

WOMEN WHO MADE BRITAIN

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE 1820 - 1910

Florence is best known as the Lady of the Lamp for her work as a nurse in the Crimean war however she was much, much more than that.

She was named Florence after the city where she was born in 1820 the younger of two daughters.

She came from a wealthy family and was an intellectually precocious child excelling in maths and languages. She was able to read and write French, German, Italian, Greek and Latin from an early age. Her father taught her through history, philosophy and literature.

She had no interest in traditional female skills preferring to read and engage in serious political and social discussions with her father. Her parents moved in elite social circles which Florence did not enjoy as she was rather awkward in social situations.

From a young age Florence was active philanthropist ministering to ill and poor people in the village near her home. She viewed her calling to reduce human suffering as her divine purpose and came to the conclusion that nursing was her vocation. In Victorian times women had no rights and were expected to marry a man of means and maintain her social standing. She received one proposal of marriage but turned him down as she felt her calling was more important.

Needless to say her parents were not pleased and forbade her to pursue training. Nursing was viewed by the upper social classes as lowly menial labour.

Florence however was strong willed and despite her parents objections she enrolled as a nursing student in Germany in 1850 – she was now 30 years old.

In early 1851 Florence returned to London and took a nursing job in an Harley Street hospital for ailing governesses. Her employer was so impressed she was promoted to superintendent. She also volunteered at the Middlesex hospital fighting a cholera outbreak. Her mission to improve hygiene practices significantly reduced death rate.

In October 1853 the Crimea War broke out. Thousands of British soldiers were sent to the Black Sea. By 1854 18 thousand soldiers had been admitted to the military hospitals. England was in an uproar over the neglect of ill and injured soldiers with many more dying of disease than died of injuries.

In 1854 Nightingale received a letter from her friend Sidney Herbert, the Secretary of War asking her to organise a corps of nurses to travel to the Crimea and tend the sick and injured. At that time there were no female nurses in the Crimea.

When she and her 38 nurses arrived they found appalling conditions – nothing had prepared them. The hospital at Scutari was on top of a large cesspit and was infested with rodents and bugs. Florence quickly set to work. She procured hundreds of scrubbing brushes and set the least ill patients to work scrubbing the hospital. She established a standard of care with basic necessities such as bathing, clean clothes and dressings and adequate food. She also organised an invalids kitchen, a laundry, a classroom and a library

Florence spent every waking moment caring for the soldiers even at night which led to her being called the Lady with the lamp.

Her work reduced the death rate by 2/3rds although this is disputed in some quarters. She remained there for a year and a half leaving in 1856 when the war was over.

When she returned to England much to her surprise she was given a hero's welcome. The previous year Queen Victoria had rewarded her work by presenting her with an engraved brooch which became known as the Nightingale Jewel plus a large grant. Florence used the money to further her cause and established St Thomas Hospital with the Nightingale Training School.

She inspired young women, even those from upper classes to follow her example and take up nursing. Thanks to her nursing was no longer frowned upon and was seen as an honourable vocation.

Based on her observations during the war she wrote a massive report proposing reforms for military hospitals. This sparked a total restructuring of the war offices administration department and a Royal commission for the health of the army.

Florence was also a statistician devising pie charts on patient mortality in Scutari that would influence the direction of medical epidemiology.

While in Scutari she contracted a bacterial infection brucellosis and never fully recovered. By the time she was 38 she was housebound and frequently bedridden which continued for the rest of her life.

Living in Mayfair she remained an authority and advocate of health care reform interviewing politicians and distinguished visitors from her bed.

In 1859 she published 'Notes on Hospitals' focussing on how to properly run civilian hospitals. During the US civil war she was consulted about managing field hospitals and served as an authority on public sanitation issues in India.

In 1907 she received the Order of Merit from King Edward and received the freedom of the City of London the following year – the first woman to receive the honour. In 1910 King George sent her a congratulations on her 90th birthday.

Today she is primarily remembered for her work in the Crimea but her greatest achievements were her attempts to create social reform, improving the health of all sections of society and founding the philosophy in modern nursing. She also helped to abolish prostitution laws which were particularly harsh on women and worked on expanding the acceptable forms of female participation in the workforce.

She was a member of the Royal Statistical Society's comprehensive study of sanitation which pressed for compulsory sanitation in private homes which led to the public health act.

In 1910 she fell ill and died a week later. She had expressed her wish for a quiet and modest funeral. Her relatives respected her wish despite the public's desire to honour her with a state funeral.

She was laid to rest in the family grave at East Wellow in Hampshire but subsequently a memorial service was held in St Pauls Cathedral.

Florence was an incredible woman, fiercely intelligent and hard working. She opened the door for women to have more control of their lives. Her work led to many changes in the health of the nation and instigated social reform. She deserves to be remembered for more than her work in the Crimea.

Question?

Did her view of nursing as a vocation result nurses pay being kept low. It has improved but is still not highly paid. Will the current situation change that?