

Study disputes theory Florence Nightingale was inspired by Irish Sisters, writes Colin Coyle

SHE is the pioneering founder of modern nursing who is said to have been influenced by the Irish Sisters of Mercy during the Crimean War. But new research casts doubts that Florence Nightingale drew inspiration from Irish nuns.

The Journal of Clinical Nursing has published a study conducted by academic Lynn McDonald, a former Canadian MP, that questions the influence of the Sisters of Mercy on the English social reformer.

McDonald claims the Irish nuns who nursed during the Crimean War worked at the Koulali Hospital, which had the highest death rate of all the British war hospitals during the 1853-1856 conflict. Rather than Nightingale drawing inspiration from the Irish, her insistence on respect for patients and high ethical stand-



McDonald claims that, contrary to the accepted wisdom that Nightingale was influenced by the Sisters of Mercy, the Irish nuns were 'more concerned with saving souls than bodies' and the English social reformer had more hospital experience

Nuns failed to light way for Lady of the Lamp



ards influenced future generations of Irish nurses, McDonald argues.

“Her influence continued through the writing she left behind and the leadership given by nurses she herself mentored, including Irish nurses,” she claims.

McDonald, co-founder of the Nightingale Society, established to safeguard the Lady of the Lamp’s legacy, claims there is no evidence to suggest the Irish nuns pioneered high-quality modern nursing before Nightingale. “It is in danger of becoming accepted wisdom, but my research shows that the Irish nuns in the Crimea were inexperienced and were more concerned with saving souls than bodies,” she said. “Rather than tending to the sick, they were urging them to repent.”

However, Therese Meehan, a senior lecturer at University College Dublin, claims the Irish were practising what she refers to as a “careful nursing philosophy” before Nightingale “discovered” it in the 1850s. She said: “Contrary to McDonald’s challenge, it is definitely true that early- to mid-19th-century Irish nurses, mainly as Sisters of Mercy and Irish Sisters of Charity, developed a distinctive system of nursing as they sought to re-establish nursing in Ireland as a skilled public service, following its almost 300-year virtual extinction in Britain and Ireland.”

McDonald contends that none of the Irish nuns Nightingale encountered had “regular hospital experience” and that Nightingale was far more experienced than her Irish contemporaries, having worked in German, French and English hospitals before Crimea.

Meehan disagrees, saying the nuns had collectively practised for 26 years. “They had gained extensive experience in nursing the general population, who were mostly poor — people with fevers and every kind of disease and injury, often under very harsh conditions,” she said. “When they were permitted to work in hospitals, usually during times of crisis, they brought considerable administrative skills.”

Meehan said that while the nuns focused on spiritual needs, they “attended first to patients’ physical needs, to their feeding, cleanliness and safety”. She describes their philosophy as “careful nursing” and claims this approach was unique to Irish nurses at the time. She said Nightingale was influenced by the sisters.

“Nightingale herself attested to the influence of one of the Irish nurses in particular, Mary Clare Moore, and to her admiration for her,” said Meehan. “When Moore

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Osborne has held the top job at the National Stud for four years

Stud boss paid €24,000 despite ‘no car’ policy

Martin Frawley

THE Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) approved the payment of a car allowance of €2,000 a month to John Osborne, head of the Irish National Stud, despite stating the allowance was “excessive” and a breach of the department’s “no car” policy for chief executives.

The payment was sanctioned because the allowance was included in Osborne’s contract, which predated the August 2012 policy put in place by Brendan Howlin, the minister at the DPER.

The Irish National Stud employs 49 people. According to its latest accounts, for 2012, Osborne was paid €174,341. It is not clear whether this includes the car allowance. The stud did not return calls on the issue.

In August 2011, an official in the Department of Agriculture, under which the Irish National Stud operates, wrote to the DPER seeking approval of the allowance, which had been paid to Osborne since he took up the top job in February 2010.

In correspondence released under the Freedom of Information Act, an official from Howlin’s department, Liam Gleeson, replied that the car allowance was “excessive”.

“I recall giving the view that the car allowance should be based on the actual cost of running a car,” said Gleeson.

Nora Lynch, an official in the agriculture department, replied that the Department of Finance view “was that the allowance should be commensurate with the role and a figure of €25,000 was advised, as this was in line with the non-commercial provisions”.

The finance department was in charge of public sector pay policy until 2011, when the new DPER took over.

In December 2012, another DPER official approved the payment as it predated Howlin’s policy of “no car provision”.

Howlin also breached his policy when he agreed to pay John O’Dwyer, the new chief of VHI Healthcare, a car allowance of €25,000 a year in 2012.