



Florence Nightingale 1820-1910

"A lady with a lamp shall stand
in thy great history of the land,
A noble type of good,
Heroic womanhood."

The lady with the lamp was Florence Nightingale, a woman of privilege whose faith was played out in her caring attention to thousands of ailing soldiers. These lines from the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), from his 1857 poem, "Santa Filomena," helped make her famous. But her mission was merely to help make people well.

Florence Nightingale was born of wealthy British parents in the Italian city she was named for. Her father, a banker, made sure that she and her sister received the broadest education possible. Young Florence learned a handful of European languages and could read the New Testament in its original Greek.

Florence had a strong desire to devote her life to the service of others. In her youth, she was respectful of her family's opposition to her working as a nurse, only announcing her decision to enter the field in 1844. Despite the intense anger and distress of her mother and sister, she rebelled against the expected role for a woman of her status to become a wife and mother. Nightingale worked hard to educate herself in the art and science of nursing, in spite of her opposition from her family and the restrictive social code for affluent young English women.

Florence enjoyed traveling with friends, and while she was in Thebes, Greece, in 1847, she wrote of being "called to God." A week later near Cairo, she wrote in her diary, "God called me in the morning and asked me would I do good for Him alone without reputation." In 1850, she visited the Lutheran religious community at Kaiserwerth-am-Rhein in Germany, where she observed Pastor Theodor Fliedner and the deaconesses working for the sick and the deprived. She was impressed by their simple lives and faithful devotion. She received four months of medical training at the institute and regarded the experience as a turning point in her life.

Later, she toured hospitals in London, Edinburgh, Dublin, and Paris, studying conditions and nursing methods. In 1853, helped by a small income from her father, Florence became superintendent of the Institution for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances in London, just in time for an outbreak of cholera.

Florence brought improved care and smart management to her work. Within two years she became her country's leading authority on hospitals. This led to a request from the British government. Would she serve as Superintendent of Female Nurses at a military hospital in Scutari, Turkey, when the army was fighting the Crimean War? This was her life's work. Of course, she said "Yes."

If she thought London's cholera epidemic was tough, this was tougher. Within three weeks of her arrival, Florence had three thousand soldiers to care for. She established a hospital just a few miles from the front. There would be greater danger there, but injured men could get quicker attention. And that's where the legend of Florence Nightingale arose. A reporter saw her tending to the wounded and wrote. "When . . . silence and darkness have settled upon those miles of prostrate sick, she may be observed alone, with a little lamp in her hand, making the solitary rounds." Not long afterward Longfellow immortalized her as "The lady with the Lamp." Upon her return to England, Florence was a national heroine.

Florence became a champion of nursing education. Wealthy friends, especially John Delane of *The Times* newspaper, helped Florence raise the money needed to found the Nightingale School & Home for Nurses at St. Thomas's Hospital, London. At last nursing became a respectable and sought after profession.

Florence was baptized in the Church of England, and during her last years she was a frequent communicant. Throughout her life she had sought a deeper experience of God, something beyond the socially expected rituals she had grown up with. When she broke from family expectations to become a nurse at age 30, she noted that this was the age when Jesus began his ministry. She clearly saw her work as a way of following her Lord. And what better way to commit one's life to the Healer than by devoting oneself to healing? She once told an assembly of nurses, "Christ is the author of our profession."

At her death in 1910, Florence Nightingale was buried in her family's 13th century parish church, St. Margaret, in Hampshire, England.