

In the shadows of nursing history

Often overshadowed in the history books by Florence Nightingale, the Irish Sisters of Mercy established, more than 150 years ago, a system of “careful nursing” and played a key role in ministering to the needs of sick and dying soldiers during the Crimean War.

by **Therese C. Meehan**

IN 2005, as we face the challenges and enjoy the fruits of our endeavors as professional nurses, we might pause to celebrate the endeavors of our professional forebears who, 150 years ago this year, faced the challenges of providing skilled nursing services for sick and wounded British soldiers in the Crimean War.* While we all surely recognize the work of Florence Nightingale, this anniversary provides us opportunity to also recognize the work of other nurses in the Crimean War, particularly Irish nurses who made a significant contribution to the development of modern nursing.

A myriad of political, social and cultural circumstances predominant in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland during the 19th century has overshadowed the fact that skilled nursing for British soldiers in the war was provided primarily by Irish nurses. For 300 years prior to the war, skilled nursing in United Kingdom had been practically nonexistent, ever since Henry VIII banished nursing nuns during the 16th century. Henry VIII's domain included Ireland, but the Irish re-established nursing as a social service at their earliest opportunity.

By the time the Crimean War was declared, Irish nursing nuns had more than 20 years of community and hospital experience in caring for the sick and injured and were recognized as skilled nurses. Thus, although Ireland existed in a subjugated and uneasy relationship with Great Britain, it was to Ireland that the British War Office looked for skilled nurses to staff hospitals.

On Oct. 17, 1854, the first group of five nurses contracted by the War Office set out from London for Constantinople. They were Sisters of Mercy from the Bermondsey Convent in London's docklands. Their Irish leader, Mary Clare Moore, had 22 years' background as a nurse and administrator, having commenced her nursing experience in a Dublin cholera hospital in 1832.

On arrival in Paris, they received a telegram to await the arrival of a second group of nurses led by Florence Nightingale, and to place themselves under her direction. For the duration of the war, they worked closely with Nightingale at the Scutari hospitals.

In letters and reports, Nightingale expressed her admiration of their nursing knowledge and skill and declared her dependence upon them in matters of nursing practice and management. When Moore returned early to England, Nightingale wrote her a letter stating: “Your going home is the greatest blow I have had yet. ... You were far

above me in fitness for the General Superintendency, both in worldly talent of administration, & far more in the spiritual qualifications which God values in a superior. ... What you have done for the work no one can ever say” (Nightingale, 1856).

Later, Nightingale wrote: “I always felt you ought to have been the Superior and I the inferior. ... I always felt how magnanimous your spiritual obedience in accepting such a position ... & how I should have failed without your help. ... I always wondered at your unfailing patience, sweetness, forbearance & courage under many trials. ... I wondered so much that you could put up with me—I felt it was no use to say to your face, either then or since, how much I admired your ways” (Nightingale, 1863).

A third group of nurses, including 11 from Ireland, departed from London for Constantinople on Dec. 2, 1854. The Irish nurses, also Sisters of Mercy, had their own leader, the accomplished Francis Bridgeman of Kinsale. They knew well the importance of their mission. In offering their services, their spokeswoman, Mary Vincent Whitty, wrote, “Attendance on the sick is, as you are aware, part of our Institute; and sad experience amongst the poor has convinced us that, even with the advantage of medical aid, many valuable lives are lost for want of careful nursing”

* The Crimean War (1854-1856), a struggle for domination of southeast Europe, ended in the defeat of Russia by Great Britain, France, Turkey and Sardinia.



"The Mission of Mercy: Florence Nightingale receiving the Wounded at Scutari"—In this 1857 oil painting by Jerry Barrett, Florence Nightingale is positioned directly below the window. Sister Mary Clare Moore, wearing a nun's habit, is the second person to the left of Nightingale.

(Whitty, 1854). Their Crimean journals have preserved for us a valuable record of their work (Luddy, 2004).

The nurses began work at the General and Barrack hospitals at Koulali, a few miles distant from Scutari. Immediately, thousands of soldiers began arriving from the Crimean battlefields, their bodies crawling with vermin and many delirious from fever, thirst and neglect. "Such desolate, worn-out looking patients never before entered any hospital," wrote Mary Aloysius Doyle, one of the Irish nurses. "Their moans would pierce the heart."

After cutting off the soldiers' clothing and boots and washing their bodies, the sisters obtained clean clothing and blankets. They set up kitchens, made lemonade and rice puddings, mixed arrowroot with port wine and sugar, and fed those who were too weak to feed themselves. Their great tenderness so overwhelmed the soldiers that some broke down in tears.

The nurses made rounds with doctors, dressed wounds, administered medicines, bandaged broken and frostbitten limbs, applied stupes, and measured out wine and brandy. Night and day, they closely watched over soldiers who were very sick or dying.

They worked alongside doctors, ladies, lay nurses and orderlies, and their strength of purpose, unity of mind and contagious calmness brought order and hope to the hospitals. The Koulali General Hospital became known among the doctors as the model hospital of the East. The purveyor-in-chief placed all hospital supplies at their disposal and told Bridgeman to act as if the hospital were her own. The chief medical officer let it be known that Bridgeman's orders were to be considered as his orders.

Following the fall of Sebastopol in September 1855, the Sisters of Mercy transferred up to the General and Hut hospitals at Balaclava, where they worked for another six months. During

a visit to Balaclava, Nightingale took notes on the Irish nurses' nursing system, which Bridgeman explained to her in the hope that someone would profit from it.

The circumstances of the time did not allow for formal recognition of the Irish nurses' contribution to the war effort, and the Sisters of Mercy thought it unbecoming to broadcast about themselves. The principles underlying their practice, however, are just as important today as they were 150 years ago. Drawing on a term used by the Sisters of Mercy, Doona (2000) has named their nursing system "careful nursing" and proposed it as Ireland's legacy to nursing. Work has commenced on identifying the central concepts of careful nursing and translating them into a guide for contemporary practice (Meehan, 2003). *RNL*

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To the editor:

Letters to the editor should be submitted via fax or e-mail to James Mattson, Editor, *Reflections on Nursing Leadership*. Fax: +1.715.925.2146. E-mail: jim@stti.iupui.edu. Please strive for brevity. We reserve the right to edit submissions.

What a great interview on U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona! My husband was a battalion surgeon with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam during 1968-1969. These types of interviews always bring tears to my eyes as well as help me recall many of Larry's stories during that time. Larry also read your interview and was very impressed. I send you continued best wishes with *Reflections on Nursing Leadership*. It is the type of publication that I enjoy from cover to cover when it arrives.

Barbara Dossey, RN, PhD, AHN-BC, FAAN
Santa Fe, N.M., USA

First quarter 2005, I actually read, didn't just glance through. Good work. Keep celebrating greatness and international nursing.

Eduarda "Eddie" Bossers, RN, BSN, BS
Syracuse, N.Y., USA

Thank you for your interview article of U.S. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona. It was good to see in writing something I believe but seldom admitted, that "Once a nurse, always a nurse."

I trained as a nurse way back when, in a three-year hospital program. The BSN program was but a gleam in someone's eye. I left hospital and active nursing about five years later to pursue health education and public health. I failed many times in later years to acknowledge my RN, although I never failed to give an opinion in most medically oriented conversations.

My work now is in public health administration at the local government level. I also teach public health nursing at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Dr. Carmona's upfront and positive comments about nurses and nursing are refreshing. Recognition from other health care providers/participants, especially physicians, is long overdue. Your article was interesting and succinct. It brought home how important nurses are and will remain.

Joan B. O'Dair, RN, MPH, MSW
Pittsburgh, Pa., USA

Yesterday I received my First Quarter 2005 *Reflections on Nursing Leadership*. I was and still am overwhelmed by the article "Been there, done that." I teach the theoretical foundations course for the BSN track at the University of South Carolina, Aiken. The U.S. surgeon general made some very insightful comments about several of the areas that I address in the course. Thank you for your time and energy in editing an excellent magazine, but especially for such a timely article on the value of nursing and nurses as individuals.

Iris Walliser, RN, MSN
Aiken, S.C., USA

I just read the story on U.S. Surgeon General Carmona, and I needed to respond with how inspiring it was. I am honored to learn that he was a nurse first. His insight into both nursing and medicine is excellent.

I work as a nurse practitioner in a busy neonatal intensive care unit. In caring for patients, I participate in both the nursing and medical worlds. I have established at our institution an advanced practice nurse group. One of our visions is that we see ourselves as the "bridge between the two towers of nursing and medicine."

The combining of grand rounds and continuing education seminars by the schools of nursing and medicine at the University of Pennsylvania is fabulous. Society needs to see nursing and medicine as a team, no longer at different levels. As views of nursing and medicine change, students will want to choose nursing as a profession, because they no longer will see it as subservient to physicians. Together, we will serve our patients better. Thank you for exposing a great role model to all of us.

Pamela G. Almeida, MS, RNC, NNP
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