

A Parallel

Florence Nightingale and Henri Dunant

By Mrs. Leila Sharma*

May 12th and May 8th are two important days remembered by us being the birthdays of two personalities who have played vital roles in alleviating the sufferings in the world. Florence Nightingale was born on May 12th, 1820 and Henri Dunant on May 8th, 1828.

Henri Dunant, the founder of the International Humanitarian Organisation—Red Cross—gave his whole life to a cause which was to bridge differences upon the battle-field, and was to play its own unique role in bridging ideological, sociological and economic differences.

Red Cross was born as a result of a cruel inhuman War of Solferino as was Modern Nursing born after the impact of the Crimean War. The need to 'humanize' War was felt and as a parallel to it the need to scientifically nurse those affected in war and peace was also felt. Red Cross and Nursing grew from a felt-need—the need to care—care without bars of colour, creed or religion.

The parallel of these two selfless persons, in the 20th century has become a legend. Henri Dunant toiled to bring a semblance of order to indiscriminate killing of man, left to die unaided, untreated. Henri Dunant was forcibly moved as he toiled among these helpless men who fought a battle dying in terrible agony through sheer want of attention. In many cases, slight wounds which if dressed and treated in time would have healed, resulted in death from septic infection. Dunant describes the men's wounds as covered with flies "The tunic, shirt, flesh and blood formed an indescribable mass, alive with vermin, which they thought were emerging from their bodies, but which in reality were the result of the fly-infested atmosphere." It was this that Florence Nightingale tried to clean up, aided by devoted nuns and Italian women. Cleanliness, washing and seeing to the needs of everyone was Florence Nightingale's constant endeavour only in another situation and another war. She tried never to let a soldier die alone and would not go to bed at night without first seeing to the needs of her charges.

The parallel and influence of Miss Nightingale on Henri Dunant was acknowledged by Dunant to be the direct inspiration of his life's major achievements. Dunant wrote "The influence of women is an essential factor in the welfare of humanity, and it will become more valuable as time proceeds."

Miss Nightingale was very moved by Dunant's

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book 'Souvenir de Solferino' a vivid description of the horrors of the war and his proposals to establish in time of peace, voluntary relief societies for operation in time of war in the whole world.

Henri Dunant and Florence Nightingale have been subjects of many parallel biographies written around their careers, their personal qualities and their ultimate achievements. Henri Dunant like Florence Nightingale enjoyed an immense advantage of being able to move freely among the top social strata of the society and to talk and convey their aims to the aristocracy. Henri Dunant and Miss Nightingale worked downwards, from the elite to the public. Both were fairly rich with one difference that Henri Dunant sold all for his cause—*Above all Nations—Humanity*—and though his life began as a banker he died a pauper.

The parallel has been maintained over these 100 odd years as both the Red Cross and Nursing aims are much the same—to alleviate human suffering.

International Nurses Day

May 12, 1973 will be the 153rd anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale. National nurses associations in many countries observe this date to honour Florence Nightingale, the founder of the modern nursing profession, and outstanding nursing pioneers in their own countries.

In 1965, ICN's Board of Directors agreed "that 12 May should be recognized as an International Nurses Day." To promote observance of this day, ICN every year suggests a theme around which national nurses associations can build programmes for International Nurses Day in their own countries. This year's theme focuses on *the nurses role in safeguarding the environment*.

THE THEME

The subject of the nurses role in safeguarding the environment was chosen as the 1973 theme for International Nurses Day because of its urgency and importance for all mankind now and in future generations and because nurses have a special responsibility and special opportunities to make a contribution.

Every nurse needs to be aware of her role in safeguarding the environment—the patient's environment in the first place, but equally important, the total environment which affects the health of every living being now and in generations to come. Protecting and improving the human environment is basic to the nurses responsibility in each country for the maintenance of health, the prevention of illness, and the care of the sick. □