



The Lady with the Lamp

BOOK REVIEW



By Lydia Wyrzes, MD

NIGHTINGALES: The Extraordinary Upbringing and Curious Life of Miss Florence Nightingale, Gillian Gill, Random House Publishing Group, ISBN 0-345-45187-2

"CURIOUS," INDEED. In one of the more fascinating glimpses of Victorian life and mannerisms, this well-written and engrossing book delves into a time when a woman knew her place; it certainly was not on the battlefields of the Crimea, blowing up the medical establishment about all aspects of medical care. This extraordinary woman became convinced she had a divine mission, much to the eternal gratitude of the common British soldier and lovers of cleanliness everywhere. She single-handedly precipitated the development of modern nursing and put public health on the radar screen. Yet, paradoxically, she spent the last 52 years of her long life essentially housebound, usually bedridden, though no medical basis for such disability was ever determined. For at least two decades, she never left her bedroom. How is it possible to reconcile these incongruities?

Gillian Gill brings a wealth of careful scholarship to the subject that both informs and entertains. As a biography that reads more like a novel, we learn about the unusual Nightingale family, close and irritating as most families can be. Florence's unique education as her father's star pupil along with her personality set the stage for her eventual transformation into the "Lady with the Lamp," the best known person in England during the 22 months she spent in the Crimea, beginning in 1854. Yet, she was a product of her age, so details on estates, marriageable suitors and male (and female) prejudices flow through the book as much as any written by Jane Austen. Florence Nightingale was an anomaly even by the standards of her day. She differed from other Victorian women philanthropists because her most important work was fundamentally political in nature - parliamentary lobbying, educating the public and implementing an enlightened public policy - even though politics at this time was largely a male game.

The book soars upon Florence's arrival in the Crimea. Essentially no accommodations were made for battlefield care of wounded noncommissioned British soldiers. Public health measures now considered standard, like latrines, were nonexistent. Nightingale uncovered the morbid fact that by joining the military, even if never leaving the British Isles, young men died at a much higher rate than expected - exceeding that of impoverished slum dwellers in the worst parts of London. She devoted the rest of her life to fighting ignorance and prejudice about health-related issues despite bitter opposition of the British military.

As a role model or hero, Florence Nightingale may be a stretch for modern readers. She was a singularly driven figure, often aggravating, invariably demanding. She was not a woman's libber and probably would not have supported the right of women to vote. What she exemplifies, however, is the power of the individual to change the world, for better or worse. She deserves credit for her enormous contributions to the medical field. This book fills in many blanks about her person, this historical age and where we have come as a profession.

And it is a darn good read, one of the highest book ratings in www.metacritic.com, a web site that compiles multiple, respected critical reviews into a unique rating system. Check it out!

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