

The Lady with the Lamp

"Angel With the Lamp"
Florence Nightingale figure
from Len Taylor of Trophy.



Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

Florence Nightingale's simple approach to patient care revolutionized nursing during the Crimean War, according to James H. Hillestad

In 1853, Russia and Turkey went to war over the guardianship of Christian places in the Holy Land, then part of the Ottoman Empire. The Russians destroyed the Turkish fleet at anchor in the Black Sea port of Sinope Nov. 30, 1853.

Alarmed at the possibility that Russia would gain control of the Bosphorus Strait, and with it access to the Mediterranean Sea, Britain and France declared war March 28, 1854. A joint British-French expeditionary force of 58,000 men was sent across the Black Sea to land on the west coast of the Crimean Peninsula in September 1854. Their mission: to attack the main Russian naval port of Sevastopol.

As the allied armies advanced, they ran into Russian forces at the River Alma Sept. 20, 1854. Though they suffered heavy losses, the Anglo-French troops succeeded in routing the Russians in what is considered to be the first battle of the Crimean War.

NIGHTMARISH HOSPITAL

What followed was a tragic series of events, precipitated by British unpreparedness.

When the British invaded, they were short of transports. They had left behind everything from medical supplies and hospital marquees to

ambulance wagons, pack animals, bedding, stretchers and kitchen equipment at their staging point in Varna, Bulgaria.

Before a shot was fired, more than 2,000 men contracted cholera and were sent off to the main military hospital at Scutari, 400 miles

across the Black Sea -- a voyage of eight days. Soon thousands more were to follow as a result of the Battle of the Alma.

The British hospital at Scutari became synonymous with all that was wrong with the British Army.

Situated opposite Constantinople, and overlooking the Bosphorus, the huge yellow-brick compound had originally been a Turkish



Florence Nightingale nurses a patient
in a set made by The Toy Soldiers of
Wm. Hocker, Proprietor.



Nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale, who became famous as "The Lady With the Lamp" during the Crimean War. (Courtesy of the Florence Nightingale Museum, London)



Fighting between Russia and the Ottoman Empire drew Anglo-French forces into the Crimean War due to concern that the Czar might win control of the strategic Bosphorus Strait. This map reflects the relative positions of the combat zone around Sevastopol and the distant hospital at Scutari. (Courtesy of Constable & Robinson Ltd., London)

army barracks. Designed to accommodate 2,000 physically fit soldiers, it soon became "home" to 20,000 sick, wounded, and dying men.

Besides overcrowding, the Scutari hospital suffered from dampness and filth, from inadequate and blocked drains and sewers, and was overrun with rats and vermin. Casualty statistics tell the tale: Of the 20,813 British soldiers who died in the Crimea before the Russians were defeated and the Treaty of Paris signed in 1856, 18,000 of them died from wounds or disease.

PIONEERING NURSE

It was into this scene that Florence Nightingale arrived.

Born in Italy in 1820, she was named Florence after her birthplace. Her British parents were wealthy and religious, with a tradition of philanthropy.

In 1837, Florence had a mystical experience in which she felt called by God. At a time when nurses were regarded as a class of ignorant, disreputable females, who all too often drank or worse, she chose -- over the objections of her family -- to devote her life to nursing.

Florence trained at renowned hospitals in Germany and Paris. In 1853, she was appointed superintendent of the Institute for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Harley Street, London.

Her family was well-connected. War Secretary Sydney Herbert obtained governmental approval to support sending Florence Nightingale along with 38 nurses to the hospital in Scutari.

Nightingale's team included 14 nurses from various hospitals, a half-dozen nurses from St. John's Institute, 10 Roman Catholic nuns and eight Anglican Sisters of Mercy.

OVERCOMING OPPOSITION

The women arrived at Scutari Nov. 5, 1854, just in time to witness the "reception" of wounded survivors of the British Light Brigade from its famous charge at the Battle of Balaclava the previous Oct. 25.

At first, the nurses were not welcomed by the



"Florrie's Lorry," a sturdy Russian-built carriage used to transport Florence Nightingale on inspection tours of hospitals during the Crimean War. (Courtesy of St. Thomas' Hospital, London)

PENSIONERS IN THE CRIMEA

A pitiful reminder of the ineptness of the British medical service at the time of the Crimean War was the decision to send out an ambulance detachment (Hospital Conveyance Corps) comprised of Chelsea Pensioners.

It is of some conjecture whether it was a scheme to shorten the old soldiers' lives (and pensions) or an effort to save money.

In any case, the plan was an abject failure. The worn-out, aged, and infirm veterans had hardly the strength to attend to the wounded, and in their weakened condition died in numbers.

--James H. Hillestad



Chelsea Pensioner figure by ErrolJohn Studios.

▶ Army doctors, who disdained any possibility that the women could contribute to patient care. The doctors resisted any change in the male status quo.

In fact, the chief of medical staff of the British Expeditionary Army, Dr. John Hall, went so far as to thwart Nightingale whenever possible. His attitude

to the sick was that pampering them merely made them less likely to want to return to the fight when well again.

With the growing influx of casualties and the increasing mortality rate of those suffering in the "hospital," Nightingale overcame Hall's resentment. She is credited with gradually

transforming the hospital from a place of death, where the mortality rate was a horrifying 42 percent, to a place of recovery and hope.

Because she permitted no other nurse than herself in the wards at night, when they were staffed by male orderlies, she became known among her patients as the "Angel of the Crimea" and the "The Lady With the Lamp," a phrase popularized in the 1857 poem "Santa Filomena" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

MARY SEACOLE: THE BLACK NIGHTINGALE

Florence Nightingale is famous worldwide, but how many people know the name of Mary Seacole, "The Black Nightingale?"

Mary Seacole was born in Jamaica in 1805. Her Scottish father was a British Army officer and her mother, a black Creole, was a respected member of Kingston society, being both a "doctress" and lodging-house keeper.

Mary's mother was regarded as a healer, combining generations of African culture with local Caribbean herbal remedies. Conventional doctors would carry a black bag full of pills and instruments. In contrast, Seacole's mother used a collection of flowers, stems, leaves, and roots for healing. In 1801, the English botanist Thomas Dancer heartily endorsed these Jamaican remedies for European residents of the island because -- quite simply -- they worked.



Figure of Mary Seacole by John Eden Studios.

Like her mother, Mary Seacole was both an entrepreneur who owned lodging establishments and a tender of the sick. She managed a professional nursing service for the British Army in Jamaica in the early 1850s. She provided valuable services to the British 97th Regiment billeted there.

When in London in 1854, Seacole heard of the terrible suffering of the Crimean War wounded in the hospital at Scutari. The casualties included soldiers she had known in Jamaica.

Seacole applied to the War Office to work as a hospital nurse, but was rejected despite her knowledge of tropical diseases and glowing letters of introduction by medical officers in Jamaica. Aside from being black, she was viewed as being a confident, opinionated, and impulsive woman -- one who might cause problems for Florence Nightingale's embryonic nursing contingent.

Thus it was that Mary Seacole set off on her own to open a hotel for invalids in the Crimea. On the surface it was an outrageous proposition, but it was in keeping with her spirit of adventure and compassion.

2 WOMEN WORLDS APART

En route to the Crimea, Seacole stopped at the hospital at Scutari, where she met Nightingale. They were two dedicated women worlds apart.

It has been said that Nightingale's greatest aim was to reform the organization of medical services not only at Scutari, but throughout the whole of the British Army. Above all,



A bust of Mary Seacole sculpted by her friend Count Gleichen, Queen Victoria's nephew, in 1871. (Courtesy of Constable & Robinson Ltd., London)

she wanted to secure recognition of the value of women as nurses. In all these aims she succeeded brilliantly.

Seacole, on the other hand, simply sought to make life -- or death -- a little more comfortable for her patients. Nightingale's character tended toward intolerance while Seacole's was more relaxed and self-assured. She was a mixture of doctor, apothecary, surrogate deathbed mother, practitioner and comforter.

Seacole continued her journey across the Black Sea and arrived in Balaclava, where she set about gathering supplies for her "British Hotel." It was located seven miles from the besieged Russian naval base at Sevastopol. Living conditions were severe. Her building materials were packing cases and iron sheeting.

Though she did not wish to rival the doctors, Seacole soon found herself in demand from the soldiers because her medicines were effective. On Sept. 9, 1855, she was the first woman to enter Sevastopol after the city fell.

She returned to England in 1856 and she continued to practice as a "doctress" in London. Seacole attended to the Princess of Wales, who suffered from rheumatism. She was also a privileged guest at the Royal Residence at Marlborough House.

She died in 1881. In a 2004 BBC opinion pool, Mary Seacole was voted "the greatest black Briton in history."

--James H. Hillestad



A British officer helps Florence Nightingale deliver a Christmas gift to a wounded soldier of the 49th Foot in "God Bless You Ma'am." This set was produced exclusively for W. Britain Collectors Club members.



Florence Nightingale figure by Corgi Classics.

SANITARY REVOLUTION

Nightingale's approach was simple, but revolutionary at the time. She stressed the importance of pure air, pure

water, efficient drainage and, above all, cleanliness.

She observed that the close proximity of sick and injured patients in dark, airless conditions caused infections to spread rapidly. She designed wards that were long, airy rooms, with

each bed having an open window and a flow of air.

Nightingale also installed boilers to wash the linens and bedding in hot water, replacing the usual cold water washing. In addition, she overhauled the kitchens to provide proper nutrition to convalescents in the wards.

After the Crimean War, Florence continued her pioneering work in reorganizing the military medical services, reforming hospitals and establishing nursing as a professional service. In fact, she almost single-handedly erased the stigma of being a nurse.

Florence Nightingale died in 1910 in her 90th year. She was buried at her home in Hampshire, shunning the opportunity to be interred at Westminster Abbey in London.

Makers of 54-mm, painted metal figures who have commemorated Florence Nightingale's work include Corgi Classics, ErrolJohn Studios, W. Britain, Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd. and The Toy Soldiers of Wm. Hocker, Proprietor. ■

“We have not a basin nor a towel nor a bar of soap nor a broom. We are steeped up to our necks in blood. Not a sponge, nor a rag of linen. These poor fellows have not had a clean shirt nor have been washed for two months before they came here.”

--Florence Nightingale, *the Crimea*



"The Lady With the Lamp" checks on a patient in a vignette produced by ErrolJohn Studios.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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