Florence Nightingale, of course, as a woman, never had the opportunity to go to university, but she did have a wonderful visit as a young woman, with her father, attending meetings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1847 (she had attended their meetings also the previous year in Southampton). The Oxford meetings were notable for papers on the discovery of Neptune. The astronomer Sir John Herschel brought the two (independent) discoverers together: the French LeVerrier and the British John Crouch Adams. The two sat “like turtledoves” on either side of Herschel.

Nightingale was interested in the process of discovery, and noted how the discovery was made by their seeing perturbations in the orbit of the planet Uranus. Lalande had made the same discovery of perturbations in 1795, but thought he had made an error.

Faraday gave a lecture on magnetism she liked; she read him carefully and later corresponded with him.

She described “tea and cakes” at ChristChurch, followed by a curious episode with the son of the dean, Buckland, who had a three-month year old bear chained to his door. Said bear managed to get into the butter and became obstreperous, especially when his master put a cap and gown on him. Her friend, poet Richard Monckton Milnes, then mesmerized the bear, who yawned and stretched out and slept.

Nightingale enjoyed seeing Oxford, beautiful in June. On Sunday, she joked, they went to church every two hours. There were “glorious services” at New College and Magdalen.

She described in a letter to a friend that she wished she were “a college man.”

Acland and public health

Sir Henry Dyke Acland, regius professor medicine at Oxford, was a close ally of Nightingale’s on numerous issues of public health. The Bodleian has a substantial collection of their correspondence. He sought her opinion on many issues, and flagged her work in speeches he made as president of the British Medical Association and the Committee on State Medicine (then the term used for public health).

She paid tribute to him late in life: “Do you know, I hear from and of you almost every day? In this way I can remember when pyemia was almost as common a thing in hospitals as any case coming from without-- I mean pyemia generated in hospital. Now, we shout so loud when there is a case that they can hear us all over London. This is an amazing change. And we owe it principally to you and what you have taught us.”

The Radcliffe Infirmary

Nightingale sent the first trained matron to the Radcliffe to get professional nursing started in 1891. Flora Masson was a most suitable choice for a university town, daughter of the astronomer royal, well educated, for a woman, herself, and the author of two books before she took up nursing.

Balliol College and Benjamin Jowett

Nightingale had a long and happy association with Benjamin Jowett, a priest of the Church of England and professor of Greek. He is often described as Nightingale’s “spiritual advisor,” but the relationship between the two was remarkably egalitarian. Each read and advised the other on their academic interests. He read and commented on her bold Suggestions for Thought and she sent him her sermons and ideas for his.

Jowett had his four-volume translation of the Dialogues of Plato sent to her, which she carefully read and annotated. She did not complain about any of his translations, but objected strenuously to many of his comments. On the communal upbringing of children in The Republic, she explained the high death rates of foundling hospitals and gave figures. She told him, “Plato does not know that crèches are the death and deterioration, the slaughterhouses, of infants, not their nurseries. See 90 percent in the good soeurs’ crèches and in all the French institutions.... All children in his state are foundlings. It never occurred to him that the greater part of them, according to universal experience, would have perished. For children can only be brought up in families.” She advised Jowett to leave out his explanation of the “cave.”

Jowett’s second edition was a fuller five volumes. In many places, he added a paragraph or two repeating or paraphrasing her words.

Jowett had a love for life that Nightingale admired. For many years, he held Holy Communion services for her at her home in London, often with a friend or relative attending. Reforms in India were causes the two shared. Balliol was the college that welcomed the most Indian students.

In her tribute to him on his death, she called him “the friend of God who has now received the crown of life.” Jowett, however, despite his twice signing the 39 Articles of the Church of England, did not believe in any individual resurrection, but rather a generalized absorption.

Project for “social physics” at Oxford: the case for evidence-based social policy

In 1891, Nightingale formed the project of getting a chair or lectureship in “social physics” established at Oxford, the university that trained the most senior politicians and civil servants, the people who most needed to have statistical knowledge at hand. She complained that plenty of statistics were collected, but they “remained in their pigeon holes, which means not at their disposal,” and thus “absolutely useless.” The term “social physics” is from the work of the Belgian statistician L.A.J. Quetelet, and means effectively applied social science. For subjects, she proposed the effect of state schools (compulsory education was new), the effect of workhouses on children, the effect of British administration in India (whether people richer or poorer, their trades and handicrafts flourishing or perishing).

Nightingale is recognized as the founder of evidence-based health care. Here she called for evidence-based social policy generally.

This paper (and other short essays on Nightingale) can be found online at: nightingalesociety.com/backgrounders