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FAMOUS FIGURES

Two Victorian Ladies and Military Medicine

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The Military Organization in Britain was largely successful in fighting its wars, in peacekeeping, and in expanding its domain in the 19th century. However this was not matched by the quality of medical care provided to its troops. That British military medicine changed for the better was largely due to two ladies, who made unique contributions. They were Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale. Florence Nightingale was born on May 12, 1820 in Italy. While she was still a young girl, she expressed her wish to become a nurse, but her family was not at all sympathetic to such a career. They had good grounds for their concern. Both the physical conditions in hospitals in the early 1800s as well as the reputation of the nurses were disgraceful. She nonetheless persisted and in preparation for her future career, read avidly and became an expert on the logistics of hospital management.

Queen Victoria was born on May 24, 1819 in London. Her parents were aware of the benefits of modern medicine; for example they had Victoria vaccinated against smallpox as a child. She was the first member of the Royal family protected in this way. Queen Victoria herself also held progressive views on medicine. She accepted chloroform anaesthesia during the birth of one of her children while the new agent was still untried and suspect, and so helped to launch this new branch of medicine.

While the Queen's life, and contributions of Florence Nightingale, are well documented, the partnership between these ladies is not so well known. It was a partnership that eventually resulted in the formation of the Army Medical Corps in 1898. The Crimean War formed the background, where it soon became evident that the medical care of the military personnel, healthy as well as wounded, was woefully poor and inadequate. Not only was there hardly enough equipment but the overall medical organizational management was poor. What remains of interest today was the attitude of the military hierarchy towards the shortages and the appalling medical conditions in the Crimea. There was a general tendency to deny the unfavourable reports coming back from the war zone and maintain that the medical situation was well under control and certainly not as described. It was in this setting that Florence Nightingale was formally invited in 1854 by Sydney Herbert, Secretary of State and a personal friend, to



"take charge of an official scheme for introducing female nurses into the hospitals of the British Army" (1).

She did this and far more. Fight-ing constantly against the military establishment, she performed remarkable improvements. The filthy army hospital at Scutari was cleansed, and for the first time the troops had adequate housing, bedding, food and solicitous care. Similarly, medical personnel were provided with equipment, medicines and simple supplies (bandages and dressings) previously lacking.

Following the war, Florence Nightingale felt that she had to continue her fight for the betterment of the soldiers. She could not have found a better champion than Queen Victoria.

Both the Queen, and her husband Prince Albert, were convinced of the worth of Miss Nightingale's case for the reform of military medicine. The two ladies met on several occasions and formed a remarkable partnership in support of the British Soldiers' medical needs. Although by the British Constitution a monarch cannot initiate policy, she can lobby for a deserving citizen. The Queen's quiet but determined support was critically important and despite the opposition from civil and military author-

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ities, Florence Nightingale's proposals for medical reform in the Army were accepted.

On May 5 1857, a Royal Warrant was issued for the Royal Commission on "The Health, Efficiency and Hospital Administration of the British Army." The Commission in its report recommended that sanitary order be insured in the barracks, the statistical department for the Army be founded, a Royal Army Medical School be established, and the Army Medical department be overhauled (2).

The *New Deal* that promised so much was, however, whittled down, and over the years the British Medical Services slipped badly. Eventually, The British Medical Association became involved and a number of medical men, among them Lord Lister, went to the now old Queen Victoria to express their concerns. With the Queen's support, the Royal Army Medical Corps was formed in 1898, when the government finally gave way to the Association's sustained pressure (3). Armies everywhere soon copied the rapid advances made in establishing efficient organization using effective methods.

References

1. Biography: Florence Nightingale, by Cecil Woodham-Smith, Constable, London, 1982, chapter v11, p137.
2. Ibid., chapter xiii, p298.
3. In Arduis fidelis, definitive History of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 1898-1998, J.S.G. Blair, chapter xiiii, pp471-2.

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