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THE COMMEMORATION  
OF  
FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

An Oration Delivered

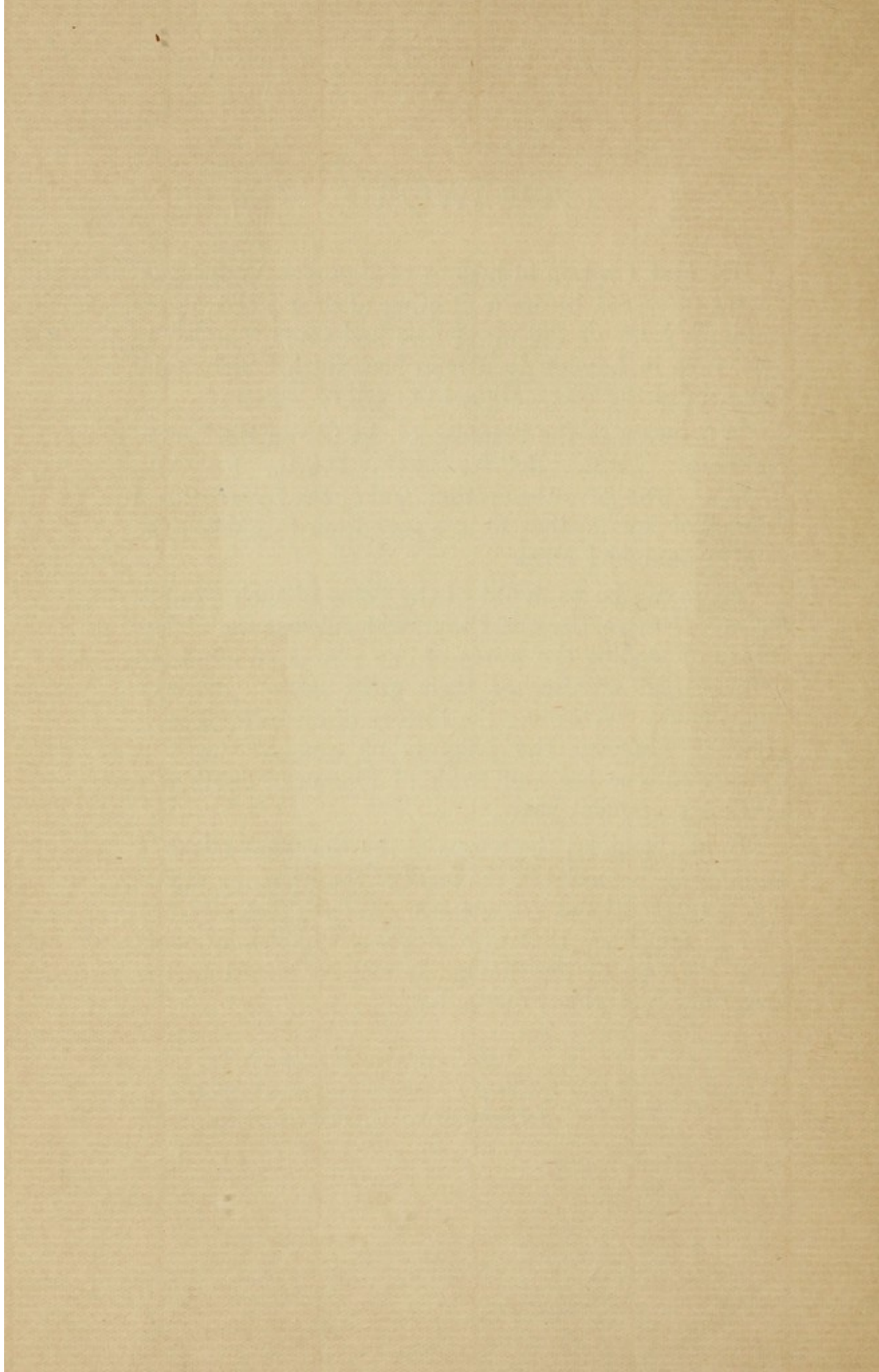
by

Sir George Newman, K. C. B., M. D., F. R. C. P.

before the

General Meeting of the  
International Council of Nurses

London. July 1937



## Florence Nightingale Oration

It is not without significance that this great representative assembly of nurses of many nations and kindreds and tongues and religions should have one common bond in the great and incomparable name of Miss Florence Nightingale. More than others, you are her soldiers to-day. The life of your illustrious leader, which became a tradition, even a legend, in her own lifetime, is now the treasured possession of the human family all over the world. We do well to remember her here to-day, and count up the thoughts and deeds with which she moved the heart of England. She was born in Florence on May 12th in 1820, and death came to her in London on August 13th, 1910, at the great age of ninety years. Reared as a lady of rank, surrounded by luxury, she lived down the discouragements, and even opposition, of her family, and became a hospital nurse, the courageous defender of the sick, the oppressed, "the bad" and the outcast. Though a recluse and for forty years in retirement; what she called "out of office"; she became an eminent public servant of the State. She sought for light in the dark Hospital wards at Scutari in 1855, as upon her own lonely path in earlier years, and, finding it, she became to all the world "a lady

with a lamp ". Longfellow chose her title to fame from the little oil lamp she carried in her hand—" A lady with a lamp I see " <sup>1</sup>—not knowing how true and enduring would prove his choice. In the perplexities of her home life and doubting heart, in the Crimean War, in hospital management, in modern nursing, in sanitary reform, in the emancipation of womanhood, she has proved indeed to be for all time a Lady with a Lamp.

Florence Nightingale's life may be thought of in three subdivisions. First, there is her romantic girlhood and early training, discipline and experience at Kaiserswerth and elsewhere, culminating in what she believed and declared to be " a divine call " or commission to be a hospital nurse. Then, secondly, came the short middle period of service under the British War Office as " Superintendent of the female nursing establishment in the English General Military Hospitals in Turkey " for two years during the Crimean War (1854-1856), which created her fame and brought to her the homage of the world. Lastly, there was a third period of the remaining forty years of her active life (1856-1895) filled to the brim with an amazing output of constructive statecraft. When we come to consider it carefully, and critically, historically, scientifically and without the aid of the invention of " cunningly devised fables ", we find it a most amazing record.<sup>2</sup> Its length, its variety, its adventure, its combination of recluse and publicist, of aristocrat and democrat, of religious mystic and practical

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<sup>1</sup> Santa Filomena : " Lo! in that house of misery  
A lady with a lamp I see  
Pass through the glimmering gloom  
And flit from room to room."

<sup>2</sup> *The life of Florence Nightingale*, by Sir Edward Cook, 1913. Macmillan and Co. (Two volumes.) The authoritative and authentic biography, fully documented.

reformer; its astounding volume of industry, year in, year out, over three generations; its insight and foresight; its world-wide comprehension, and its tremendous harvest—all contribute to make her life a story standing by itself in the history of mankind.

Surrounding this central figure moves a host of men and women, the most eminent of their day—soldiers, sailors, statesmen, proconsuls, doctors, engineers, poets, theologians, philosophers,—thwarting or abetting her, obeying or refusing her bidding, rejected or inspired by her. They pass before us like ghosts out of the long past. They come and go, they live and labour and die around this remarkable woman, who seems to go marching on to her special destiny, undeviating, undefeated, undismayed, lord of her own event. Sometimes she is like a Hebrew prophet, warning, foretelling, declaiming and declaring; sometimes as practical mystic, like her friends, Sidney Herbert, Lord Lawrence of the Punjab, and General Gordon; sometimes as reformer like Lord Shaftesbury; Miltonic in austerity, of intensive fire like Savonarola or Francis of Assisi; a theologian like Dean Stanley or Professor Jowett; an adult educationalist, a scientific investigator with Dr. Parkes and Dr. Farr; a philosopher like her friend John Stuart Mill; an artist in taste after the school of Giotto in the fourteenth century; a soldier in understanding and command, *and all the time a hospital nurse*,—always observing and collating, always for bold action, always ready and reliable when needed, sometimes to be persuaded, sometimes immovable as a rock—“ as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land ”.

We all know, in a general way, what Miss Nightingale did for the wounded of three nations in the Crimean War. As Kinglake, the historian, said : “ There acceded

to the State a new power ", and Professor Trevelyan has added his considered opinion in these words :

" The real hero of the War was Florence Nightingale, and its indubitable outcome was modern nursing, both military and civil, a new conception of the potentiality and place in society of the trained and educated woman, and a juster national conception of the character and claims of the private soldier.<sup>1</sup> "

There is something for us to chew and think about. What Miss Nightingale did in the Crimean War was to open widely the gates of order and efficiency in place of disorder and neglect. She put an end to the tortuous ramifications of administrative incapacity and divided responsibility in the military hospitals; an end to the inherent faults of confused systems; an end to the scientific ignorance and incompetence of red tape officialism—for these were the three agencies which imperilled the efficiency and health of armies by leading to complacent acquiescence in a high mortality from wounds, and a still higher mortality from preventible disease and starvation.<sup>2</sup> It is strange to reflect upon the fact that this particular problem of excessive mortality among soldiers from disease, though relieved in the Crimean War, did not find its solution until nearly sixty years afterwards in the Great War (1914-1918), with its new knowledge and reformed medical services.

In 1856, after her two dramatic years in the Crimean War, Miss Nightingale, though retired and invalided, turned her genius—alert, determined, apprehending,

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<sup>1</sup> *History of England*, George Macaulay Trevelyan, 1926, page 653.

<sup>2</sup> " Those who fell before Sebastopol by disease were seven times the number of those who fell by the enemy."

still purposive—to the wider questions which directly emerged from her experience. Her long years of seclusion were partly due to her physical invalidity, but partly self-designed in order that the serious work of her life might not be hindered by what she considered “the wasted time of claims”. Thus only, as she conceived, was she able to carry through her big schemes. It is only possible on this occasion to mention, in order, their main outline.

First, there was the hygiene of the British Army, and Miss Nightingale’s initiation of, and work for, the Royal Commission on the health of the Army in 1857, concurrently with which there was issued her “Notes affecting the health, efficiency and hospital administration of the British Army”. Her conception of the health of the soldier included his social welfare, his character, his training, his food and sleep, his cleanliness, his leisure, his savings, his letters home, his own people. “She was the soldier’s friend, no less than the ministering angel.”

The Report of the Royal Commission, including a special Memorandum by herself of thirty folio pages, was published in 1858,<sup>1</sup> and was followed by the establishment of the Army Medical School; by reform in hospital construction and the renovation of the military barrack system, and by the improvement in the collection and arrangement of army medical statistics. To Miss Nightingale, the science of medical statistics was almost a religious exercise, a compass, a signpost which she approached with reverence, the ascertainment of the truth of conditions and their effect.

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<sup>1</sup> Report of Royal Commission on Sanitary Condition of Army, military Hospitals, and the treatment of the sick and wounded, 1858. Miss Nightingale’s evidence pp. 361-391.



Then came the far-reaching problem of the necessity for the adequate training of nurses, the establishment in 1860 of the Nightingale Training School (provided by Miss Nightingale out of the National Fund presented to herself as a public tribute to her Crimean work), and by its personal direction, the creation of a nursing profession. As a prelude to this great movement, Miss Nightingale had published her popular but classic "*Notes on Nursing: What it is and what it is not*", in 1859; an epoch-making little book, both of current technique and of enduring wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

The foundation of the training of nurses was followed by her initiation of a Royal Commission on the Sanitary State of the Army in India, which reported in 1863. It is important to remember that such an enquiry had been foreshadowed by her in 1857 at the end of her *Notes on the British Army* printed in that year and published in 1858. "It would be a noble beginning", she said, "of the new order of things (after the Indian Mutiny) to use hygiene as the handmaid of civilisation". The method she suggested included sanitary commis-

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<sup>1</sup> I possess a first edition of this great little book. It would not be considered, nowadays, nearly eighty years after, to be a complete textbook of technical nursing, its methods and duties. The technique has grown and become more complex. But this book contains the whole philosophy of nursing, a sort of alphabet of domestic hygiene—fresh air, sunlight, pure water, efficient drainage, warmth, cleanliness, quietude. There are also the principles of nursing. "Apprehension, uncertainty, waiting, expectation, fear of surprise, do a patient more harm than any exertion. Remember, he is face to face with his enemy all the time, internally wrestling with him. You are thinking of something else. Rid him of his adversary quickly is a first rule with the sick." Miss Nightingale thought of disease as a "reparative process", an effort of nature to remedy what is wrong. She considered (a) a sound knowledge of the laws of hygiene, (b) sane knowledge of medicine and surgery and (c) above all, an acute and sympathetic faculty of *observation* as the three fundamental requirements of a competent nurse. "Merely looking at the sick", however, "is not observing". Nursing is to be an art, like any other art, which demands "a sense of call" followed by "a diligent apprenticeship".

sioners in India under the Government of India but also supervised by the India Office in England, and this being adopted by the Commission was announced in due course by her friend Sir John Lawrence, the Viceroy. It is not surprising that she should say, " I sing for joy every day at John Lawrence's Government. " It was indeed a great partnership, and it began in fact the reorganisation of the public health service in India on a wide basis, including sanitary commissioners, the sanitation of villages and soldiers' barracks and military stations, land irrigation, hospitals and prisons, and the prevention of periodical famine.

Hardly less pregnant was Miss Nightingale's contribution to the reform of nursing under the Poor Law in England. Miss Twining and Dr. Rogers began such reform in London in 1853. But in 1861, Miss Nightingale co-operated with Mr. William Rathbone of Liverpool in introducing her friend and disciple, Miss Agnes Jones, " a Nightingale probationer " to the workhouse infirmary at Liverpool.<sup>1</sup> The Liverpool experiment of using trained nurses in poor law institutions sealed the doom of the untrained " pauper nurses ", though they did not officially disappear for many years. Indeed, two generations had to pass before the Nursing Order of the Local Government Board in 1913 fulfilled Miss Nightingale's first principles of Poor Law nursing, and it was not until Mr. Neville Chamberlain's great Local Government Act of 1929 (which itself incorporated several of the chief principles enunciated by Miss Nightingale in 1886) that the crucial victory was really won. Thus she introduced the special training and wider sphere of nurses, midwives and health visitors.

<sup>1</sup> *Workhouse Nursing : The Story of a Successful Experiment.* W. Rathbone, 1867.

Lastly, there was the supreme principle of the "neutralisation" of the wounded soldier, of whatever nationality. Somewhere about 1743 Sir John Pringle, the British founder of modern military medicine, suggested that military hospitals should be regarded as neutral and immune from attack by any of the fighting forces. This far-reaching rule remained without national or international support until the experience of the Crimean War of 1854 and the Italian War of 1859 moved Henri Dunant, a Swiss philanthropist (himself inspired by Miss Nightingale's work at Scutari) to describe the barbarities of war and in particular the necessity of protecting the wounded. He instigated the consideration of this principle at the Geneva "Society of Public Service" in February 1863, and subsequently secured direct attention to it at two international conferences convoked at Geneva in 1863 and 1864. In August of the latter year was instituted the international "Geneva Convention" which formulated the principle of the neutralisation of the wounded under the Red Cross, and it was Miss Nightingale herself who, at the request of the British War Office, drafted the instructions for the British delegates at that Convention, to support the declaration of the neutrality of Red Cross Hospitals, doctors, nurses, and all wounded soldiers. It was but expressing in definite compendious terms her practice in the Crimea of nursing all wounded men of whatever nationality, friend or foe.

Here then we have our Lady's programme of public service. What are we to make of her and of it? First, respecting herself we may discard all legendary fancies, fables, fabrications, and the inflated and uncertain atmosphere of "romance", and, if we can, we must weigh as in a balance the actual facts which remain after

seventy years of opinion, and of praise or blame or misinterpretation. Miss Nightingale's character was, like all human character, a complex of heredity and environment, but in her case it was the resultant also of the use of high spiritual forces and will-power in varied circumstance. She was able to prearrange much of the circumstances of her life (as in large measure we can all do), and considered it to be her duty to do so, in order to make both her life and her nursing work directly conducive to what she conceived to be her mission. Moreover, she took pains to develop a capacity and an insight to capture from circumstance its *elements of guidance*, and in this sense could justly have preferred the ancient claim "*I control circumstance, not circumstance me?*" It has been said that she was paradoxical, vacillating, opinionated, autocratic, intolerant, prejudiced, self-willed, masterful, and in discipline even a martinet. Well, ninety years is a very long period of life, and I daresay that on occasion Miss Nightingale manifested, like the rest of us, each of these qualities. They do not disturb me in the least; they are all human, common to us all, and in any army leader sometimes unavoidable. Quite naturally and properly she was nicknamed "The Bird", and it is curious to note how its varied plumage appeared to different observers; a swallow, a martin, a duckling, a dove, a nightingale, a swan, or an eagle; it is perilous at this date to specify. Perhaps from time to time she had some of the characteristics of all these beautiful birds, certainly of the last named!

Ruskin told us that in order to judge works of consummate Art, it is necessary to give them both *time* and *space*. And in truth we must stand off some distance to measure or differentiate this great and pre-eminent person—for great and entirely exceptional, history will

assuredly declare her to be. This at least may be said, the plain facts show that she was a woman of sound and practical common sense, compassionate and tender-hearted, diligent, loyal, *self-renouncing because self-dedicated*, with a genius for administrative organisation, possessing a high sense of public duty and statesmanship, and with a soul anchored in the inexhaustible and enduring verities of her religious faith and her spiritual experience—still the greatest power on earth to move the minds and hearts of men and women.

In her later life, Miss Nightingale appears to have found rest and refreshment in poetry, in Browning's *Rabbi Ben Ezra* for instance, and in Sir Edwin Arnold's *Song Celestial*, and many stanzas in both are apt images of her philosophy :

“ Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made.

. . . . .

*Strive*, and hold cheap the strain;  
*Learn*, nor account the pang; *dare*, never grudge the throe! ”<sup>1</sup>

“ Abstaining from attachment to the work,  
Abstaining from rewardment in the work,  
While yet one doeth it full faithfully,  
Saying, ‘ ’Tis right to do! ’—that is true act.

. . . . .

For tho' to know is more  
Than diligence, yet worship better is  
Than knowing, and renouncing better still.  
Near to renunciation—very near—  
Dwelleth eternal peace.”<sup>2</sup>

We must not assume that in Miss Nightingale we have

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<sup>1</sup> *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. R. Browning.

<sup>2</sup> *The Song Celestial*. Sir Edwin Arnold.

unapproachable impeccability, some kind of hypothetical sinlessness and perfection. No, she had her faults and no doubt made many mistakes, for she was constituted of the same clay as ourselves. She belonged to an age different from our own, the nineteenth and not the twentieth century. She was surrounded for two whole generations by criticism and controversy, some of it self-created, and we must not be rash or impatient in our ultimate estimates. Indeed not the least of her personal achievements was that, like an alchemist, she *transmuted* in the course of years the nature, form and substance of the conventionalities of her own social environment and its standards and judgments, changing them from baser metal into gold. Let me recall to your remembrance Lord Rosebery's appraisal of the deductions and allowances which we must make for human nature, one of the most beautiful passages in modern English :

“ When we see that the greatest and choicest images of God have had their weaknesses like ours, their temptations, their hours of darkness, their bloody sweat; are we not encouraged by their lapses and catastrophes to find energy for one more effort, one more struggle? Where they failed, we feel it a less dishonour to fail; their errors and sorrows make, as it were, an easier ascent from infinite imperfection to infinite perfection.

Man, after all, is not ripened by virtue alone. Were it so, this world were a paradise of angels. No, like the growth of the earth, he is the fruit of all the seasons; the accident of a thousand accidents, a living mystery, moving through the seen to the unseen. He is sown in dishonour; he is matured

under all the varieties of heat and cold; in mist and wrath, in snow and vapours, in the melancholy of autumn, in the torpor of winter, as well as in the rapture and fragrance of summer, or the balmy affluence of the spring—its breath, its sunshine, its dew. And at the end he is reaped—the product not of one climate, but of all; not of good alone, but of evil; not of joy alone, but of sorrow—perhaps mellowed and ripened, perhaps stricken, and withered and sour. How then shall we judge anyone? How at any rate shall we judge a giant, great in gifts and great in temptation, great in strength and great in weakness? Let us glory in his strength and be comforted in his weakness.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, I turn to say a word of summary upon Miss Nightingale’s workmanship. It was varied and prolonged, yet it was all of one piece, with little or no alien element or diversion from a strait line of purpose. An analytical study of her main principles, as interpreted in her practices, suggests that, speaking generally, they were six in number :

(a) The national and social importance of the hygiene of armies, and to that end the hygiene also of *the classes of society from which the soldier is drawn* ;

(b) The necessity of adopting the principles of science and art in designing hospital construction and management, and in the improvement of national sanitation ;

(c) The more accurate and fuller recording of the incidence and definition of disease, sickness and incapacity, physical and mental; in order to discover the foundation both of truth and of action ;

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<sup>1</sup> *Robert Burns*, by Lord Rosebery, 1896.

(d) The absolute requirement of adequate training for nurses, midwives and health workers, if they are to prove efficient and worth while, and the *application of their beneficent services to all classes of the community*;

(e) The emancipation and education of the womanhood of a nation to be approximately equivalent to that of its manhood;

(f) A universal law for the international neutralisation of the wounded soldier, as the *irreducible minimum of civilisation* as against barbarism.

No one can read this formidable list without recognising that Miss Nightingale was not only the founder of trained nursing, she was also one of the international pioneers of the whole science and art of Preventive State Medicine, which is to-day so profoundly affecting, transforming and expanding man's life upon the earth. It should, however, be observed that, though she was concerned in each of these six enterprises, she wove them together like a single piece of tapestry, a synthetic philosophy. Yet she did not finish or complete any one of them. They are still incomplete, and in each sphere there remains much to do. In order that her disciples may make their contribution, they will bear in mind that, though they may wisely endeavour to emulate, they should not attempt to imitate Miss Nightingale. We may appreciate her as a national and international possession for which the human family must ever be grateful, but we shall not heighten or enhance such appreciation by allowing "the dead hand of the past" to be laid too heavily upon us. She herself would have said that advance in *new times, new knowledge and new methods* is still greatly needed in all six directions, though



not equally needed in all nations. We are not called upon to pledge ourselves to-day that we also will *do* what Miss Nightingale *did*—it cannot be—but we may fairly aspire, in our own problems and in our own lands, times and ways, to act upon the high plane of her motive and objectives, expanding both their occasion and operation.

In the presence of an international assembly of nurses for the healing of the nations, one can hardly escape the reflection, what an inestimable gain for the whole world it would be if, as well as neutralising the wounded men and women of our generation, each nation would learn the wisdom of neutralising its traditional lack of appreciation of other nations, the mutual undervaluations and particular shortcomings, and the ignorance and prejudices which so easily beset us all. For, to *know* and to *understand* is always to make juster judgments of men. Our true valuation of Florence Nightingale would find most appropriate expression, yes, and would choose the better part; first, in gratefully accepting with knowledge and with understanding, the inspiration of her life and work and its spiritual foundation; and secondly, in planning our own day's enterprise in order that it shall both *extend the frontiers of life* and *enlarge its opportunity* for the men, women and children of all nations."



