

## Florence Nightingale

by Angela, Countess of Limerick

In 1872 Henry Dunant, on a visit to London, read a paper on the work of the Red Cross. His first words were:—" Though I am known as the Founder of the Red Cross, and the originator of the Conventions of Geneva, it was an Englishwoman to whom all the honour of that Convention is due. What inspired me was the work of Miss Florence Nightingale. . . "

In this generous tribute Dunant acknowledged his indebtedness to one of the greatest pioneers of modern nursing history.

Since the Crimean war, Florence Nightingale has acquired a legendary prestige. Her overwhelming sense of vocation had enabled her to overcome both the opposition of her family and the innumerable obstacles she subsequently encountered in achieving her life's ambition.

In 1850 after a visit to the 'Institute for the Training of Deaconesses' at Kaiserswerth, she wrote " Now I know what it is to live and love life." From then on she gave herself up to the training, already started in 1844, which was to fit her for the superhuman task to which she dedicated the rest of her life.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Crimean War in March 1854 the most disquieting reports were received in England of the ghastly conditions and shortages in the hospital in which the sick and wounded British patients were being nursed. In October of that year Sidney Herbert, the Secretary for War, wrote to Florence Nightingale asking her to undertake a scheme to introduce female nurses into the Army Hospitals in the Crimea:—" There is but one

person in England that I know of who would be capable of organising and superintending such a scheme ” and he added prophetically “ If this succeeds, a prejudice will have been broken through and a precedent established, which will multiply the good for all time ”.

Florence Nightingale had no hesitation in accepting the challenge. Unknown to Herbert, she had already acted on her own account. She had recruited a party of nurses and was prepared to sail immediately. When she arrived in the Crimea, Florence Nightingale and her party were regarded with grave suspicion and difficulties of every kind were put in her way. Her reforming zeal was bitterly resented by the authorities, who accused her of spoiling the troops and “ destroying discipline ”. Only someone with high courage and tenacity of purpose could have succeeded in producing order out of the chaos of the hospitals where the neglect and suffering of the patients were unspeakable.

As conditions worsened with the approach of winter and the magnitude of the disaster became apparent, the official attitude changed and within a few months Florence Nightingale had established her position.

With lack of proper accommodation, a shortage of medical supplies, clothing and suitable food, Florence Nightingale reported “ calamity unparalleled in history of calamity ”. It was not only in caring for the sick and wounded that Florence Nightingale transformed the situation, but her insistence on better and more hygienic conditions in the barracks and a more civilised life for the troops were also part of the Herculean task she set herself.

The crushing burden was the administrative work—“ Nursing is the least of the functions into which I have been forced ” she writes. Everyone came to her for help and advice. But she rose to the occasion, and as one of her biographers describes it “ she became the rock to which everyone clung. Her calmness, her resource, her power to take action raised her to the position of a goddess. The troops worshipped her ”. But these great achievements were only accomplished at the expense of unremitting toil and led to several complete breakdowns in health. On one occasion she hovered for two weeks between life and death.

In April 1856 peace was proclaimed and 3 months later the last patient left the Barrack Hospital at Scutari. But Florence Nightin-

gale was very conscious that her work was not ended. She had seen hell, she said on her return to England, and she could never forget it.

The mortality in the Crimean disaster, 73% in 3 months from disease alone, was the result of faulty hospital administration, and she realised, exhausted as she was, that she would have to tackle the gigantic task of peacetime reform in this field if her experience in the Crimean war was to be of any permanent value.

Through her influence a Royal Commission was set up to study the problems involved and as the result of its work civilian hospitals, as well, benefited from the recommendations. From this period Florence Nightingale's advice was freely sought on all matters affecting medical administration and the detailed planning of hospitals both at home and overseas.

A further development of her work was the opening, in 1860, of the Nightingale Training School for Nurses at St. Thomas' Hospital in London—the precursor of similar schools in other parts of the country. A year later she was helping to establish the first District Nursing Service and at the same time she was planning the training of midwives.

In 1870, at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, the National Society for Aid to the Sick and Wounded (subsequently the British Red Cross Society) was formed, and Florence Nightingale was pressed to take control of its work. She was too busily involved in her other activities to accept, but she did, however, take a close interest in its work and made an appeal for its funds, which met with a generous response.

“Those who undertake the work of aiding the sick and wounded” she wrote, “must not be sentimental enthusiasts but downright lovers of hard work”.

She held the same views about nurses—she despaired of what she described as “Excellent gentlewomen more fit for heaven than a hospital”. Every nurse should be trained to lead and take big responsibilities and big risks if the purpose was big enough, just as she did, throughout her adventurous life.

Florence Nightingale had not only progressive ideas, but also the spirit of adventure and the faith to bring them to fruition. The Herculean task she set herself, however, was only carried out at the expense of her health and her personal life. She shunned

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publicity, and there is no doubt that at one time she exploited her ill health to gain the necessary time and solitude for her labours.

Florence Nightingale was a hard and exacting task mistress and she had no scruple about driving others relentlessly at the pace she herself was prepared to set. As a result she succeeded not only in remedying many of the appalling social evils of her day, but also in paving the way for much of the progressive social legislation enacted in the latter part of the 19th Century.

Florence Nightingale has left to posterity an ideal, stamped with her own image. In the Florence Nightingale medal, presented for outstanding nursing achievements, this image takes material form—it represents not only technical skill, but the qualities of the pioneer, the self discipline, the capacity for action and the sacrifice for a consuming purpose.

In June 1907 the VIII International Red Cross Conference was held in London.

A message was sent—"To Miss Florence Nightingale, the pioneer of the first Red Cross movement, whose heroic efforts on behalf of suffering humanity will be recognised and admired by all ages as long as the world shall last."

Therein lies her Memorial.

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