

13. Florence Nightingale and the Commonwealth

by Lynn McDonald, for the Nightingale Society

The World Health Organization declared 2020 to be the “Year of the Nurse and Midwife” in honour of the Bicentenary of Florence Nightingale (born 1820), for her founding of the nursing profession and her work in health promotion, disease prevention, hospital safety and access to quality health care for all. As well as founding the first nursing school in the world, at St Thomas’ Hospital, her Fund paid for the creation of the first midwifery training programme, at King’s College, London.

Health, according to the WHO definition of on its founding in 1948 is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.” It resembles Nightingale’s “to be able to use well all the powers one has.” But what did Nightingale do for the **Commonwealth** in particular?

Nursing: Nightingale nurses started professional nursing and founded nurse training schools in **Australia, Canada** and **India**. That is, her school sent out teams of matrons and nurses, and Nightingale herself mentored these early nursing leaders.

Hospital reform: Nightingale was a promoter of safer hospital design, through the pavilion model. She advised hospital architects in Canada and Australia on new buildings, to ensure the safest possible design for nurses as well as patients and doctors. She insisted on high standards of cleanliness and comfort in nurses’ residences, that in Sydney, New South Wales, was a world model.

Anti-racism: Since Nightingale’s grandfather worked with William Wilberforce for the abolition of slavery, she early learned liberal, inclusive, principles, which guided her work. For further on her anti-racism see:

<http://nightingalesociety.com/backgrounders/10-florence-nightingale-a-leading-anti-racist/>

India: Nightingale worked vigorously, for decades, on sanitary reform in India, famine prevention and relief, medical aid for women, women’s rights (against the enforcement of child marriages). She wrote a campaign letter for the first Indian national, Dadabhai Naoroji, to become an MP. She sup-

ported the organizations and journals of Indian reform organizations, notably the East India Association, precursor of the Indian National Congress.

Aboriginal peoples: On becoming aware of declining numbers of aboriginal (Indigenous) peoples, Nightingale had a study conducted on disease and mortality in aboriginal schools and hospitals, in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Canada. The data showed rates of death twice what they should be, but she was unable to persuade the Colonial Office to carry on the research. Her analysis got wide distribution in Australia, especially. She was the first person to document the high death rates in Canadian residential and day schools, an enormous issue today with the revelation of physical and sexual abuse and loss of language and culture. In 1880, she published a paper, “Woman Slavery in Natal” for the Aborigines’ Protection Society.

Nigeria: The first Nigerian trained nurse, Kofoworola Abeni Pratt (1915-92) wanted to train at the Nightingale School in London, as she admired Nightingale. She started training there in 1946 and passed with distinction, obtaining certificates as well in midwifery, tropical medicine and administration. When the National Health Service opened for service in 1948, Mrs Pratt was its first black nurse. On her return to Nigeria, she became the first Nigerian matron of a hospital, at University College Hospital, Ibadan (and led in its transfer to the University of Ibadan), the first chief nursing officer of Nigeria, the first commissioner for Health, Lagos, co-founder of the National Association of Trained Nurses, vice-president of the International Council of Nurses, winner of the Nightingale Medal, honorary fellow of the Royal College of Nursing, etc.

Action for Commonwealth nurses and midwives: Support recognition of Mrs “Rola” Pratt in the NHS as the first black nurse in the NHS. The Nightingale Society urges that an award be made in her name, to be presented annually. (See letter to the Secretary of State for Health at nightingalesociety.com.)

For further on Nightingale see <http://nightingalesociety.com/backgrounders/>