Florence Nightingale Biography

Florence Nightingale (1820 – 1910) Volunteered to nurse soldiers during the Crimean War. She analysed the difficult conditions to help revolutionise the service of nursing and the treatment of patients.

Short bio of Florence Nightingale

Born in 1820 to a wealthy family, Florence was educated at home by her father. She aspired to serve others, in particular she wanted to become a nurse. Her parents were opposed – at that time, nursing was not seen as an attractive or ‘respectable’ profession. Despite her parents disapproval, Florence went ahead and trained to be a nurse. Florence later wrote that she felt suffocated by the vanities and social expectations of her upbringing. On one occasion, sitting in her parent’s garden, she felt a call from God to serve others. She resolved to try and follow God’s will in being of service to others.

Florence had the opportunity to marry, but she refused a couple of suitors. She felt marriage would enslave her in domestic responsibilities.

In 1853, the Crimea war broke out. This was a bloody conflict leading to many casualties on both sides. Reports of the British casualties were reported in the press; in particular it was noted that the wounded lacked even the most basic of first aid treatment. Many soldiers were dying unnecessarily. This was a shock to the British public, as it was one of the first wars to be reported vividly in the press back home. Later in 1855, Florence Nightingale was asked (with the help of her old friend Sydney Herbert) to travel to the Crimea and organise a group of nurses.
Many of the initial applicants were unsuitable and Florence was strict in selecting and training the other nurses. Nightingale was helped in using nurses trained by Elizabeth Fry’s school of nurses. Nightingale was an admirer of Fry, who amongst other things campaigned for better prison conditions.

Florence was very glad to be able to take up the post and put into use her training as a nurse. They were based at the staff hospital at Scutari. She was overwhelmed by the primitive and chaotic conditions. There were insufficient beds for the men and conditions were terrible; the place smelt, was dirty, and even had rats running around spreading disease. Speaking of Scutari hospital, Florence Nightingale, said

“The British high command had succeeded in creating the nearest thing to hell on earth.”

In the beginning, the nurses were not even allowed to treat the dying men, they were only instructed to clean the hospital. But, eventually the number of casualties became so overwhelming the doctors asked Florence and her team of nurses to help.

Florence’s attitude included strict discipline for her other nurses, who always wore a highly visible uniform. The efforts of Florence and her team of nurses were greatly appreciated by the wounded soldiers and gradually positive news reports filtered back home.

By the time she returned home she had become a national heroine and was decorated with numerous awards including one from Queen Victoria.

After the war, she didn’t really appreciate the fame, but continued to work for the improvement of hospital conditions, writing to influential people encouraging them to improve hygiene standards in hospitals. She also founded a training school for nurses at St Thomas’s hospital, London. It was after her return from the Crimea that some of her most influential work occurred. She was a pioneer in using statistical methods to quantify the effect of different practises. Ironically, she found that some of her own methods of treating soldiers decreased recovery rates. But, this scientific approach to dealing with hospital treatment helped to improve standards and the quality of care.

Florence Nightingale died at the age of 90 in 1910.

Another nurse who gained a strong reputation at the time of the Crimean War was Jamaican nurse, Mary Seacole. Florence Nightingale didn’t accept her offer of services when she came to the Crimea. But, Mary worked on her own initiative from a base in Balaclava near the front line. Her reputation amongst British officers was as strong as the reputation of Florence Nightingale. But, it was Florence Nightingale who remained in the public consciousness in the twentieth century.
