

NURSING ICONS

10: Florence Nightingale (1820–1910)



Florence Nightingale carte-de-visite

1856 Photograph by William Edward Kilburn, published by Ashford Brothers & Co
Owned by Florence Nightingale Museum

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Cartes-de-visite

Photographs of celebrities attached to small cards, known as cartes-de-visite, were hugely popular in the second half of the 19th century. Today, this Florence Nightingale carte-de-visite is a reminder of Nightingale's enduring celebrity status.

Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale was born in 1820. Aged 16, she discovered she had a talent for nursing while caring for her family and servants during a flu epidemic. She decided that God was calling her to become a nurse. Her parents were against the idea, as until then, nursing was a job for the poor. Despite this, Nightingale undertook nursing training and at 33 became superintendent of a hospital for 'gentlewomen' in London. In 1854, she was invited by the Minister of War, a social acquaintance, to oversee the introduction of female nurses into the military hospitals in Turkey.

Wartime nursing

During the 19th century, the invention of increasingly destructive weaponry and tactics caused large numbers of casualties. In unsanitary conditions, soldiers' lives were equally threatened by disease as they were by injury. Care of the significant numbers of wounded and sick personnel was inadequate and unorganised.

Nightingale believed in miasmatic theory, the idea that disease was transmitted by foul air, long after it had been discredited in the medical world. However, the measures she introduced to remove miasmas, such as airing and cleaning wards, did improve sanitary conditions. With the nurses she brought to Turkey, Nightingale cleaned and organised hospitals and improved supplies of food, blankets and beds.

Nightingale's fame

Nightingale's reform of military hospitals was deemed an outstanding success, and she returned to Britain a hero. Nightingale hated what she called the "buzz fuzz" of celebrity. Her desire for privacy only fuelled the legend, and the saintly image of Nightingale was reproduced on a huge variety of souvenirs.

Activity

Put yourself in the place of Florence Nightingale and write a letter to a hospital explaining how to prevent the spread of miasmas. Discuss with

your group why the measures may have worked despite Miasmatic Theory being superseded by Germ Theory.

Fact: Nightingale had a pet owl named Athena, which she saved from a group of children after it fell from its nest in the Parthenon, Greece. After her death Athena was stuffed and can now be seen at the Florence Nightingale Museum in London.