

The Writings of Florence Nightingale

by
(Mrs) Lucy Seymer

We are reproducing here 'Florence Nightingale Oration No. 2' by Mrs. Luc Seymer, M.A., S.R.N. She had delivered this oration at one of the Congresses of International Council of Nurses as early as 1947.

We have chosen this oration because it provides quite an exhaustive material on the writings and works of Florence Nightingale. This is also to mark the birth anniversary of Miss Nightingale on May 12. This day is also celebrated as International Nurses Day. Another reason for choosing this article is that there is paucity of material available on works and life of Florence Nightingale with us. We do hope by reproducing this oration, our readers will come to know more about the Pioneering and veteran nursing leader.

I HAVE chosen the writings of Florence Nightingale as the subject of my speech to-night, because I feel it one which has been shamefully neglected and its full significance underestimated. This neglect is partly understandable, since many of Florence Nightingale's works are difficult to obtain. Yet nowhere does she reveal herself more completely than in her writings. The Florence Nightingale International Foundation has justly recognised their importance, is proposing to compile a catalogue of everything connected with her, including all that she wrote. This catalogue will be available at the projected Headquarters of the Foundation to facilitate the research of future students. At present, Florence Nightingale's writings are equalled in scope and variety only by their inaccessibility. Many lie buried in British Government publications; others appear in the Proceedings of bygone Congresses. Others were contributed, fifty or more years ago, to different periodicals, some of which are not now current. Some day, one hopes, the Foundation may be instrumental in reprinting those works which most faithfully illustrate her character, those which do not "date," but are eternally true. For what is the position now? Have most nurses any knowledge of her important contributions to Government Reports, or any conception that she wrote about philosophy—or about India? Because Florence Nightingale's literary work deserves closer study than it has yet received, I am attempting this brief survey.

It was a fashion among some biographers of the 1920s to "**debunk**" their eminent Victorian forefathers. Nobody as serious-minded and as fearless as Florence Nightingale could hope altogether to escape this form of detraction. Yet

the first thing that emerges from a study of her writings is that she was herself an eminent "debunker"! Her criticisms of the follies and inefficiencies of the so-called systems which confronted her are positively devastating. But, **trenchant** as she was, she was never **scurrilous** or personal. As she herself said:—

"It would be as useless as injudicious to select individual instances or persons as the objects of animadversion. The system which placed them where they were is the point to the considered. (1)"

This quotation comes from **Notes on matters affecting the Health, Efficiency and Hospital Administration of the British Army** which Sir Edward Cook, her biographer, has justly called the "least known but most remarkable of her works." This is the greatest written indictment of the ignorance, stupidity and apathy Florence Nightingale found in high quarters, especially in the military hierarchy. It minutely examines the true cause of the unnecessary sufferings of the Crimean Army, and discusses how to avoid their recurrence. It forms an amplification of her important contributions to the official Report of the Royal Commission of 1857.

To those unfamiliar with British Government procedure let me here explain that a Royal Commission is a Committee of disinterested persons chosen by the Crown to undertake an enquiry into some particular question. Their "terms of reference" are minutely stated and the results of their enquiries embodied in a Report, presented to the Crown and published as an official document.

But Florence Nightingale's struggles against the War Office did not end with the Crimean War. In 1858 she wrote as follows in an unsigned article about the scheme for building an Army hospital at Netley, near Southampton, on a site declared quite unsuitable by one Commission, but later approved by another:

"Like all other War Office proceedings, the project in question had to begin from below, and to work its way up to the top—commencing with the now happily defunct Army Medical Department, and receiving there that mark of incapacity which it is likely to carry on its forehead in all time to come.

When a Minister asks for excuses, we may be very sure they will be found. Indeed it is wonderful what may be done in this line. For £1,000 of public money a Minister may have on very short notice 200 pages of excuses. We are reminded of the grain of mustard seed, which indeed is the least of all seeds, but it becomes a great tree and birds live in its branches. The excuse upon which Netley could be continued was the least of all excuses, but £70,000 have been lodged in its branches and voted by the House of Commons this year.⁽³⁾"

This passage provides an admirable illustration of Florence Nightingale's style, about which a word must be said, diffidently, in any speech which purports to treat of her writings. Its most marked characteristic is perhaps its extreme lucidity: the meaning of any passage is at once clear to even the most hurried reader. But being clear is often synonymous with being dull—and her worst enemy could never accuse Florence Nightingale of dullness! To everything she wrote, even to her driest and most factual productions, she contrived to give a twist of her own. There is a characteristic tang, often a sarcastic one, in her phrases, that makes them stick in the memory and a keen sense of humour permeates all her strictures.

Her style varied, obviously, with the public she was addressing. Her "official" writings are clear and unemotional, though here and there she cannot resist indulging in a sly dig. For instance, in a Government report she says:—

"It is added 900 men are generally accommodated in the barrack without inconvenient overcrowding. What is **convenient** overcrowding?⁽⁴⁾"

or again:—

"In another (hospital) the privy is said to be a disgrace to the 19th century. One wonders to what century it would be a credit.⁽⁵⁾"

Her writings make it clear, I think, that to Florence Nightingale the sin against the Holy Ghost was humbug: the verbal or factual insincerity that is unsupported in the one case by proof and in the other by action. To sham she was merciless: she was almost as impatient of muddled thinking, and she abhorred sentimentality. One senses her indignation under, or perhaps because of, the quiet and impersonal tenour of the great bulk of her writings. And above all these things, at every turn one is struck by her breath-taking modernity.

Her works on nursing were for a wider public, so she adopts a more popular vein replete with her own brand of caustic humour. Take this definition of a nurse:—

"No one ever gives any other definition of what a nurse should be than this: "devoted and obedient." The definition would do just as well for a porter. It might even do for a horse. It would not do for a policeman. Consider how many women there are who have nothing to devote—neither intelligence, nor eyes, nor ears, nor hands.⁽⁶⁾"

or again this succinct criticism:—

"Merely looking at the sick is not observing. To look is not always to see.⁽⁶⁾"

or again the rather cynical passage wherein some women's motives for nursing are exposed:—

"It seems a commonly received idea among men and even among women themselves that it requires nothing but a disappointment in love, the want of an object, a general disgust, or incapacity for other things to turn a woman into a good nurse.⁽⁷⁾"

(Now did I not say she was a debunker?) Her works on India are rather different in treatment and to the layman appear overburdened with facts and figures. But this is unavoidable when expounding any complicated subject.

A question which must be answered at this point is:—Was Florence Nightingale a **great** writer? I believe she herself would have deprecated any such title. Can we find a key to her attitude to writing in a letter where she confesses that she "had much rather live than write"? In the face of this statement I feel that she experienced little of the creative satisfaction of authorship **as such** and that she wrote because she must.

Now why did she have to write? At the end of the Crimean War her position was unique and her influence was unparalleled. This influence she felt she must use to the full limit of her powers. As she forcibly put it: "I stand at the altar of the murdered men, and while I live I fight their