

EDITORIAL

## Lynn McDonald: Champion of Florence Nightingale

This year is the centenary of Florence Nightingale's death. Nightingale passed away on August 13, 1910, at the age of 90. It also marks 150 years since the publication of *Notes on Nursing*, her treatise on secular, modern nursing, as well as the opening of the first Nightingale School of Nursing. To commemorate these events there has been a proliferation of publications, both positive and negative, on Nightingale's life and legacy, as well as a re-issuing of her most influential writings on nursing.

This editorial is dedicated to the work of Lynn McDonald, professor emeritus at the University of Guelph, sociologist, social scientist, and Nightingale scholar. I will return to Dr. McDonald shortly, to explain why she is so deserving of this attention and why I consider her the "other" lady with the lamp.

But first, let me set forth my position on Florence Nightingale. I am a Nightingale devotee. When I was a young girl, Nightingale's biography captured my imagination, and it later played a role in my decision to become a nurse. Throughout my career, particularly when I have found myself at a crossroads, I have returned to Nightingale's writings for inspiration, direction, and re-affirmation of what nursing is or ought to be.

In the year 2000 I found myself at such a crossroads just as my directorship of the School of Nursing at McGill University had drawn to a close. It was a time when nursing ping-ponged between nursing surpluses and shortages. It was a time of mass firings when the work of nurses went unrecognized and underappreciated and when some believed that nurses could be easily replaced by less educated and less skilled health-care workers. It was a time when nursing identity and role confusion were at their most acute. It was a time when many nurses abrogated traditional roles rooted in the care of the body in favour of technology and medical functions. I was disheartened by these events, and so I decided to spend the first part of my sabbatical year becoming reacquainted with Florence Nightingale and her writings, re-reading *Notes on Nursing* (Nightingale, 1860/2010) and *Suggestions for Thought* (Calabria & Macrae, 1994) and reading some of the biographies published over the decades. Two books caught my attention because they cast a shadow over Nightingale's character, impugned her reputation, and called into question her motivations — in short, they knocked Florence

Nightingale off her pedestal and undermined her legacy (Small, 1998; Smith, 1982). I could not be swayed by the arguments of these authors, although I had no basis for questioning their scholarship. In reading Nightingale's own words, I found myself inspired anew and, in fact, able to reframe my own theoretical work within her principles. This experience affirmed for me that, however unpopular Nightingale had become, it was important that one be guided by her own words and not the interpretation of her words by others.

Fast-forward to 2009 and my next sabbatical. Although I am not a historian and have not had any training in historical methodology, I have been immersed in nursing for more than 45 years. I understand and know nursing well. Nightingale continued to intrigue. I was working on new ideas about the nature of person-environment, and I realized that Nightingale was the person to study and that the Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery, King's College London, was the place to go. It was there that I first came across the impressive work of Lynn McDonald, a fellow Canadian.

Dr. McDonald had undertaken the daunting task of putting together the writings of Florence Nightingale in a collection of volumes. Nightingale was one of the most prolific writers of her time, and she covered a wide range of topics. The breadth and scope of her interests are breathtaking. She wrote on nursing, nursing education, health, healing, public health in England and India, statistics, social reform, theology, mysticism, society and politics, the Crimean War, hospital administration, hospital architecture, and women's role in society — to name just some of the subjects that captivated her. She was a philosopher, nurse, feminist, administrator, social commentator, and social reformer. During her lifetime, from girlhood through to her early eighties, she published numerous books, articles, position papers, pamphlets, and over ten thousand letters (McDonald, 2010). She carried on a prolific correspondence with innumerable individuals: politicians, colleagues, friends, family members — people of considerable influence and none at all.

Lynn McDonald, as Editor of the *Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*, spearheaded a project to locate both published and unpublished material and compile it into 16 volumes, each weighing in at around a thousand pages (the volumes are listed below in Appendix 1). Dr. McDonald's work is stunning in its scope and depth and, most importantly, it gives Florence Nightingale back her own voice.

The 16 volumes are organized thematically rather than chronologically. The first few contain material that heretofore had not been published — and in some cases had not even been known to exist. These serve as a foundation for later volumes. For example, Nightingale's ideas

were informed by her family and her faith and hence the earlier volumes cover these topics.

### **Who Is Dr. Lynn McDonald?**

I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. McDonald for this editorial, and I came away very impressed indeed. I could not help but draw parallels between subject and author. Not unlike Florence Nightingale, Lynn McDonald is passionate about her topic and will go to great lengths to achieve her goal. She has devoted the last 20 years to bringing forth this collection of works despite innumerable obstacles — little to no funding, meagre interest and support from the nursing community, editors committing only to later withdraw.

McDonald, like Nightingale, is an ardent feminist. It was her commitment to understanding the contributions of women theorists to the origins of social science that led her to Florence Nightingale. She discovered Nightingale while examining social and classical theorists, both male and female, of the 19th century. Up until then, she told me, “if one took a course in philosophy, political thought, or sociology, you’d think all 19th-century theorists were men, and you’d be wrong.” Nightingale was just one of the women on McDonald’s list of theorists, and as McDonald became more familiar with Nightingale’s ideas and writings she found herself devoting more and more time to her.

Like Nightingale, McDonald is a systems thinker who believes that ideas can best be understood in their own particular context and from a wide-angled social and historical perspective. And not unlike Nightingale, she has an insatiable curiosity in her search for understanding and in locating Nightingale material scattered among 200 archives worldwide (McDonald, 2010). She is a superb detective and has pursued hundreds of leads, hunted down material that has taken her to private and public collections found in libraries, resource centres, and attics throughout Great Britain, Canada, the United States, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, and Turkey.

But above all the two women share a commitment to social justice and the betterment of society through political activism. Nightingale spent a good part of her life working to better the lives of the poor by fighting for clean water, improved sewerage, and decent housing, by working with influential Members of Parliament and providing them with the arguments and the data. McDonald served as a Member of Parliament from 1982 to 1988, representing the New Democratic Party, and is a former president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, Canada’s largest women’s organization.

### How the Collected Works Came About

A number of events conspired to bring this project about. As McDonald lectured on early social science theorists, both undergraduate and graduate students became intrigued and captivated by Florence Nightingale. Many of McDonald's students wanted to write papers on Nightingale but had difficulty finding or accessing primary source material. Works that were available, such as *Notes on Nursing*, had little to say from a sociological perspective. To address this shortcoming, McDonald assembled a team to gather the information, and thus the project was born. She secured a publishing contract with Wilfrid Laurier University Press. At about the same time, the writings of John Stuart Mill, another 19th-century philosopher and theorist — and both a contemporary and a correspondent of Nightingale's — were being collected in a series of volumes. Even though Mill's works were readily available and accessible, this project had no difficulty attracting significant funding, whereas McDonald was meeting with little success. Then came the publication of several negative books on Nightingale. A book by the Australian historian F. B. Smith that is vicious in its attack on Nightingale, even blaming her for the high mortality rates in the Crimea, not only went unchallenged but was extolled (Smith, 1982). McDonald paid no heed to Smith's assertions. Being familiar with Nightingale's writings, she found Smith's book to be laced with inaccuracies, distortions, and outright lies. Smith had relied on secondary sources and when McDonald went back to his primary sources she found that he had taken Nightingale's writings out of context. Smith's book, other negative books on Nightingale published subsequently, and three BBC programs casting her in a poor light and seen by millions went uncriticized by those who should have come to Nightingale's defence and set the record straight — namely nursing leaders, historians, and other social scientists. Nightingale's reputation was easily tarnished because, as McDonald astutely observes, she “had been revered but was not read.” McDonald knew that this situation could change if Nightingale were permitted to speak through the voluminous writings of hers that had miraculously survived.

### The Significance of the Collected Works

Poor scholarship and ignorance are dangerous. They contaminate and destroy reputations, negate people's lived experience, and distort reality. When fiction trumps facts, everyone is vulnerable to pernicious attacks that often lead to the wrong decisions and the wrong actions. The best weapon against such a pernicious virus is knowledge. Good researchers rely on primary sources. Many of Nightingale's attackers have leaned

heavily on secondary sources or have misinterpreted her work and taken it out of context.

This collection brings together all the primary sources of Nightingale's writing. It is a treasure trove for anyone wishing to understand, explain, describe, and know Nightingale and her contributions. It is a sourcebook for nurse scholars and social scientists. McDonald is the first author to make use of Nightingale's various works, and she has written a most informative biography, *Florence Nightingale at First Hand* (McDonald, 2010), based not on secondary sources or fiction but on primary sources.

This work serves to remind us that Nightingale gave us the methodology to bring about change. As McDonald notes, she was the first to develop a research methodology and the first to graphically display her findings in order to make a case for change. Nightingale begins by observing what is, and then, based on solid research, determines what is and is not working in order to intervene. "We mustn't be relaxed," says McDonald, paraphrasing Nightingale. "We mustn't say, 'Oh, yes, I've done the right thing.' Be careful and follow up with monitoring and see what is actually working and what is not." McDonald adds, "This is still very good advice. For example, in terms of hospital safety, this is needed even more today."

Finally, each volume makes fascinating reading for both the layperson and the professional. Because of the many topics on which Nightingale wrote, there is something for everyone. She was one of the eminent thinkers of the 19th century. The reader cannot fail to be impressed by Nightingale's incisive mind, as evidenced in her keen observations and superb analyses. She is a person who paints a large canvas yet knows the importance of the details. She writes with compassion, wit, passion, and above all integrity. The reader comes away from each of these volumes in awe of the woman and inspired by her brilliance.

### Conclusion

We in the nursing community must acknowledge the tremendous gift that Lynn McDonald has given us. She has provided us with a sourcebook for interesting questions about Florence Nightingale, the origins of modern nursing, and all that affected the conduct of nursing yesteryear and continues to affect it today.

McDonald has given us the tools to ward off unsubstantiated attacks against Nightingale. It is nurses who need to restore Nightingale's reputation, first within our own ranks and then among those who would defame her. When we undermine Nightingale we undermine nursing. She provided nurses with a broad mandate in society. The social contract

is far-reaching in the areas of health promotion, illness prevention, and public health, and as concerns healers and social reformers, and it can be fulfilled with every patient encounter and be extended to social activism. Nightingale's imaginings and actions are as relevant now as they were in her day. The context and times may have changed but her messages are timeless and translate well to today's realities (see, for example, Dossey, Selanders, Beck, & Attewell, 2005).

I have dubbed McDonald the "other" lady with the lamp, because her work has the power to illuminate, inform, and inspire the current generation of nurses and the generations to come, just as did the work of Nightingale, referred to fondly as "the lady with the lamp."

**Laurie N. Gottlieb**  
**Editor-in-Chief**

### References

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**Appendix 1 *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale,*  
Edited by Lynn McDonald**

- Vol. 1: *Florence Nightingale: An introduction to her life and family*, 2002
- Vol. 2: *Florence Nightingale's spiritual journey: Biblical annotations, sermons and journal notes*, 2002
- Vol. 3: *Florence Nightingale's theology: Essays, letters and journal notes*, 2002
- Vol. 4: *Florence Nightingale on mysticism and Eastern religions* (Gérard Vallée, Ed.), 2003
- Vol. 5: *Florence Nightingale on society and politics, philosophy, science, education and literature*, 2003
- Vol. 6: *Florence Nightingale on public health care*, 2004
- Vol. 7: *Florence Nightingale's European travels*, 2004
- Vol. 8: *Florence Nightingale on women, medicine, midwifery and prostitution*, 2005
- Vol. 9: *Florence Nightingale on health in India* (Gérard Vallée, Ed.), 2006
- Vol. 10: *Florence Nightingale on social changes in India* (Gérard Vallée, Ed.), 2007
- Vol. 11: *Florence Nightingale's suggestions for thought: Collected works of Florence Nightingale*, 2008
- Vol. 12: *Florence Nightingale: The Nightingale School*, 2009
- Vol. 13: *Florence Nightingale: Extending nursing*, 2009
- Vol. 14: *Florence Nightingale: The Crimean War*, 2010
- Vol. 15: *Florence Nightingale on later wars* (forthcoming)
- Vol. 16: *Florence Nightingale and hospital reform* (forthcoming)

For further information on the Collected Works of Florence Nightingale, visit the project's Web site: [www.uoguelph.ca/~cwfn](http://www.uoguelph.ca/~cwfn).