



Nightingale, Florence (1820-1910)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Florence Nightingale.

Famous as the mother of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale has often been depicted as a selfless and fairly bland do-gooder. In reality, she was a tough, even ruthless, reformer who took on many of the most powerful institutions of her time and fought passionately for her right to a career and an individual identity in the stifling atmosphere of Victorian England.

Nightingale refused to be pushed into any of the limited roles (wife, mother, social ornament) available to middle class women of the time. Instead, she carved out a significant role for herself, and, in the process, paved the way for professional nursing as a career choice for women all over the world.

Nightingale was born on May 12, 1820, to wealthy English parents who named her after her birthplace, Florence, Italy. She received a classical education from her father, who taught her Greek, Latin, history, and mathematics at home.

Early in life, she became convinced that her calling in life was caring for the sick. Her family was horrified by this revelation, since nursing was considered an occupation for lower class women, who were believed to be generally drunken and slovenly. Nightingale persisted, however, and in 1850 she began to study nursing in Egypt, Germany, and France. In 1853, she was rewarded with an unpaid job, supervising a women's hospital in London.

The event that would change Nightingale's life forever was the Crimean War, in which Britain was allied with France and Turkey against Russia. When the war began in 1854, Britain's War Secretary asked Nightingale to lead a unit of 38 women to nurse the troops, who were dying of disease faster than they could be killed in the fighting.

Nightingale's exacting and efficient approach to nursing helped reduce the death rate from diseases such as cholera, typhus, and dysentery from almost 50% to 2%. However, she was angered and frustrated by the indifference and incompetence of the army bureaucracy, which she felt was responsible for many deaths among the fighting men.

Nightingale felt protective of her patients and watched over many of them personally, day and night. The image of her patrolling endless rows of sickbeds at night, lighting her way with a lamp, was a romantic one, which was sent back to London by war correspondents.

When Nightingale returned to England she had become famous through the many articles written about her in the *London Times*. Although her own health had been broken by her grueling two years in the Crimea, she used her fame to work for the causes she believed in especially, reforms in the War Office and the Medical Establishment of the British Army and the creation of nurses' training programs. Although she herself never nursed again, she became a well-known public figure whose advice on health matters was sought by many world leaders.

Her chronic illness for the last 50 years of her life and her status as an invalid only added to the reverence in which she was regarded by the public. In her later life, she used the awe she inspired, and to some extent even her illness, to advance her ideas. She especially advocated the cause of preventive medicine and better medical treatment for the poor.

Although much of Florence Nightingale's work improved the lot of women everywhere, she had little affection for women in general, preferring the friendship of powerful men. Perhaps she felt a kinship with them, since she often referred to herself in the masculine, as "a man of action," for example.

She did, however, have several important and passionate friendships with women. As a young woman she adored both an aunt and a female cousin with lover-like attachment. Later in life she kept up a prolonged correspondence with an Irish nun, Sister Mary Clare Moore, with whom she had worked in Crimea. Her most beloved confidante was Mary Clarke, an Englishwoman she met in 1837 and kept in touch with throughout her life.

In spite of these deep emotional attachments to women, most scholars of Nightingale's life believe that she remained celibate for her entire life, perhaps because she felt an almost religious calling to her career, or perhaps because she lived in time of sexual repression. Her relationships might be seen as "Romantic Friendships."

She died August 15, 1910 in England.

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