Florence Nightingale: nurse and public health pioneer

August 2010 marks the centenary of the death of Florence Nightingale, who must be, without doubt, the most famous name in nursing. Most people, even those in the health professions, think of her as 'The Lady with the Lamp'; the heroine of the Crimean War, who tended the sick and wounded soldiers at Scutari. Important though this was, her main contribution, which continued long after Crimea, was in the organization of nursing training, in hospital planning, public and military health, and in effective collection of medical statistics.

Florence Nightingale was born in 1820. Her parents were wealthy, with large estates in Derbyshire and Hampshire. She was born during one of her parents' prolonged trips abroad and was appropriately named Florence, the city of her birth. (Her elder sister, Parthenope, born in Naples, was given the Greek name of her birthplace.) Florence was a highly intelligent child and received a broad education from her father and private tutors – in modern languages, the classics, literature and mathematics. Much to her parents' alarm, she announced, at the age of 24 years, that she had made up her mind to become a nurse.

Miss Nightingale studied at various medical institutions during her travels, becoming familiar with the nursing at Catholic sisterhoods. She was particularly influenced by the practice of the Deaconess Institute at Kaiserwerth, Germany. This was a Protestant establishment which offered a 3-year training course in nursing and pharmacy. It provided both inpatient and outpatient care, as well as relief of the poor and work among prisoners and 'fallen women'. Florence attended a 3-month course at Kaiserwerth and also studied at the Sisters of Charity in Paris.

Professor Harold Ellis *is Emeritus Professor of Surgery, Guy's, King's and St Thomas' School of Biomedical Sciences, London SE1 1UL*

In 1853 she was appointed superintendent of 'The Establishment for Gentlewomen During Illness' in Harley Street, London, a charity for sick governesses. Here, within a year, she established a model institution and had plans to open a school of nursing.

Now fate intervened. In 1854, war broke out. British and French troops were sent to the Crimea to support Turkey in a rather obscure dispute with Russia. By October, reports from news correspondents were reaching home of the appalling conditions of the British sick and wounded, compared with the good care given to their French allies by the French medical service, aided by the Sisters of Charity. Sir Herbert Spencer, a family friend and the Secretary for War, requested that Miss Nightingale, provided with plentiful and independent funds, should take appropriate equipment and a contingent of nurses to Scutari.

Here, outside Constantinople (now Istanbul), and across the Black Sea from the Crimea, was situated the main British base hospital. This was in an old Turkish Army barracks, its 1700 beds overwhelmed with 3–4000 sick and wounded British personnel. Facilities were all but non-existent. Wound sepsis, cholera, dysentery and 'Crimea fever' were rampant and the mortality was a dreadful 42.7%.

How Florence dealt with this situation has passed into British folk-lore, but the fact remains that the Lady with the Lamp (which she carried on her night rounds) had the mortality down to 2.7% in a few months.

While visiting the Crimea, she contracted Crimea fever and nearly died. Her health was seriously and permanently damaged and the rest of her life was spent as an invalid, much of it confined to her room. Now began the less known but remarkable phase of her life. First she published her 800-page *Notes on matters affecting the health efficiency and hospital administration of the British Army*, packed with facts, figures, statistics and tables. Much as a result of this, Army hospitals and barracks were reconstructed and a military medical college established.

In 1859 came her *Notes on Nursing*, which became a standard textbook, translated into many languages and still in print today. In 1860 the Nightingale School of Nursing opened at St Thomas' Hospital, with funds raised from a popular appeal after the war. (There is, by the way, a splendid Florence Nightingale Museum in the grounds of St Thomas' Hospital.) In the last 10 years of her life, her mind and vision faded – she eventually became totally blind. Honours were showered upon her. She became the first woman to receive the Order of Merit, granted to her by Edward VI 1 in 1907.

She died on August 13 1910, at the age of 90 years. In her will she requested a simple burial in the family plot near Romsey, Hampshire, with a small cross, bearing only her initials and dates of birth and death, to mark her grave. To comply with her wishes, the family refused the offer of burial in Westminster Abbey, with all the accompanying pomp and ceremony of state. **BJHM**

Figure 1 *is reproduced courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library.*
Conflict of interest: none.

Figure 1. Florence Nightingale.