried there to find Dunant, who had a long white beard and was clad in a red dressing-gown, immersed in a book he was writing against war: "*L'Avenir Sanglant*". What a scoop! Newspapers all over the world soon carried the astounding news that Henry Dunant was still alive. Overnight he was again covered in glory. Sovereigns wrote to him. He received thousands of messages and the supreme honour of being awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize.

In his will, written in a firm hand, Dunant asked that his "mortal remains should be cremated . . . with no ceremony whatsoever". So it was that he departed this life on 30 October 1910, two and a half months after Florence Nightingale, who had expressed the same wish, which was no less scrupulously fulfilled.

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Dunant disappeared from the scene in 1867, in circumstances which are well known. It was around that time that Florence

Nightingale convinced herself that she was no longer in a fit state to get up or to leave the house. She continued to work furiously from her bed, but, like Dunant, she so completely disappeared from the scene that the public came to believe that she, too, was dead. For forty-three years both were lost in anonymity, each confined to one room. This similarity is somewhat disturbing.

It seems obvious that a man who at the age of thirty-nine suffers however great a reverse of fortune, is not finished, particularly when he has the intellectual resources, friends and backing that Dunant had. Similarly, those who have closely studied the life of Florence Nightingale agree that her exhaustion following the Crimean war was not incurable. It would seem that nothing compelled her to lead the life of a recluse.

One can but wonder whether people who have given their all and reached the goal which Providence seemed to have assigned them do not have a vague yet imperative feeling that they must leave the scene, and that the work which they started will then be resumed by others and brought to fulfilment.

One last word.

As we have seen, Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant chose differing if not contrary ways of transforming the lot of soldiers. Let us then not say that Florence Nightingale was a forerunner of the Red Cross. Let us put her in the place she truly deserves, that of the founder of modern military medical services. That is no less a claim to glory!

Still the future was clearly to show that their work was complementary. To be convinced of this, it is enough to take a look at an ambulance or a hospital ship. They bear witness to the constant progress achieved on the lines advocated by Florence Nightingale. But what emblem protects them against attack from a possible enemy? The Red Cross, the emblem of Dunant. That is how their paths have again met and why they are now linked in our memories and in the gratitude of mankind.

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