

In the Red Cross and Red Crescent World

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Her life (1820-1910)

Born in Florence, Italy, to well-to-do and learned English parents, Florence Nightingale was brought up in a religiously tolerant milieu and keenly aware of social injustice. Her father, to whom she was very close, raised her in a non-conformist manner which at the time was more appropriate for a boy than for a girl. From a very early age she was deeply concerned with the plight of the poor and felt a calling to become a nurse, though she knew full well that there was little formal training available and that she would have to gain practical experience for herself. So she began to read everything she could find, even statistical works. When her family travelled around Europe, she visited the hospitals of the great cities, observing and learning how to care for those who were both sick and poor. In Paris she trained with the Sisters of Charity and then went to Kaiserswerth, Germany, where she took a complete nursing course at the Institution of Protestant Deaconesses. After returning to England, in 1853 she was appointed superintendent of London's Hospital for Invalid Gentlewomen, which she reorganized. Her acceptance of this post brought about the final break with her family, which opposed her choice of activity. And Miss Nightingale herself was prey to doubts and inner turmoil arising from her conflicting desires to have a social and family life and yet devote herself to her ideal of humanitarian service. In the end, she rejected a prestigious marriage in order to follow her vocation.

But it was her work during the Crimean War (1854-1856) that made Florence Nightingale famous throughout Britain and later the entire world; indeed, she achieved legendary status during her own lifetime.

A pioneer of relief for wounded soldiers

The Crimean War, which pitted Britain, France and Turkey against Russia, took a very heavy toll owing to the use of new and more sophisticated firearms. It also revealed the total inefficacy of the British army's medical services, under

whose care the wounded soldiers died more often of disease caused by poor hygiene and sheer negligence than they did of the injuries they had received. The alarm was sounded by a correspondent for *The Times* who called for dedicated women to come and care for the wounded soldiers at the hospital in Scutari, an eastern suburb of Constantinople. Florence Nightingale's message to Under-Secretary of State Sidney Herbert, a friend of hers, expressing her willingness to go, crossed with his message to her asking her to do so. She arrived in Scutari in October 1854 with forty assistants — including several nuns — and powerful political backing. Besides appalling hospital conditions — filth, overcrowding, rats and shortages of food, clothing, surgeons, equipment and medicines — she also had to contend with the animosity of doctors who regarded her as an intruder. But her organizational skill, her enterprising spirit and her determination enabled her to make the hospital more efficient and to gain acceptance for her nurses in the treatment of the wounded, which had previously been the exclusive domain of military personnel. While devoting tremendous energy to her administrative tasks, she also worked day and night to care for the patients: she met them as they arrived in Scutari, she comforted them during the most harrowing operations, she brought solace to the dying. At night, when not writing to Sidney Herbert, who had meanwhile become Minister of War, to tell him how chaotic the conditions really were, she wrote letters for soldiers to their families and went from ward to ward, lamp in hand, to see what more could be done.¹ It is said the patients would kiss her shadow as she passed. Though inspired by general humanitarianism, her attitude towards the soldiers was also distinctly maternal. They called her "the Lady with the Lamp", a name by which she became known throughout the world, and saw her as an angel of gentleness and selfless compassion. The prevailing view of her day was that a nurse was someone who had been disappointed in her affections or was simply incapable of doing anything else.² Yet Florence Nightingale began to change all that; she was a woman of action, action based on a genius for organization, strict discipline, hard work and an indomitable spirit. That is what made her a true heroine. She ushered in a new era of service to wounded soldiers who had previously been abandoned to their fate — more by tradition, their duty being to fight the enemy and not to stop and help wounded comrades, than out of inhumanity.³

¹ Montgomery, John, *Florence Nightingale*, Edito-Service, Geneva, 1970.

² Gordon, Richard, *The private life of Florence Nightingale*, Penguin Books, London, 1980, p. 61.

³ *Idem*, p. 156.

Legend and reality

If Florence Nightingale had died during the Crimean War — as she very nearly did from fever — her legendary reputation as the Lady with the Lamp would probably have been no different, for that image of her in Scutari is still what remains in the public mind. Yet for Miss Nightingale herself, the Crimean War was but an episode in her life, a stepping stone in her career.

Life truly began for her when she returned to England, though she did so in a state of exhaustion and suffering from depression brought on by her years in Turkey. Indeed, convinced that she was not physically able to rise from her bed, she declared herself an invalid and spent the rest of her life — over fifty years — living more or less as a recluse in her bedroom, surrounded by servants and secretaries. She invested her fame and her energy in furthering the causes dear to her: reforming the army's medical services, revolutionizing the concept and siting of hospitals, developing the field of preventive medicine and improving the status and training of nurses. She went to considerable lengths — including claims of her own imminent death — to enlist the aid of those whose support she needed. Famous people came to consult her. Some of her biographers have stated that, with the exception of Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale was probably the best informed woman in the entire country. This was because she maintained close contact with people who were at the centre of the power structure but, above all, it was because she was a voracious reader. Using the knowledge and experience she had acquired in Scutari, she wrote a steady stream of letters, notes, memoranda and reports about the areas of interest to her. Her writings reflect great intelligence, common sense, a comprehensive approach to problems and astonishing vision. Florence Nightingale believed that to cure an illness it was not enough to apply a treatment; the patient should be placed in the best situation possible to allow nature its full healing potential. She therefore advocated instructing nurses, and indeed the entire population, in health care and hygiene. To be effective, she knew that hygienic measures had to be accompanied by proper sanitation and a reliable supply of clean water.

A forerunner of the Tracing Agency

As mentioned above, Miss Nightingale was not concerned only with the physical comfort of her patients; she also endeavoured to meet their cultural and emotional needs. In Scutari, she set up areas for reading and recreation and organized courses and lectures.

At night, when she was not working in the wards, she wrote letters for the patients to their families. If someone died, she had a form letter that she used to describe to a soldier's wife or mother his last hours, reassuring her that he

had thought of her and also that he had accepted his approaching death. Finally, she indicated the burial site. Likewise, she was often contacted by the wives of soldiers, who had not heard from their husbands for months. She always replied personally after doing her best to trace the individual concerned and making enquiries of the military authorities to ensure that no mistake had been made about the name. Miss Nightingale thus anticipated the work of the Central Tracing Agency, which itself dates back to 1870. The founders of the relief agency established at that time in Basel, Switzerland, soon realized how much the morale of the victims of the Franco-Prussian War was improved by being able to write to their families.

Florence Nightingale's influence on the founders of the Red Cross and on the Movement's work

At a lecture he gave in 1872 in London, Henry Dunant paid tribute to the work of Florence Nightingale. Both knew of the other's accomplishments but they never met, as Dunant did not take up her invitation to spend a few days in Claydon, where she was staying with her sister. Several years earlier Dunant had sent her a copy of his book *Un souvenir de Solferino* and Nightingale had made no secret of her disapproval. Though they admired each other, they differed as to what could best be done to come to the aid of war casualties. The founder of the Red Cross thought it best to act at the international level, setting up volunteer relief societies in every country in peacetime, the members of which would be ready to act in the event of war. Miss Nightingale objected to this idea and favoured the nationalist cause of reorganizing and reforming the administration of the British army. She felt that the relief societies proposed by Dunant would take on responsibilities that properly belonged to the government of each country, whereas the latter, thus freed of those charges, would be more likely to engage in new wars. Moreover, she did not believe that belligerent powers would respect the rules of international law, such as those laid down by the Geneva Convention. She was convinced that each nation had to face up to its own problems.

Despite their differences and the fact that his project eventually prevailed, Henry Dunant held "the Lady with the Lamp" in very high esteem. Following his visit to London, he wrote of her as a "noble lady who pioneered a new era of universal charity".⁴ Her dedication so impressed the Japanese during the Meiji

⁴ Lossier, Jean-George, "Hommage à Florence Nightingale", *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 423, March 1954, p. 187.

period (1868-1911) that they deified her as a *kwannon*, Buddhist goddess of pity.⁵ One of the first tasks undertaken by the Japanese Red Cross when it was founded in 1890 was to train nurses and imbue them with Florence Nightingale's altruistic spirit.

It was her influence in improving the status and training of nurses — first in Britain then throughout the world — that enabled the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to carry out their traditional task of caring for wounded and sick members of the armed forces. Her reference works on hygiene, health-care training and social welfare also enabled them, when the First World War ended, to develop peacetime applications for their activities.

Florence Nightingale's legacy endures and the lamp she lit in Scutari burns brighter than ever. In May 1993, the ICRC awarded the Florence Nightingale Medal to 35 nurses.⁶ This brings to 1,075 the total number of medals conferred since the first award on 12 May 1920, the hundredth anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth.

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NOTE

The *Review* is happy to reproduce hereinafter (pp. 476) two photographs showing the award of the Florence Nightingale Medal in 1993.

The ICRC thanks all the National Societies which sent information and photographs concerning the award of the Florence Nightingale Medal in their respective countries. It regrets being unable to publish all the photographs for lack of space.

⁵ "Monuments élevés à la mémoire de Florence Nightingale", *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 423, March 1954, p. 203.

⁶ See *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 295, July-August 1993, pp. 312-317.



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: President Clinton presenting the Florence Nightingale Medal to Dr. Claudia Adkins at a ceremony attended by senior officials of the American Red Cross.



PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA: Ms Li Guimei, Ms Zhang Jin Yu and Ms Zhang Shuihua, recipients of the Florence Nightingale Medal.