

10. Florence Nightingale: A Leading Anti-Racist

by Lynn McDonald, for the Nightingale Society

When racist views were socially acceptable, Nightingale was an exception. Her own family was liberal and progressive. Her grandfather was a radical MP who supported the right to vote for Jews, Roman Catholics and “dissenters” (Protestants not in the Church of England). He worked with William Wilberforce for the abolition of slavery.

Nightingale had the opportunity, on her travels, to see slavery in action, which reinforced those liberal, anti-racist values. On her Egyptian travels, she witnessed a slave market where Nubians, captured as girls, were sold (letter 24 November [1849], in Vallée, *Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 157).

After the Crimean War, one of Nightingale’s earliest research projects was on mortality and illness in “colonial schools and hospitals,” meaning for Indigenous people in the Australian colonies, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), southern Africa and (pre-Confederation) Canada. Although the data were shoddy, there was enough to show that the rates of death and disease were twice what they should be (*Sanitary Statistics of Native Colonial Schools and Hospitals*, in McDonald, *Florence Nightingale on Public Health Care*, 168-83). She made her point succinctly: “By far the greater part of the mortality is the direct result of mitigable or preventable disease.”

Australia. Nightingale carried on the research to papers on the disappearance of Indigenous people both for Australia and **New Zealand** (“Note on the New Zealand Depopulation Question,” McDonald, *Florence Nightingale on Public Health Care*, 183-85). She succeeded in getting Australian public opinion interested – newspapers gave her papers good coverage – but this did not lead to any action.

Canada. Sexual and physical abuse in residential schools has only recently been recognized as a terrible legacy from the past. Nightingale’s work was not on those aspects of abuse, but simply disease and death. **She was the first person to make public the high rates of disease and death in residential and day schools in Canada.**

Unfortunately, Nightingale was unsuccessful in getting the Colonial Office to continue to collect data, let alone make necessary improvements. She turned to working on India, where she was able to have more (albeit limited) impact.

India. On her many years of research and publication on India, Nightingale supported the work of leading Indian national social and public health experts and organizations. She published in their journals. She met with and encouraged their officials.

She wrote a campaign letter for the first Asian to be elected to Parliament (in Finsbury), Dadabhai Naoroji. W.E. Gladstone, the Liberal leader, also wrote a campaign letter for him, but hers was stronger. Naoroji was the founder of the East India Association, the precursor to the Indian National Congress, that (eventually) won independence for India. Nightingale had a major paper read at one of its meetings (reproduced in McDonald, *Florence Nightingale on Politics*, 364-5). When Gandhi came to England, he carried with him a letter of introduction to Naoroji, and Gandhi had a high opinion of Nightingale.

Rukhumabai, Sorabji, and Abeni Pratt

Her worldwide inspiration. Nightingale encouraged women in other countries in the pursuit of their goals, in numerous fields.

A fine example in medicine is Rukhumabai, the Indian woman who opposed child marriage and enforced widowhood. In law, there is Cornelia Sorabji, the first woman graduate from Bombay University and the first to practise law in India and the U.K.

The superb Nigerian nursing leader, Kofoworola Abeni Pratt, chose to pursue nursing at the Nightingale School precisely because of her admiration of Nightingale. Mrs Pratt became the first black nurse in the National Health Service, when it was launched in 1948. She later led in the establishment of Nigerian nursing, nurse training in Nigeria and its incorporation into the university system, which in turn encouraged nursing developments elsewhere in Africa. Pratt was named the first chief nursing officer of Nigeria, the first commissioner of health for Lagos, and served on the International Council of Nurses and UN committees. See

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