

## HEALTH IS NOT A TRIFLE

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**1.** Housed within a huge glass and iron structure that soared 108 feet accommodating full-grown trees, the International Great Exhibition opened in London in May 1851. Although promoted as a showcase for the art, commerce and manufacture of all nations, the British Empire predominated with more than 50% of the 14,000 exhibits. Among the many other innovations was a flushing toilet available to the six million who arrived on excursion trains from inland, and by ship from other countries.

I never saw Hyde Park look as it did being filled with crowds as far as the eye could reach, [wrote Queen Victoria].... A little rain fell, just as we started, but before we neared the Crystal Palace, the sun shone and gleamed upon the gigantic edifice, upon which the flags of every nation were flying....(1)

Among the dignitaries was the Duke of Wellington whose defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 had ushered in forty years of peace during which time preparation for war was ignored. Wellington was among those who decided that peace made the position of Director-General of the Army Medical Department an unnecessary expense. Such economic reformers Kinglake wrote:

left standing the emptiest pomps and vanities of their country, and applied their nipping parsimony to strictly useful institutions, including that medical service

upon which, in the times to come, the health and the lives of our sick and wounded soldiery would have to depend.(2)

2. In 1851, the same year as the exhibition, her Majesty's Government appointed Dr. Andrew Smith as head of the much-reduced Army Medical Department. Noted for his ability and integrity<sup>1</sup> Smith accepted the position with its scanty salary, sparse staff and inconspicuous quarters. Protective of professional prestige, *The Lancet* pointed its editorial finger at Her Majesty's government stating it had bungled badly:

The country will find, to its cost in case of war, that it is not in the underpaid and undervalued medical department that such reduction of power and emolument can be made. We feel for a paltry saving of £800 per annum a considerable injury has been inflicted upon the medical department of the army.(3)

As valid as such protests were and as perceptive as this prediction came to be, the Government paid little heed. Nor did the officers, men of wealth who purchased their commissions and promotions. They were separate from doctors who bore officer titles but civilian status, and even more separate from the soldiers they used more than led. The right of a soldier to be well led and well cared for in exchange for his giving his body and often his life was not considered.

Three years after the festive opening of its Grand Exhibit, Britain allied itself with France - its former enemy- to prop up the decaying Ottoman Empire against Russian aggression. Britain's access to its markets in India played a part as well. (March 28, 1854) The Russian War, as it was then called, would be a *coup de main*-  
3. a slap of the hand, a short attack. Similarly optimistic John Delane, the Editor of the *Times*, told correspondent William Russell, that he would be back by Easter

only a few weeks away. (April 16). For two years Russell reported what he saw and would be credited with saving the British Army. Prince Albert, however, disdained Russell as “the miserable scribbler.” An officer dismissed Russell as a “vulgar Irishman.” The Duke of Newcastle, the Secretary for War, diminished the *Times* reportage as a newspaper clamor. It was not the first time nor would it be the last that the messenger was vilified.

4 Others were horrified at what Russell reported from the Crimea specifically, “The number of lives that have been sacrificed by the want of proper arrangements and neglect must be considerable;” oct 9<sup>th</sup> . Thomas Chenery’s words were no less shocking: men were “left to expire in agony, unheeded and shaken off” as they were transferred from the battlefield across the Black Sea to Constantinople, and then to Scutari where little was ready to “ease their pain or facilitate their recovery.” oct 12. (5) The people, not the military, nor the medical authorities, sought nurses for the men. The people demanded that nurses be sent to care for their men.<sup>2</sup>

5 On the 15<sup>th</sup> of October Sidney Herbert the Secretary of State at War (finances) told Florence Nightingale, “There is but one person that he knew in England ”capable of organizing and supervising such a scheme.” (6) Five days later Nightingale left for the East with her party of nurses and nuns. The battles of Alma and Balaclava had been fought and Inkerman would occur on November 5<sup>th</sup>, the day after their arrival. Ten days later, November 14, 1855, the Russian winter roared in sending ships to the bottom of Balaclava Harbor, among them, *The Prince*, that was laden with winter clothes, food and drugs for the men and forage for the animals.

As the war ended, Nightingale remembered those winter days:

But I, who saw the men come down through all that long, long dreadful winter (four thousand we received in seventeen days-Dec 17/54- Jan3/55-& of these we buried more than the half) without other covering than a dirty blanket & a pair of old Regimental trowsers,..-living skeletons, devoured with vermin, ulcerated, hopeless, speechless...-70-80 we lost per diem on the Bosphorus alone up to Feb/55 on which day we buried 85 in one grave.... -in that month there were 1000 more burials than deaths registered.(7)

On the first of those days -December 17<sup>th</sup> - the *Egyptus* arrived at the Bay of Constantinople with twenty-two nurses, nine ladies, and fifteen Sisters of Mercy ready to care for the men under Nightingale's supervision.

What did Nightingale do? Nightingale washed her hands of the forty-six pairs of hands that might have cared for those men pouring into Scutari. She focused on Herbert reproaching him for sending more nurses without her requisition, a power she assumed rather than one the War Office specified she had in its [O]fficial Instructions to her.(9) Nightingale erred in adding Herbert's statement to the people in the *Morning Chronicle* to her powers. That said Herbert had waited until he heard on November 8<sup>t</sup> and again on November 28<sup>t</sup> that Nightingale's position was secure. It must be noted his concern for her reception trumped his sending other nurses to the soldiers.

With a certitude unsupported by the facts, Nightingale declared that the Superior of the new nuns "obviously came out with a religious view – not to serve the sick, but to found a convent.... They will worm their way in & intrigue with the Priests

afterwards.”(10) Nightingale’s prejudgment about Catholics would not have been uncommon in her mid-nineteenth century England. England was definitely a Protestant nation but at this time when Oxford notables such as John Henry Newman converted to Roman Catholicism, and Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Famine swelled the population, anti-Catholic fervor was at its height in London and in the East. In the crunch of the new moment, however, the 34 year-old Nightingale chose her old biases over the overwhelming needs of the soldiers, as she remembered, living skeletons, devoured with vermin, ulcerated, hopeless, speechless....

The Superior that Nightingale fastened on was the 41 year-old Mother Francis Bridgeman, a proven administrator chosen in 1844 to establish the Sisters of Mercy in Kinsale on Ireland’s south east coast. Red Coats and sailors in their blue jackets guarded land and coast from local uprisings and invasions from abroad as Bridgeman built a convent, a school, a House of Mercy and an industrial school under their scrutiny. She led her nuns in privileging the poor and the sick following the founding principle that “the poor need help now.” In caring for the starving Irish from 1845-1852 Bridgeman and her nuns accumulated more than enough experience that might be applied to their care of soldiers suffering from the same diseases that followed starvation and exposure - scurvy, typhus, diarrhea and cholera to mention just a few.

Only on the fifth day after their arrival did Nightingale contact Bridgeman and but she did not focus on her nursing competencies and those of her nuns.(11). The War Office had chosen these nuns as nurses, placed them “by the bedside of the sick” and further stipulated that they would “act principally as nurses” caring for the sick and wounded but were free to speak on religion with Catholics though not with Protestant

soldiers. They would serve within the wards of the hospital, “under the medical officers and the superintendent of the nurses -Nightingale -in all matters of hospital regulation.” Out of the wards the nuns would be under their own superior.(12)

Nightingale refused to accept Bridgeman stating she would have one superior only, and that was Mother Clare Moore in her own contingent. She would accept five of Bridgeman’s nuns after making space for them by sending back five nuns of her own party one of whom was a superior, Mère Sainte Marie.(13) The other ten of Bridgeman’s nuns were not her responsibility since Herbert had sent them to Dr Alexander Cumming, the Inspector General of Hospitals. None had been “consigned” to her. Apparently respecting Bridgeman’s responsibility Nightingale wrote that if she advised one of the five to withdraw, she could “do so.” (14) On January 8<sup>th</sup> Bridgeman and four of her nuns presented themselves at Scutari where they were not to nurse the sick. Two sisters were appointed to the kitchen, one sorted clothes and Bridgeman and another were idle.

Sixty-eight days had passed since the War Office accepted Bridgman and her nuns as nurses. But on none of those days were the nuns nursing patients. Events happening in London finally put Bridgeman and her nuns with patients. As December ended Russell wrote *Times* Editor Delane that the truth was too horrible to report. As people headed towards the Christmas holidays, they read Delane’s attacked on the aristocratic mismanagement of the war that cost the ordinary soldier’s comfort and more often his life.(15)

Delane’s outrage in the *Times* may have influenced Herbert’s note of January 12<sup>th</sup> to Bridgeman. Apparently he had “acted under a misconception of Miss Nightingale’s

wants and wishes,” he wrote,” and advised her to select the most efficient and send back the remainder. -His postscript focused on Bridgeman:

I am informed that your kind services may very probably be required at Galata. If it relieves you from your present difficulties, I should be glad to hear had been the case. (16)

7. The Koulali military hospitals at Galata would be opening as January ended.

The War Office cleared Mr William Ronan S.J., as the Catholic chaplain to the nuns and soldiers. He arrived on January 21, met with Nightingale who after a bit of a struggle agreed to abide by the agreement the War Office had with Bridgeman and her nuns. Accordingly, five of them would nurse soldiers in the Scutari General Hospital with Sister Elizabeth, an English-born nun from Dublin as the presiding Sister. Only these five were under Nightingale’s superintendence. The Commandant of the Bosphorous accepted the ten nuns Nightingale had rejected to nurse soldiers at the Koulali Hospitals that were under the patronage of Lady Stratford de Redcliffe, the Ambassador’s wife. Bridgeman and her nuns nursed soldiers under the superintendence of Mary Stanley and later that of Emily Hutton until the Koulali General Hospital was made over for Sardinian soldiers. On 8<sup>th</sup> of October Bridgeman gathered the nuns from Scutari General Hospital and together with the Koulali group transferred to Balaclava General Hospital after providing General (Sir) Henry Storks with their history.(17) He had Nightingale accompany them.

In London the most significant January event occurred on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January when 8 John Arthur Roebuck of Sheffield called for a select committee to investigate the conduct of the war. Five days later 28 January 1855 the House of Commons’ vote

of 305-148 swept the Aberdeen government with its Secretary for War and Secretary at War out of office. The Roebuck's investigation would point to Commander-in-Chief Hardinge, Secretary for War Newcastle and Secretary at War Herbert as the culprits who caused the disaster and not Smith who was blamed.(18) No one mentioned Dr John Snow's finding that the pathogen that caused cholera was ingested and not breathed in.

9 Swept in to office was Lord Panmure as the Secretary of State for War as February began ending the old-fashioned departmentalization in the war department that muddled decision-making resulting in the waste of human life. On February 19<sup>th</sup> 1855 Panmure sent his Sanitary Commissioners to the East where they buried the rotted corpses of soldiers strewn across the Crimea and buried the bodies of other soldiers bobbing up and down in Balaclava Harbor. It took a year to make all fit for the soldier's "health, decency and comfort."(19)

10 Panmure kept his eyes on the winter ahead determined it would not be a repeat of the winter of 1854-55. He alerted the Commander-in-Chief saying, "I must entreat of you to allow nothing to induce you to treat health as a trifle." (20) Panmure sent Lt. Colonel (Sir) John Henry Lefroy (1817-90) his "Wandering A.D.C.," actually his Confidential Advisor in Scientific Matters, to the East and told him to inspect "every hole and corner."(21) SEAN NOEL Nightingale saw Lefroy as the "Voice of the War Office" but hesitated in being seen as telling those officials what to do. Thus in her second letter she wrote that "the War Department considers the number of twelve ladies now employed at the General Hospital Balaclava is greater than the average number of patients in that hospital requires, and that Lord Panmure has desired my

opinion.” Nightingale concurred with the Secretary for War.(22) Her hope to reduce the number of Bridgeman’s nuns was not to be realized. Three weeks later on January 7<sup>th</sup> 1856 Sister M. Joseph Croke, one of Bridgeman’s nuns, noted in her diary that Lefroy and his suite have been at the extra kitchen and seemed greatly pleased. (23) As Lefroy inspected Balaclava General Hospital, he pointedly asked if 12 Ladies were required for two hundred and fifty beds. He reported that the reasons for their retention were such as to decide me not to press for any reduction of them.” (24)

Their care as represented in the *Confidential Report on the Nursing System, since its introduction to the Crimea on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1855* that Lefroy commissioned as December ended provides a picture:

The Superiority of an ordered system is beautifully illustrated in the “Sisters of Mercy”, - one mind appears to move all; and their intelligence, delicacy, and conscientiousness, invest them with a halo of confidence extreme [sic]; the Medical Officer can safely consign his most critical cases to their hands; - Stimulants - or opiates - ordered every five minutes, will be faithfully administered, though the five minute labor were repeated uninterruptedly for a week.(25)

That ordered system of care had succeeded that of Nightingale’s Mrs. Weare as superintendent and Mrs. Davis as cook. Nightingale was not allowed to have a copy but Lefroy had shown her the *Report* and received her pages of refutations of its findings. (26) She aimed her rage at David Fitzgerald, the Deputy Purveyor in Chief not realizing Lefroy had commissioned the *Report*. She did not address the tribute to the Sisters of

Mercy. As hostilities ended, an Armistice was declared and peace was being negotiated, Nightingale became ever more adamant that her powers be signified to the Military and Medical Authorities in the Crimea. Lefroy argued that, “Her claim appears to me indisputable, given “all that she had done and sacrificed.” Moreover unity was vital for without it “the Protestant part of the nursing enterprise certainly, and probably the whole, will soon disappear.”(27) Accordingly Panmure declared Nightingale’s powers in a General Order on March 16<sup>th</sup> 1856. The Catholic part of the nursing enterprise, specifically Bridgeman and her nuns, having endured Nightingale’s rejection of ten of them, her misrepresentation of them in letters to the War Office, friends and family, and her general hostility as evidenced in referring to Bridgeman from January 4<sup>th</sup> forward as the Brickbat and her nuns as the Brickbats resigned.

Lord Panmure regretted for the good of the Hospitals in the Crimea that the services of these Ladies had ceased rather abruptly but desired them to know of his satisfaction at the work that they have performed with so much zeal and devotion. He thanked them and cordially approved of the services they rendered to the sick and wounded of our Army in the East.(28) Lefroy’s acceptance of their nursing system at Balaclava that privileged the soldier seems to have epitomized Panmure’s conviction that health was not a trifle.

11 In 1861, ten years after the Crystal Palace and four after the Russian War, the Guardsmen Memorial soared above Waterloo Place. Once looked down upon as a brute, the ordinary soldier rose up as a hero in the first monument to the ordinary soldier. The cost was considerable – 21,016 had died, 16,500 of them from preventable diseases.

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