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“I HAVE DONE MY DUTY”*

Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, 1854-56

In October 1854 in the Crimea, the war being waged against Russia by Turkey, Great Britain and France was at its height. Public opinion in Britain

* “*I have done my duty*” — *Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, 1854-56*, edited by Sue M. Goldie, published by Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, xii + 326 pp.

was outraged when news came of the dreadful conditions which sick and wounded soldiers had to endure. Florence Nightingale, who was at that time Superintendent of the Hospital for Invalid Gentlewomen in London, received permission to go to Scutari, a suburb of Istanbul, to care for the wounded and sick in the hospitals there.

From the day she arrived in Istanbul on 4 November 1854 until she returned to England at the end of July 1856, Florence Nightingale kept up regular correspondence with her family and friends. Sue M. Goldie, who is an expert on Florence Nightingale and has written her biography, has traced more than three hundred of her letters, of which she has included about a hundred in her book.

These letters fall into three broad categories:

- long, detailed reports to the War Office, in which she proposed immediate measures for the practical reform of the entire hospital administration;
- letters to nurse-recruiting offices and to friends and colleagues describing the frightful conditions encountered daily in hospitals overcrowded with thousands of wounded and cholera-stricken soldiers;
- letters to her family where she speaks of her “heart sinkings”, her exhaustion (she worked practically round the clock). Mainly, however, they express her conviction to give of her best and her determination to see her work successfully concluded.

Most of Florence Nightingale’s reports to the War Office during her first six months in the field are included in the book to illustrate her reaction to the carelessness and lack of organization of the army medical services which she found upon her arrival at the military hospital in Scutari. Although some of these reports were strictly official, most of them are private and completely frank, since they were addressed to her friend Sidney Herbert¹ who held a high position in the War Office. She told him from day to day of the almost insurmountable difficulties she had to face in an almost general atmosphere of hostility; in particular, she encountered opposition on the part of certain officials in charge of the army medical service, and found several nurses incompetent and unruly. However, after a few weeks in Scutari, her spirit of enterprise, energy and courage — plus powerful backing from Sidney Herbert — enabled her to organize the hospital more efficiently and to have female nurses admitted to military hospitals.

In April 1855, Florence Nightingale went to the Balaclava General Hospital in the Crimea where she met the same heads of the medical service who had done their utmost to oust her; the issue was finally resolved in March 1856 by the War Office which decided to entrust her with overall responsibility for the nursing services to the armed forces engaged in the Crimean War.

¹ He was Secretary at War.

The War Office was convinced that a strongly centralized nursing department was needed and that Florence Nightingale was clearly the most competent person to establish and be the head of such a department.

While striving to reorganize the nursing service, she tirelessly devoted herself to taking care of the wounded and the sick, in particular soldiers with cholera (although her letters rarely mention this aspect of her work). Being very demanding towards herself, she expected blind obedience from her subordinates, and the nurses working under her were bitter in their complaints. Gradually, however, she came to appreciate what the difficulties were; she tried to gain a better understanding of her colleagues' problems and secure the best possible working conditions for them.

In recognition of her services after the Crimean War, the British Government established the Foundation of the Nightingale Training School for Nurses in St. Thomas's Hospital.

Because of her work in the Crimea, and later as head of her school for nurses, Florence Nightingale is looked upon as one of the chief founders of modern nursing techniques. In perusing these selected letters — each one reproduced in its entirety in Sue M. Goldie's work — the reader acquires an extremely vivid impression of her reactions, her frustration, her indignation and, especially, her enthusiasm and total commitment to her vocation as a nurse.

Yet this book is more than a tribute to Florence Nightingale herself and all that she accomplished during the Crimean War. By showing just how vital the work of nurses in the midst of armed conflicts is, it also helps to restore due recognition for the often inadequately appreciated services of those who, in tending sick and wounded soldiers, are after all closest to them in their need.

Françoise Perret

PLANET OF VICTIMS

ICRC delegates on humanitarian mission

Should the work of an ICRC delegate be called a profession, a speciality, a state of mind, a way of life or a calling? There is no easy answer to this question. But one thing is certain: there is no other job quite like it. This is apparent from reading *La Planète des victimes*, the book devoted by Michel Goeldlin to ICRC delegates in the field.*

* Michel Goeldlin, *La Planète des victimes* (photographs by Yucki Goeldlin), Editions de l'Arve, Geneva, Editions du Griot, Paris, 1990, 280 pages.