

Book Reviews

Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale: the woman and her legend*, London, Viking Books, 2008, pp. xxii, 647, illus., £25.00 (hardback 978-0-670-87411-8).

From Lytton Strachey's vigorous deconstruction in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) to 1980s cartoons of Margaret Thatcher as the "Lady with the Blowlamp", Florence Nightingale has served generations of historians, critics and commentators as a synecdoche for our difficult relationship with the Victorian age. As Mark Bostridge notes in the final chapter of his masterly new biography, one of the deepest ironies of Nightingale's life is the way in which the uncritical veneration she enjoyed (or suffered) towards the end of her life—expressed in a landslide of material culture, from prints, statuettes and "Nightingale cradles" to music-hall songs and the imposing statue erected in London in 1915—proved central in creating the apolitical, religiose "straw woman" so easily torn apart by Strachey and his successors.

Bostridge made his reputation with a series of literary biographies in the tradition of Peter Ackroyd and A N Wilson, and in *Florence Nightingale* he once again bridges popular and academic genres, offering a rigorous and highly readable study of Nightingale and her milieu. His stated aim is to "overturn many of our misconceptions about one of the greatest figures of the Victorian Age [*sic*]", and in this sense his status as an independent scholar is a great advantage, enabling him to draw on the most inspiring recent work in the history of medicine—especially that of Michael Worboys—without allowing it to dominate his narrative. To take one example, his discussion of whether Nightingale's five decades of ill-health can be explained as a case of chronic brucellosis is admirably understated, concerned less with reductive retrospective

diagnosis than the meanings and uses she found in her experience of illness.

Born in the first year of George IV's reign and dying a few months after Edward VII (who initially refused to admit her to his all-male Order of Merit), Nightingale's long life is reflected in a daunting mass of correspondence, memoranda, journals, reports, and a seemingly endless procession of *Notes on . . .* Bostridge guides his readers through this complex story with a lightness of touch and a portraitist's eye for the many facets of his central character. He reveals the ways in which Nightingale's family—rich, Dissenting, socially ambitious, politically engaged—shaped her practical piety, her headstrong, omnivorous spirit of enquiry and her ambiguous attitude towards the status and role of women in public life. Nightingale's intense relationship with her elder sister Parthenope provides a platform from which to explore the tensions between her own aims and desires, drawn out through an unconventionally diverse education and a series of journeys around Europe and the Near East, and the expectations and strictures placed upon a good-looking, well-born Victorian daughter.

But Nightingale's popular reputation still largely rests upon her work at the Scutari Hospital during the Crimean War, and Bostridge offers a compelling account of the Scutari mission. One member of her parents' social circle—Sidney Herbert, Secretary of War during the Crimean campaign—proved crucial in gaining official support for Nightingale and her party of nurses, and after the conflict Herbert became one of her closest and most trusted allies in the campaign to improve British military nursing. But he also reminds his readers that the Crimean mission occupied less than two years of Nightingale's nine decades of life, and that the administrative and political experience she

acquired at Scutari was most effectively deployed during her years of seclusion in England, as an *éminence grise* to a generation of reform-minded soldiers, doctors, ministers and civil servants. Less dramatically, but equally engagingly, he notes that the Greek oil lamp with which Nightingale was conventionally portrayed is entirely incorrect. When she carried a lamp, it was probably a Turkish design made from folded and varnished parchment.

Most striking, however, is Bostridge's commentary on Nightingale's life after returning to England. He highlights the sheer grind of her later life—surely Nightingale must have been the hardest-working invalid in history—and dissects the manifold political setbacks and personal quarrels as she began to elaborate a new vision of nursing, one which owed almost nothing to the pious sentimentality of Coventry Patmore's *The angel in the house* (1854) and much more to the hard-headed statistical digests of Edwin Chadwick and William Farr. He argues that we should integrate Nightingale's reports on nursing and sanitation reform with her devotional and proto-feminist writings, reading her freethinking Christian faith as a spine around which she structured her friendships, her campaigns and her own spiritual and bodily welfare. This devotion to a god with whom she could have direct personal contact (and even, on several occasions, converse) underpins the contrast between the potency of the “political” Nightingale, expressed in her correspondence and her reports to government, and her private reflections on weakness, failure and mortality.

Bostridge's interpretation of the ways in which Nightingale responded to European germ theories of disease may re-ignite older debates around the decline of miasmatism, but he also demonstrates that the practicalities of nursing, rather than the technicalities of disease transmission, lay at the heart of her work. His major claims and reinterpretations will be generally familiar to historians of nineteenth-century British medicine, but his great achievement in *Florence Nightingale* is

to have marshalled these arguments (and the huge volume of archival material on which they rest) into a balanced and constantly engaging narrative. He rejects both hagiography and vilification, preferring to explore and expand upon the tensions in Nightingale's life, work and character. This is a compassionate, critical and intellectually satisfying portrait of the “Lady with the Lamp”, one which will speak to generations of scholars, readers and nurses.

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Deborah Brunton, *The politics of vaccination: practice and policy in England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, 1800–1874*, Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, and Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2008, pp. xi, 255, £50.00, \$85.00 (hardback 978-1-58046-036-1).

Between 1800 and 1874 in Great Britain, smallpox vaccination expanded from a medical novelty to a state-mandated procedure. Deborah Brunton's carefully researched and thoughtfully argued book details the politics that surrounded the passage of key pieces of legislation regarding vaccination in England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Her comparative analysis reveals remarkably different vaccination practices despite similar legislation, and underscores the importance of social, professional, and institutional cultures in the evolution of public health measures.

Brunton's work addresses a little studied period in the history of vaccination. The early history of smallpox vaccination is covered in several biographies of Edward Jenner, the English doctor who introduced the practice in 1798. Its later history in the last decades of the nineteenth century is addressed in studies about the anti-vaccination movement in Great Britain. But surprisingly little has been written about the intervening period, when smallpox vaccination became a widely adopted practice