

Comment & Letters

An Irishwoman's Diary

This week 150 years ago, 11 Irish nurses sailed from Kingstown to Holyhead en route to the Crimea to tend patients in British war hospitals.

For weeks the fate of the wounded of Alma and Inkermann and those afflicted by rapidly spreading diseases had filled the newspapers in harrowing detail. At least 2,500 men, about one third of them Irish, lay helpless at Scutari in rough and filthy conditions, their gaping wounds, gangrenous limbs and dysentery unattended, with no one to answer their anguished cries. Many died needlessly, the lists of names growing longer every day.

Their French allies did not suffer and die in this way because at the first sign of need they called upon the nursing nuns who accompanied each regiment.

A heartfelt cry echoed across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland: "Why have we no Sisters of Charity?" The answer to this question reached back 300 years to Henry VIII and his closure of the monasteries and banishment of nursing nuns.

The 11 Irish nurses, Sisters of Mercy, were Ireland's answer to this cry. Nursing nuns had begun to re-establish themselves in Ireland at the beginning of the 19th century, and it was to Ireland that the British War Office looked for skilled nurses for the Crimean hospitals. Dublin woman Clare Moore, of the Bermondsey Convent of Mercy in London's docklands, had already arrived at the Scutari hospitals with Florence Nightingale and was quietly attempting to guide the hand of the powerful but inexperienced nursing superintendent.

Clare Moore had begun her nursing training 22 years earlier, during the cholera epidemic of 1832, under the watchful eye of Catherine McAuley at Dublin's Townsend Street Depot cholera hospital. She was now an accomplished nurse and administrator who, during long years of famine and fever, had cared for the sick poor with every type of disease and injury.

The 11 nurses sailing from Kingstown had from four to 22 years' experience caring for the sick poor in crowded cabins, tenements and workhouses. Their leader, Francis Bridgeman, had begun her training in 1832 at the Limerick cholera hospital. She had developed a specialised method of stuping to help relieve the cholera cramps, which was to

Therese Meehan

become an important treatment in the Crimean war hospitals.

A kinswoman of Daniel O'Connell, and mother superior of the Kinsale Convent of Mercy, she was also an astute administrator and leader. Accompanying her from Kinsale were Clare Keane and Mary Joseph Lynch. From Cork city were Paula Rice and Aloysia Hurley and from Charleville Mary Joseph Croke and Clare Lalor. From Carlow



Illustration of the hospital ward at Koulali, first published in 1857

were Mary Stanislaus Heyfron and Mary Aloysius Doyle and from Dublin Agnes Whitty and Elizabeth Hersey. Over the years the Irish nursing nuns had developed a comprehensive and effective system of nursing called careful nursing.

Great crowds gathered at Kingstown harbour to see them off. "As [our] vessel moved off, a fervent 'God speed you' arose in one loud cry," wrote Mary Aloysius Doyle. They knew well the importance of their mission. In offering their services to the British War Office their spokeswoman, Mary Vincent Whitty, had written: "Attendance on the sick is, as you are aware, part of our Institute; and sad experience among the poor has convinced us that, even with the advantage of medical aid, many valuable lives are lost for want of careful nursing."

They travelled on from London on December 2nd with a larger group of 10 ladies, 23 lay nurses and four more nursing nuns and arrived at Constantinople on December 17th. All were eager to begin work right away. Four thousand men now lay in extreme distress in the Scutari hospitals with very few nurses to tend them. However, Florence Nightingale, furious with the British War Office for sending more nurses without consulting her, rejected the new group as not wanted and not needed. But they surely were needed. A few miles distant at Koulali, two Turkish barrack buildings were given over as hospitals. The Irish nurses set to work with all their

Orderlies scrubbed the hospitals from end to end. Hundreds of poor, broken soldiers began arriving from the Crimean battlefields, their bodies crawling with vermin, and many delirious from fevers, thirst and neglect. "Such desolate, worn-out looking patients never before entered any hospital," wrote Mary Aloysius Doyle. "Their moans would pierce the heart."

The nurses cut off their clothing and boots, washed their bodies and obtained for them clean clothing and blankets. They set up diet kitchens, made lemonade and rice puddings, mixed arrowroot with port wine and sugar, and fed the soldiers who were too weak to feed themselves. Their great tenderness so overwhelmed the soldiers that some would break down in tears. They made ward rounds with the doctors, administered medicines, dressed wounds, bandaged broken and

frostbitten limbs, applied poultices and stupes, and measured out allowances of wine and brandy. They watched closely over men who were very sick or dying, by night as well as by day.

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

When peace was declared, and after 16 months of intense and dangerous work, the 11 Irish nurses returned to their native land. The circumstances of the time did not allow for formal recognition of their contribution to the war effort, and for their part they thought it unbecoming to broadcast about themselves. Nonetheless, the vital importance of their careful nursing system was not lost on Florence Nightingale. Indeed, she took it up as her own and it became the foundation for the development of modern nursing.

● Therese Meehan, RGN, Ph.D., is a lecturer in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at UCD.