PREFACE

This is a study of some of Florence Nightingale's thoughts in action. It is not an attempt to retell the story of her life. There are already dozens of biographies and hagiographies of the Lady with the Lamp, beginning with the great biography by Sir Edward Cook. His two volumes form a monument worthy of their subject: they show his marvellous industry in combing through a huge archive which must have been largely unsorted when he began; he is accurate and has a keen sense of personality and period; his tact and fairness never falter when narrating the conflicts involving his redoubtable heroine; above all, he conveys the nature and force of Miss Nightingale's superb intelligence. These qualities together set his work on that rare plane with Morley on Gladstone, Maitland on Leslie Stephen and Forster on Dickens.

All subsequent works on Florence Nightingale, including Lytton Strachey's essay and the liveliest and perhaps least known study, that by Margaret Goldsmith, are recensions of Cook. The most pretentious and popular of them, the book by Cecil Woodham-Smith, is careless, often misleading, and ungrateful to Cook, from whom her work is closely derived. Instead of writing another biography, I have tried to discover from a fresh, close examination of the Nightingale Papers, and the manuscripts of some of her allies which were not available to Cook or Goldsmith, and not used by Woodham-Smith, why and how Miss Nightingale assumed the career of reformer, why and how she chose particular strategies and fought particular battles, and how she fared with them. I hope my accounts of these episodes will give the reader a clearer idea of Miss Nightingale's ambitions and beliefs than existing studies provide. I have tried, too, to place her in her context as a social improver and thereby to illuminate more widely the unofficial mind of reform in High Victorian England.

I am deeply grateful to my colleagues in the Research School of Social Sciences for their generous, expert and varied help with this book: Janice Aldridge shepherded my tangled drafts through the new technology; Cameron Hazlehurst supplied me with unlikely but profitable sources; Ken Inglis, Oliver McDonagh and Allan Martin criticised my drafts with marvellous acuity and forbearance; Pauline
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Barratt, Jeanette Horrocks and Christine Woodland unearthed crucial facts.

Notes

I would like to clarify one or two points relating to the text. Parentheses within quotes are Miss Nightingale’s own and square brackets contain my additions. I have also used square brackets within the notes to indicate my suggested names and dates for letters and memoranda where these are absent or uncertain in the original.
Florence Nightingale’s first chance to deploy her talent for manipulation came in August 1853. She then became resident lady superintendent of the Invalid Gentlewomen’s Institution at 1, Upper Harley Street. This charity provided refuge for distressed ladies who paid for single rooms or ‘compartments’ at the subsidised but still formidable rates of 10/6 or one guinea a week. The Institution was a few years old; it was run down, and ill-managed by separate committees of ladies and gentlemen led by a half-hearted council; it had newly removed to the Upper Harley Street premises. The post was Miss Nightingale’s first (though unsalaried) job, her first exercise of independent control. Her father made her an allowance of £500 a year. Her aunt Mai Smith secured her a flat in Pall Mall so that Florence could as she put it, ‘clear off ... at my own time’ from the Institution. The new superintendent had about five months’ practical observation of hospital nursing. She was 33 years old.

Even while she was negotiating for the appointment, Miss Nightingale was insisting upon changes in the nursing arrangements and upon the installation of mechanical improvements at Upper Harley Street. Henceforth each nurse was to sleep next to her ward, and ‘the bells of the patients should all ring in the passage outside the nurse’s own door on that story, and should have a valve which flies open when its bell rings, and remains open in order that the nurse may see who has rung’. A piped hot water system and a ‘windlass’, a kind of tray hoist, were also to be built, to save the nurses’ legs when serving meals, and their time in carrying water. The alterations were made. The superintendent-elect supervised the work by letter from Paris, simultaneously with mobilising biddable supporters in Lady Canning, Lady Inglis and Mrs Sidney Herbert to become more active on the committee.

Within a week of her arrival at the Institution Miss Nightingale challenged the governing bodies with her decision to admit Catholics and even Jews. She let it be said that she would resign on the question. The governing bodies capitulated, in writing. There is no evidence that any Catholic or Jew ever sought admission or was admitted; but among the high-minded High Church aristocratic would-be tolerant membership of the committees, it was an inspired choice of issue. The
new superintendent also dismissed the incumbent matron, an act which did not technically lie completely within her province, and introduced her own housekeeper, paid from her own pocket. Within weeks of Miss Nightingale's installation the house surgeon resigned and she took a leading part in selecting his successor and defining his duties, once more exceeding her authority. She insisted, yet again upon threat of resignation, on accompanying the doctors on their rounds in order to ensure that orders were executed and that what she called the patients' 'legerdemain of Hysteria' should not prevail with the medical men. The young, zealous and personable Puseyite chaplain was forced out and, against the inclinations of the ladies' committee, the lady superintendent replaced him, with 'good, harmless Mr Garnier', older, physically and theologically nondescript, and tame.

These early victories confirmed Florence Nightingale in a strategy which she followed to the end of her career. She had discovered two great strengths in herself, necessary strengths in all reformers. She fed on an unyielding, unremitting drive to dominate her associates and opponents and to this end she defined issues and goals, distinct from theirs, in the pursuit of which she never faltered, regardless of the worth of her rivals' goals, the cogency of their arguments or the solidity of their facts. She had also an extraordinarily rich and firm imaginative grasp of the relations between individuals and the siting and working of things and of human beings' relations to them. This sense, which we might best describe as Balzacian — uncanny insight into both human obsessions, ambitions and delusions and the concreteness of 'things' — was to enable her to become a successful, indefatigable politician and disposer of persons and objects. Like a novelist drawing upon a month's visit to Bath or a few months as a governess, Florence Nightingale absorbed during her brief visits to hospitals sufficient ideas to sustain a lifetime of admonition, exposition and rule-making.

After three months at the Institution Florence Nightingale reported her successes in a long letter to her father:

When I entered into service here, I determined that, happen what would, I never would intrigue among the Comtee. Now I perceive that I do all my business by intrigue. I propose in private to A, B, or C the resolution. I think A, B, or C most capable of carrying in Committee, and then leave it to them — and I always win.

I am now in the hey-day of my power. At the last General Committee they proposed and carried (without my knowing
anything about it) a Resolution that I should have £50 per month to spend for the House, and wrote to the Treasurer to advance it me—whereupon I wrote to the Treasurer to refuse it me. Ly Cranworth, who was my greatest enemy, is now, I understand, trumpeting my fame thru’ London. And all because I have reduced their expenditure from 1/10 per head per day to 1/.

The opinions of others concerning you depend, not at all, or very little, upon what you are, but upon what they are. Praise and blame are alike indifferent to me, as constituting an indication of what myself is, though very precious as the indication of the other’s feeling...

Last General Meeting I executed a series of resolutions on five subjects, and presented them as coming from the Medical Men.

The new rules included in-house dispensing of drugs to save druggists’ bills, new rules to enforce old provisions limiting each patient’s stay to two months, new reduced diets, fixed by the superintendent, and a public advertisement for the Institution, also composed by Miss Nightingale.

All these I proposed and carried in Committee without telling them that they came from me and not from the Medical men—and then, and not till then, I showed them to the Medical Men, without telling them that they were already passed in committee.

It was a bold stroke, but success is said to make an insurrection into a revolution. The Medical Men have had two meetings upon them, approved them all nem-con—and thought they were their own—and I came off in flying colours, no one suspecting of my intrigue, which, of course, would ruin me, were it known.

Intrigues are often torn, as Florence Nightingale usually was, between savouring their triumphs in private and boasting of their victories to intimates. Florence was close to her father, her weak but indispensable ally against her mother, Fanny, and sister, Parthenope. Her revelation of her new powers seems to have been designed to fortify the faith William Nightingale showed in her when he backed her venture into pursuing a life independent of the family circle. The striking thing about Miss Nightingale’s intrigues is their elaborateness, often amounting to elaboration for art’s sake. At Upper Harley Street her reforms were easily accepted. No group, except the patients and servants, who were voiceless, was threatened by them. Patients and servants could only vote with their feet. Her rules on diet and restricting
the sojourns of patients appeared to the doctors and some committee members to be rational and parsimonious, and not inhumane; her public measures promised to enhance the reputation of the Institution and its governors, and to improve the doctors' standing within it. Miss Nightingale chafed at the committee's dilatoriness and slack indulgence to patients rather than their indecisive opposition; by October 1853 she had overcome the 'treasurer who dealt with inexpedient principles and my Committee who dealt with unprincipled expedients ... My Committee are such children in administration', she informed her father. This is a severe characterisation of men and women and medical men who most of them possessed many more years' experience of the charity arena than their lady superintendent. But none of them matched the force and ingenuity she brought to intrigue.

Miss Nightingale's urge to boast served yet another purpose which she seems not to have recognised. Her setbacks were numerous and glaring but she none the less recorded them, glossed them and laid the blame elsewhere. In November 1853, unprompted, she inaugurated a series of quarterly reports to the ladies' committee. The reports chronicle, jauntily and unaware, the decline of the Institution. During the three months after her arrival, she dismissed or lost one complete set of servants and nurses, with the exception of the cook and one nurse, and there are indications that she subsequently lost a second set. She also changed most of the tradespeople. Typically, she forsook the local grocer for Fortnum and Mason's. Within seven months she apparently was compelled to change several of the tradespeople again. She also started a frenetic bout of home-jam making, producing, on my estimate, many more pots than the patients could possibly consume. The charwoman had disappeared; this had permitted a great saving in money but 'the house has not now the advantage of efficient cleaning — the housemaids being two inexperienced girls, who, though willing and anxious to do all in their power, are unequal to the work without constant superintendence'. Miss Nightingale purchased and begged a great deal of new kitchen utensils, new linen and new furniture. Thereby she raised the capacity of the Institution to 27 beds, but from about March 1854 the average number of inmates was only nine. At this level the Institution's income from paying patients and subscriptions was falling £500 short of the running expenses which had jumped, under the new superintendent, from under £1,000 to £1,500 a year. The dismissals continued: 'I have changed one housemaid, on account of her love of dirt and
inexperience, & one nurse, on account of her love of Opium & intimidation. The superintendent and her matron do not appear to have excelled in picking and training staff.

The shortcomings of the Institution were not, apparently, the lady superintendent's responsibility. She warned the ladies' committee that "The fact of the deficiency of Patients calls for immediate attention. Otherwise, this Institution will degenerate into a luxurious piece of charity, not worth burthening the public with." Meanwhile the furiously busy sewing, mending and jam making continued. By May 1854 the bedroom arm-chairs received spare covers made from the former curtains which Miss Nightingale disliked and discarded. The five bedroom sofas were all provided with spare covers, specially lined with calico. In addition, there were one dozen more dusters, two table-cloths, eight toilet-covers, four sand-bags, made out of 'old green baize', and two anti-macassars, together with extra dusters, old towels doubled into cloths (bringing the total to over 50 in six months — there is no indication of what they were used for, or if they were used), carpets repaired, counterpanes, pillow cases and towels mended. By August there were more sofa-covers, two more hassocks, more repairs to the linen, together with 30 more pots of red currant jam and six of jelly, at a cost of twopence per pot. The superintendent reported, in a single sentence apparently as an afterthought, that there was only one nurse left at the Institution. This development had saved £9 in wages for the quarter.

Miss Nightingale blandly concluded that the August report would be her last. She informed the Committee that she considered her work to be done, 'as far as it can be done' and that the Institution had 'been brought into as good a state as its capabilities admit'. 'Good order, good nursing, moral influence & economy' had all been satisfactorily implemented. She had not, she admitted, been able to effect her promised scheme of nurse training, but this was the committee's fault because they had allowed her too few patients. Moreover, the few they had introduced included too many of the wrong kind. Florence Nightingale always took a cool view of patients, and never wavered from her opinion, announced in the February report, that only the 'seriously ill' deserved hospital care. This classification excluded all 'trifling, hysterical or incurable cases'. Such patients tended to press their individual needs and were difficult to control. The results of the superintendent's sharp way with patients shows in the final report. After less than a year of her ministrations only ten patients remained in the Institution, that is, only one-third of the beds were occupied:
five of the ten were dying, another was a child, and yet another was an apparently immovable 'spine case'. (The remaining three, who presumably were open to being discharged or to discharging themselves, included, in Florence Nightingale's judgement, '2 fancy-Patients' and a 'moral case'). About two years before the Harley Street episode Parthe, who was no fool, had confided to her and Florence's special friend, Madame Mohl, that Florence had 'little or none of what is called charity . . . she is ambitious - very, and would like to regenerate the world with a grand coup de main . . . I wish she could see that it is the intellectual part that interests her, not the manual. She has no esprit de conduite . . . she was a shocking nurse.'

In her August report Miss Nightingale had given notice of three months, though adding that she might stay on for six; but she was already privately negotiating to transfer to King's College Hospital. But before the month was out she had moved without warning her committee to the Middlesex Hospital, she claimed, to supervise the admission of female cholera victims. Our knowledge of this episode comes from the vivid account Miss Nightingale gave Mrs Gaskell, the novelist, later in August while both were on holiday at one of the Nightingale country houses, Lea Hurst. Mrs Gaskell reported to Catherine Winkworth that Florence told her

The prostitutes come in perpetually - poor creatures staggering off their beat! It took worse hold of them than of any. One poor girl, loathsomefilthy, came in, and was dead in four hours. I held her in my arms and I heard her saying something. I bent down to hear. 'Pray God, that you may never be in the despair I am in at this time.' I said, 'Oh, my girl, are you not now more merciful than the God you think you are going to?' . . . Then, again, I never heard such capital mimicry as she gave of a poor woman, who was brought in one night, when F.N. and a porter were the only people up - every other nurse worn out for the time. . . F.N. undressed the woman, who was half tipsy but kept saying, 'You would not think it ma'am, but a week ago I was in silk and satins; in silk and satins dancing at Woolwich' . . . She got better.

This story is not supported by the Middlesex Hospital archives. Miss Nightingale is not mentioned in the medical superintendent's detailed record of the Hospital's work during the cholera outbreak in late August and the first three weeks of September. He named many devoted workers, from senior physicians to general servants; it is
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inconceivable that he would have overlooked an exotic lady volunteer. There is no evidence that any of the female patients were prostitutes and the notably proper behaviour of both male and female inmates [the men were mostly ‘respectable artisans’ from a neighbouring piano factory] suggests that it is unlikely that the females were prostitutes or indeed that they would have been admitted had they been known as such. Moreover, the first female case diagnosed as suffering from ‘undoubted [Asian] cholera’ was not admitted until 5 September. Miss Nightingale’s account of her good works at the Middlesex Hospital constitute a memorable example of her powers as titillating fabulist.

By early October 1854 she was back at Upper Harley Street, preparing to leave for the Crimea. After Miss Nightingale’s departure the Institution became moribund, presumably burdened with the debts she had incurred. It seems to have revived somewhat in the 1860s and to have lingered on, beset by financial troubles, into the present century. There is no evidence that Miss Nightingale ever revisited Harley Street or took any further interest in it.

Biographers from Cook to Woodham-Smith, even Strachey and the editor of the quarterly reports I have quoted, are unanimous in representing Miss Nightingale’s sojourn at Harley Street as her first great triumph. Yet the evidence they quote is mostly from people like Mrs Gaskell, who never saw the Institution and knew of it only from hearsay from Mr Nightingale, Parthe and Fanny, whose acquaintance with it was equally remote and whose information derived from Florence’s own self-justifying letters. Each was gradually enfolded in Florence’s great plans. ‘Our vocation is a difficult one’, she confided in January 1854 to her cousin, Marianne Galton, who had no vocation, ‘as you, I am sure, know; and though there are many consolations, and very high ones, the disappointments are so numerous that we require all our faith and trust. But that is enough. I have never repented nor looked back.’ The sheer oddity of her enterprise beguiled her relations, as it beguiled the ladies and gentlemen of the committees, underpinned as it was by her insouciant explanations of her failures with staff, patients, tradesmen and accounts and her generalising of the blame; and biographers have been beguiled ever since. Her superbly assured epigrammatic Byronic prose by a process of stylistic legerdemain turns small gains with linen and jellies into mighty personal feats and big set-backs into everybody’s moral shortcomings. By style and instinct she was a consummate politician.

The ladies and gentlemen of the committees were the more easily
beguiled by Florence Nightingale because she was one of them. Her
name represented enormous wealth, expressed in two large country
estates and easy membership of the best circles — yet with a difference,
quite apart from her superb intelligence. Miss Nightingale came of a
politically radical Unitarian dynasty which had become in her parents’
generation wealthier, probably, than many of the titled families whose
members graced the committees. As her reports reveal, she stood a little
apart, unresponsive to the claims of birth.

There is no need for the purposes of this revaluation to recount her
childhood and early adulthood. What can be assumed and indeed rather
more than can be proved has been delicately told by Cook and
splendidly over-dramatised by Strachey and Woodham-Smith. Nearly
all of the evidence about Florence Nightingale’s conflicts with her
mother and Parthe derives from Florence herself, as does her largely
retrospective account of her religious travails as an adolescent and
young woman. As I shall show later, Florence Nightingale’s
uncorroborated accounts of her troubles cannot be trusted. The only
points that are clear are that William, her father, Fanny and Parthe
realised very early that they had a very brilliant obstinate being to
cope with and that at every crisis, whether in Florence’s foreign travels,
her impulsive ventures into local village nursing and other charitable
works, her interest in Egyptology, music and natural history, or
Monckton Milnes’s proposal of marriage, they were supportive.
Typically, it was Parthe who took over caring for the owl Florence
brought back from Athens. Occasionally Fanny’s and Parthe’s
sympathy wore thin, as when the latter diagnosed Florence as ‘a
poseur’, but in general they appear to have been discerning about
Florence’s moody egotism and extraordinarily patient in coping with
it.

Her father, a clever, amiable dilettante, taught Florence and Parthe
fluent Italian, French, Latin and Greek and mathematics. He also
required his daughters to write essays on philosophical and historical
themes. Both he and Fanny wrote easily and aphoristically and
Florence probably acquired her style from them. Parthe’s prose is more
novelettish and wordy but it is still effective. Florence, unlike Parthe,
was blessed with a prodigious memory for anecdotes and quotations
from a huge range of reading, from Aristotle, Shakespeare and Milton
to Spanish mystics such as St Teresa. It is a measure of the family’s
intellectual and fashionable standing, and their confidence in their
conversational resources, that they knew not only the best of the
English intelligentsia but also cultivated such foreign luminaries as
Sismondi, de Tocqueville, Thiers and Élie de Beaumont.

The family’s sceptical intellectualism and wealth made them the less ready to give in to Florence's threats to express her capabilities in hospital work or superintending a religious sisterhood. Yet outside conducting a London salon or presiding over charities, controlling a sisterhood was the one avenue to power open to ambitious single women of the upper classes.

Florence’s private estimates of her parents and sister did not reciprocate their tolerance. Her father she unspARINGLY yet accurately characterised as wanting in the strenuousness she found in herself. He was ‘a man who has never known what struggle is . . . & having never by circumstances been forced to look into anything, to carry it out’. Had he succeeded in entering Parliament in 1835 he might have found a focus for his abilities but he lost the election because he refused to bribe the voters, and never tried again. On hearing of his death in 1874 Florence noted privately that he was a weak, inexpressive man: ‘It was his utter indifference to me – he never cared what I was or what I might become.’ A little later on a second slip of paper she added that 'he never had a[n] . . . office of his own'. But she kept up appearances. On about the same day she told at least one close friend, probably Benjamin Jowett, the master of Balliol College Oxford, that her one consolation was that 'my Father cared for my work'.

‘Parthe’, she privately assured herself in 1851, ‘was a child’. Child or not, Parthe was a formidable rival who, as Florence knew, often saw through her, but who nonetheless exemplified a feminity which Florence sought to dismiss as trivial. ‘Parthe says I blow a trumpet – that it gives her indigestion – that is alas true – Struggle must make a noise – & every thing that I have to do that concerns my real being must be done with struggle.’ Parthe’s interests in music, art and dress, and her attempts to reform her sister’s dowdiness, Florence rejected as petty and womanish. Parthe had a sharp literary intelligence, too, as her subsequent five novels, essays on agricultural and landholding questions and invaluable Memoirs of the Verney Family during the Civil War [vols. I and II] were to prove. Rather than the nonentity depicted by Florence’s biographers, she was a considerable competitor. Florence reserved her sharpest comment and keenest resentment for her mother. Fanny was intelligent and formidable. Florence noted that her mother had a ‘genius for doing all she wants to do & has never felt the absence of power’. She had ‘organized the best society’ for her daughter, who did not want it. ‘I felt insane at her disappointment.’

Her family’s ready acknowledgement of Florence’s talents made her
revolt the harder to sustain. About 1851-2 she wrote, 'There is scarcely anyone who cannot, within his [sic] own experience, remember some instance where some amiable person has been slowly put to death at home — aye, and at an estimable & virtuous home.' Only when Fanny’s health broke in the mid-1860s did Florence accept her: ‘I don’t think my dear mother was ever more touching or interesting to me than she is now in her state of dilapidation’, Florence told Madame Mohl in 1866. By 1869 Fanny’s memory was ‘almost gone’, but Florence confided to Dr Sutherland that she found her ‘far more respect=able than ever she was before’. Even so, after her mother became completely senile and blind Florence visited her rarely and then only under protest at being, as she told herself in 1872 during her first visit for about six years, ‘turned back into this petty, stagnant stifling life’. Florence kept to her room at Embley; her mother was wheeled in to her each day at 12.30 for a brief meeting. Two years later, at the time of her father’s death even this meeting with the helpless old woman stopped, ‘on account of my [Florence’s] weakness’.

Occasionally, as in the preceding note from 1851-2, Miss Nightingale referred to herself in the male gender. She apparently believed, reasonably enough, that her parents would have preferred her, their second and last child, to have been a male, in order to inherit the estate and continue the new family name, changed from Shore with a fresh accession of wealth in 1815. Her father liked to praise his daughter as the possessor of ‘quite a man’s mind’, while Florence in one of her imaginary conversations with her mother in 1851-2 informed her that ‘with my “talents” & my “European reputation”’ she was not ‘going to stay dangling about my mother’s drawing-room . . . I shall go out and look for work . . . You must look upon me as your son . . . You must consider me married or a son’.

Her parents had encouraged her to marry Richard Monckton Milnes, the rising Liberal social reformer and literary man, during his nine-year-long courtship during the 1840s. But their hopes that Florence would thereby realise her talents for conversation and philanthropy in becoming a great London hostess foundered on her resolve not to marry and perforce subordinate her career. As she remarked in her anonymously published Suggestions for Thought (first drafted 1851-2) ‘Marriage is the most selfish of all ties . . . as Milton put “He thy God, thou mine”’. ‘Can one man or woman’, she added, ‘be more interesting to us than mankind? I know that I could not bear his life — that to be nailed to a continuation & exaggeration of my present life without hope of another would be intolerable to me.’ John Stuart Mill, whom
she subsequently bullied into reading her manuscript, noted that her Milton quotation was incorrect: 'Milton says worse than this: he says He thy God, I his.' Mill, theoretically a more thoroughgoing egalitarian feminist whose correction was even more egregiously inaccurate, prudently did not draw the implications of Miss Nightingale's slip. Her emotional attachments were directed to her own sex and from adolescence onwards she engaged occasionally in sentimentally effusive protestations of love for various female relatives and acquaintances. These sudden outbursts, during which Florence lost her usual steeliness and even her curt prose-style, were to continue into her old age.

Miss Nightingale's struggles to reconcile her egotism with her unfixed, non-Biblical, non-sacerdotal religiosity were equally explosive. When she reached her early twenties she had learned to exist with her dilemma by imagining herself a victim of special persecution and as destined endlessly to re-live Christ's crucifixion. Thereby she mortified her narcissism. Whilst travelling in Egypt in 1849 she experienced a severe crisis of suffocated ambition. She recorded in her diary that Christ appeared to her on five occasions, two of them on successive days. At each apparition she heard Him ask her the same general question: 'Would I do good for Him, for Him alone without the reputation?' (7 March 1849). A week later, at Thebes, 'as I sat in the large dull room waiting for the letters, God told me what a privilege he had reserved for me ... & how I had been blind to it. If I were never thinking of the reputation how I should be better able to see what God intends for me.'

Soon after this visitation Florence Nightingale accepted an instruction she heard from God to proceed, against the wishes of the family, to Kaiserswerth, to sample the communal nursing and reformative duties of the Lutheran evangelical deaconesses gathered there by Pastor Fliedner. Her visit may have satisfied her urge to defy the family but she found Kaiserswerth nursing grubby and ineffectual and the devotions of the community profoundly anti-intellectual; although she never ceased subsequently to praise Kaiserswerth and Fliedner in public. Indeed Kaiserswerth was a valuable experience for her: it provided a living lesson in what to avoid both in the shape of high-minded, affected spirituality and in stupid nursing routines which ignored common cleanliness, rational comfort, and punctuality. Miss Nightingale determined that nurses should serve their Creator by helping patients physically and morally and not by worshipping while their charges died in their own filth. Still, the dedication and obedience
of the deaconesses impressed her. They were ‘consecrated’ by the pastor after probation, but did not take religious vows. Florence Nightingale approved this compromise. She distrusted Catholic and High-Church sisterhood vows because they enjoined obedience to a supernatural regime which deflected commands issued by rational mundane authority and provided an excuse for non-compliance. Nurses should nurse to meet God’s purposes and to advance their personal quest for selflessness, but under human direction — as it turned out — Nightingale direction. Moreover, vows entailed a self-abased striving for the humblest office, whereas, Miss Nightingale wrote in 1851-2, ‘we should strive for that we can best do and what is most attractive & thereby find our duty’. She formed this view of nursing, like her other beliefs, early in her career when she knew little of their results in practice, but she never wavered from her formulas. Her approach was a priori all her life.

There is another element, rather less obvious, which must be added: the narcissistic quality of her personality. Throughout her career there is abundant evidence to attest to this strand in her behaviour. Florence Nightingale’s diaries and hundreds of letters and private memoranda show her to have been an untiring watcher of herself. She observed every play of her intelligence and weighed it, fluctuating between self-admiration and self-contempt. Her self-regard was never stable. In public she was gracious and ingratiating, immensely productive and politically effective. In private she indulged in bouts of self-deprecation, scorn of others, and guilt for her passion for fame and her destructive use of her allies. Within the family her father, her mother and Parthe were too easy and yielding, and emotionally inaccessible, to supply the tensions and gratifications that Florence craved. Her mother’s retrospective accounts of Florence’s essays on keeping pets, sick nursing in the village and management of her dolls all indicate, however falsified and toned down they were in memory, that from childhood Florence was alternately unpredictably wilful and petulant, and a docile seeker of adult approval. Her mother’s remarks also indicate that neither she nor her husband was very interested in Florence’s enthusiasms. As Florence reminded herself in the Suggestions of 1851-2,

‘God makes the family’... Perhaps it is just the contrary. God makes attractions — & the principle of the family is not to go by attractions ... In an amiable family, the common cause of things is for everyone to give up just enough to prevent such a ‘row’ as would make it intolerable.
— Good for us to practise self-denial & forebearance — But if God wants us to do what we like — we overturn the family. Man is born into the world — woman into a family. Woman must be born into world to find joy — to exercise their powers. People are ‘robbed & murdered’ by their families & no one notices — their time to do original thought is murdered.\(^{19}\)

Outside the family Miss Nightingale used auxiliaries to obey her orders and reinforce her self-esteem; she dropped them when they rebelled or lost their ability to service that esteem. She yearned for intimacy, to fuse herself with idealised others, yet she retained a profound sense of her psychological distance from other human beings, a contradiction, as I shall outline later, that permeated her dealings with such confidants as Sidney Herbert and Mary Jones, the superintendent of a High Church nursing sisterhood. Florence Nightingale’s sexual relationships remained infantile. She never permitted herself to become unguardedly close or unreservedly dependent upon anyone. Throughout her career she made public emotional investments in others, in shared great plans and objects, and when the others’ commitment wavered or their contribution disappointed her, as invariably they did, she ostentatiously withdrew the outlay and reinvested it in herself. In all her ventures she played by turns the role of trusting acolyte and the only begetter who was always let down. Ultimately she had made a mystic marriage with God’s work: ‘real mothers & fathers of the human race’, she told her soul mate Jowett about 1865, ‘are not the males and females, according to the flesh’.\(^{20}\) They were instead spiritual heroines and heroes consecrated to spirituality. In this scheme of things there was little place for earthly competitors, as the Crimean adventure was to show.

Notes

7. Mrs Gaskell to Emily Shaen, 27 October 1854, in J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (eds.), *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester, 1966), p.318;
Report on the recent outbreak of Cholera near the Hospital; and the means adopted to meet the influx of patients, 23 September 1854’, Admission Books for 1854, Middlesex Hospital Archives. I am indebted to Mr W.R. Winterton, FRCS, FRCOG, for help with these sources.

14. 7 December 1851 quoted in Goldsmith, Nightingale, p.99.
17. F.N. to Sutherland [December 1864?] BL Add.Mss 45751 ff.250-1.
20. F.N. to Jowett, draft [1865?] BL Add.Mss 45783 f.68.