



The Continuing False Accusations against Florence Nightingale, Founder of Professional Nursing

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Abstract

Here three false accusations against Florence Nightingale, founder of professional nursing, are refuted. First, further material, from a previous Trends article, is adduced on the portrayal of Mary Seacole as a co-founder of nursing. Secondly, recent accusations of Nightingale discriminating against men in nursing, even because of their so-called “hard and horny hands” are shown to be based on faulty attributions. Thirdly, charges of racism are not only refuted, but material cited that show Nightingale’s positive work on BME minorities and Indigenous persons. Finally, editors who accept such shoddy articles are challenged to raise their standards. Authors are called on to publish corrections.

Keywords: Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole awards, Racism, Discrimination against men, Publication standards

Introduction

This article is a follow up on one from 2020, “Problems of Ethics and Scholarship in Nursing Publications.”¹ A key claim discussed in that article was the presentation of a “co-founder” of nursing, Mary Seacole (1805-81). That is, while Nightingale (1820-1910) has not been “cancelled” in any country, in some, now Canada as well as the United Kingdom, she has been demoted to being a “co-founder” with a politically correct, but factually wrong, “co-founder.” This 2026 article goes on to refute recent (false) accusations against Nightingale: that she discriminated against men in nursing, that she was a racist, and a combination of the two, that she “conceived” of nursing as being the work of white women.

Materials and Methods

This is a discussion article, based on the extensive writings of Florence Nightingale, in print and manuscript, and the more recent secondary literature on her. Her manuscripts and print sources are available on a website.²

Discussion

The main proponents of Seacole as a nurse, led by the United Kingdom’s National Health Service, continue that promotion. The “Mary Seacole Awards” continue, supported by Health Education England, the Florence Nightingale Foundation, which was founded

after her death in her honour, the Mary Seacole Trust, the Royal College of Midwives, and Unison, a nurses’ union. The enormous statue of Seacole at St Thomas’ Hospital, where Nightingale founded the first nurse training school in the world, continues to link Seacole with her. The Florence Nightingale Museum, on the same premises, continues to promote Seacole along with Nightingale. A Mary Seacole portrait was unveiled at Guy’s Hospital in London in 2021.

In fact, Seacole was not a nurse and never claimed to be one, but was a (mainly) successful businesswoman, generous volunteer, and author of an interesting travel memoir, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, 1857. A concerning feature of the memoir, however, is its section quoting lavish tributes to her ability by doctors. Biographer Jane Robinson looked assiduously for evidence of a letter by the Principal Medical Officer at the Crimean War, Sir John Hall, and others, extolling Seacole, but found nothing. Seacole had a “chapterful of letters in *Wonderful Adventures*,” but the “lack of corresponding copies in their authors’ papers are inadmissible as independent tokens of esteem.”³

Errors in Hall’s supposed letter should raise suspicions, beginning with the fact that Seacole was not in the Crimea in the winter of 1854, as his supposed quotation states:

I have much pleasure in bearing testimony to Mrs Seacole’s kindness and attention to the sick of the Railway Labourers’

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Army Works Corps and Land Transport Corps during the winters of 1854 and 1855....she charitably furnished them with proper nourishment, which they had no means of obtaining except in the hospital...John Hall, 'Inspector general of Hospitals.'⁴

As for her providing "proper nourishment," the meals she produced were for sale, her customers officers-soldiers could hardly have afforded her prices.

A new twist, Mary Seacole has begun to be shown in three Toronto hospitals, with the placing of pictures of Nightingale and Seacole side by side in a hallway. There is a picture of a black nurse standing beside the Seacole picture at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. She is quoted as saying, reasonably enough, "You want to see someone who looks like you." Evidently no one on the nursing faculty informed her that Seacole was not a nurse, or that there were genuine black nurses who deserve to be celebrated. In her book Seacole called herself the "yellow doctress" or "the yellow woman from Jamaica," "motherly yellow woman" while her references to blacks were all to people other than herself, such as my "good for nothing black cooks."⁴ She never nursed one day in any hospital in any country.

Letters to officials at the University Hospital Network pointing out the lack of evidence for Seacole as a nurse went unanswered, or were justified as being wanted by black and minority nurses. That they could choose a black nurse who was highly qualified, Kofoworola Abeni Pratt (1915-92), the first black nurse in Britain's National Health Service, was of no interest.

In addition, Seacole herself never had anything to do with Toronto, or any place in Canada, while Mrs Pratt, a Nigerian trained in England, knew and networked with Canadian nursing leaders. In 1966, when Pratt was chief nursing officer for Nigeria (the first African to hold the post), she showed Canadian nursing leaders Alice Girard, president of the International Council of Nurses, and Sheila Quinn, deputy director of the ICN, around Nigerian health care facilities. Indeed, a biography of Pratt includes a picture of the three nursing leaders together in Lagos.⁵

It is particularly odd to see that Seacole is supported by the Royal College of Midwives, when she had nothing to do with midwifery, while Mrs Pratt both qualified in midwifery while at the Nightingale School, and worked as a midwife in London before returning to Nigeria.

The Accusation of Discrimination Against Men in Nursing

The accusations against Nightingale on discrimination against men in nursing have been extreme in content, written up with fervor, mainly by men nurses. True, the Nightingale School was only for women, at a time when women were not allowed in any existing profession, or the civil service, army, clergy, etc., and constituted the obvious pool for nurse training. Nightingale was clear that training was the way into nursing, that women did not by their nature make

good nurses, and that men could be good nurses. She named three examples of men, that is, not trained nurses but men who made careful observations on the sick and gave care competently when needed.⁶

One was the famous General Gordon, or "Gordon of Khartoum." For Nightingale, "his love of his sick, his experience, made him of the same profession as I am".⁷

While there are many sources on "discrimination against men," here an intriguing sequence of false claims is examined. Thanks are due to Danish nursing historian Dr Susanne Malchau Dietz for first suspecting the misinformation.

In 2022 Richard V. Reeves, PhD, founding president of the American Institute of Boys and Men, and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Washington, published a newsletter where he asserted that:

Nightingale firmly believed that solely women were created for nursing, and that every woman was a nurse. She was a strong advocate for women and nursing as she considered nursing to hold feminine traits: nurturance; gentleness; and compassionate, in comparison to the 'hard and horny hands' of men. Therefore, Nightingale openly opposed male nurses as she believed that they were not fitted to 'touch, bathe and dress wounded limbs, however gentle their hearts may be.'⁸

Reeves did not cite Nightingale for this statement, but "As quoted by," an editorial by three authors who, also, did not cite Nightingale.⁹ That editorial stated that Nightingale considered nursing to hold feminine traits: nurturance; gentleness; and compassionate, in comparison to the 'hard and horny hands' of men".⁹ The editorial, again, did not cite Nightingale herself, but a 376-page book by nursing historian Anne Summers: "Nightingale herself believed that men's 'hard and horny' hands were not fitted 'to touch, bathe and dress wounded limbs, however gentle their hearts may be'.¹⁰ The authors gave no page number, but it was possible to track the citation since the book was based on Summers's doctoral thesis at the Open University, which is available online.¹¹ There it becomes clear that the source was not Nightingale at all, but an Anglican nun, Sarah Anne Terrot, who had nursed with her in the Crimean War and wrote a memoir about that experience. Nor did Terrot seek to exclude men from nursing. The "hard and horny" hands referred only to those of the untrained soldiers assigned to assist in the hospitals. Terrot was quoting a wounded patient: "'Och! The blessing of the touch of a woman's hand; she touches my poor leg so tender and gentle!' Of course men whose hands were hard and horny through labour-hands used perhaps to the plough, and more recently to the firelock [heavy guns]—were not fitted to touch, bathe and dress wounded limbs, however gentle and considerate their hearts were".¹² Those men, soldiers, untrained, had been put to work hauling supplies and equipment from the harbour of Balaclava to the British Army camp.

As this article is finished, Reeves has three sources in circulation with the misquotation of Nightingale. He has been repeatedly urged to, at the least, remove the electronic substack, where he makes the false quotation, with no source, but with a picture of Nightingale and trainee nurses.¹³

A related misconception, Nightingale is said to have “promoted the idea that to be a ‘good nurse’ was also to be a good woman,” a statement that shows how little commentators knew /know about the challenges of starting the profession. “Nurses” were then grouped with kitchen maids, paid little and were badly housed. Hospital “nurses” were notorious for drinking on the job, taking opiates, and, for Nightingale, the “cardinal sin of unreformed nursing”¹⁴ was their demanding bribes for services, which happened in all countries, even in hospitals where the nursing was done by nuns-they would not take bribes, but their servants did.

The Accusation of Racism and Colonial Oppression

The accusation that Nightingale was a “racist,” that she discriminated against people of colour, is perplexing given any understanding of her own background, as a member of a liberal family, particularly her maternal grandfather, William Smith, an MP who worked with William Wilberforce on the abolition of the slave trade. Yet the literature on Seacole is rife with the accusation that Nightingale discriminated against her because of her colour. That accusation fails not least because Seacole never applied for a position as nurse, but rather dropped in on offices related to the hiring of the nursing team (Nightingale did not make the selection), after they had left for the war. Seacole indeed acknowledged in her memoir that Nightingale and her team had already left when she was seeking to go.¹⁵

Brown et al firmly declared: “Let’s begin with some facts. The Nightingale nurses who served in the Crimea were all White women.” Correct, but the population of the United Kingdom then was about 98 percent white. Blacks were not even counted in the Census, there were so few. Further, the accusation goes: “Nightingale valorized whiteness and conceived of nurses as essentially White, excluding women of color (and men of all races-a different topic) from nursing”.¹⁶ Brown et al gave no source for this extreme statement.

A Canadian doctoral student, later professor, Stake-Doucet, set out the staggering claim that “What is rarely discussed in nursing history is Nightingale’s racism and her political role in the genocide of Indigenous people under British rule.” She continued: “She believed Indigenous lives were a small price to pay for the expansion of the British Empire”.¹⁷ No source is given, nor is any available, for Nightingale had great respect for Indigenous people, seen notably in research she did on death rates in “colonial hospitals”.¹⁸ Another source that shows Nightingale’s concern is a paper she sent to the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, 1864, published the next year.^{19,20}

Stake-Doucet went on in 2023 to publish those extreme accusations in a peer-reviewed journal.²¹

In the same blog above cited, Nursing Clio, Smith repeated and highlighted the false accusation that Nightingale made “heavy and sickening” remarks about Maoris- no examples given²² And how could she have? She had called for the colonial governor to obtain information-she supplied the questionnaire--on Maori health, but the governor failed to obtain it. See Nightingale’s “Note on the New Zealand De-population Issue”,²³ an issue she pursued for some years.

Conclusion

Given the egregious accusations in the three subject domains discussed above, attention should be paid to remedies. The false accusations came not only from blogs but peer-reviewed journals with academic authors. That is, not only did authors with PhDs fail to adhere to good research standards, but so did their peer reviewers and the editors of the journals. “As cited by” or “quoted in” should be considered dangerous words! To use such suspect material to demean the founder of the nursing profession seems especially offensive. Any peer-reviewed journal that publishes such faulty material should acknowledge the errors when exposed and provide space for rebuttal. In extreme cases, the article should be withdrawn. Any author exposed for such errors, such as RV Reeves of the Brookings Institution, should post a correction on the institution’s website.

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Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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