Florence Nightingale

The Woman and Her Legend

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Extract

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1. The Ridiculous Name of Nightingale

Take a walk south from the Porta Romana in Florence today, along the Via Senese, then turn westwards, and you will soon find yourself climbing a steep path along a narrow winding road. High stone walls, mossy and mottled with age, obliterate the view in either direction, but tall cypress trees line the route, and olives and vines run down to the walls on both sides.

Towards the summit, at a bend in the road, a large house comes into view. The Villa La Colombaia is now a convent junior school with an imposing modern stone façade, but parts of the house date back to the fifteenth century. On its garden side the original low building with shuttered windows, arranged around a courtyard, is still in existence. A gravel walk through an elegantly laid-out garden leads to a magnificent view over the city, of Brunelleschi's white ribbed dome amid a sea of red rooftops.

It was from this 'Maison de Campagne', on a spring day in 1820, that twenty-six-year-old William Nightingale wrote to his brother-in-law Ben Smith about the expected imminent arrival of his second child. The city of Florence itself seemed deserted – everyone was travelling to Rome for Holy Week – but William and his heavily pregnant wife Fanny were taking advantage of the fine weather to ride up and down the hillside, he on a pony, she in a carriage driven by grey horses.

As William wrote his letter, his first child, Parthenope, born just a year before in Naples, was wriggling about on his knee, proving 'so rumbustical I can hardly scribble'. He was confident that the new baby would be a boy, though apologetic that he could not report 'by the same post the arrival of a young Ulysses, the protector of Parthenope . . . He is expected every minute not to say moment, but delays his arrival I know not why . . .'

It would be a further five weeks before William Nightingale was able to announce the birth of another daughter.

'I found a house at Florence on the hill/of Bellosguardo,' wrote Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*. Walk on a short distance from the Villa La Colombaia, and the legendary beauty of this small area outside the city gates, which has attracted so many well-to-do and famous visitors through the centuries, is immediately apparent. A stone monument at the roadside records some of the distinguished names who have lived or stayed at Bellosguardo: among them, Galileo, who retreated here after his appearance before the Inquisition, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Brownings, Henry James, Clara Schumann and, the penultimate name on the list, above that of Violet Trefusis, Florence Nightingale.

It is Henry James who provides the location of Florence Nightingale's birthplace with the link to a neat little biographical irony. For it was while staying, in 1887, at the Casa Brichieri-Colombi, another of the grand villas on the road leading to the brow of Bellosguardo, that James wrote the first draft of *The Aspern Papers*. James's novella, with its story of a would-be biographer who attempts to prise some letters of a famous American poet, Jeffrey Aspern, from an old woman, only to discover that she has burned them one by one, has been described as a moral fable for historians and biographers. It dramatizes the biographer's primordial fear: the destruction of the manuscript evidence, so vital to the craft, literally obliterated in a cloud of smoke.

The contrast with the fate of Florence Nightingale's manuscripts could scarcely be greater. While not a scrap of the Aspern papers is left for posterity, Nightingale's biographer has to struggle hard not to be buried under a veritable mountain of material, to the extent that he may find himself occasionally wishing that the odd bonfire had actually taken place. Florence Nightingale was an inveterate hoarder. She preserved not only letters, diaries, personal notes and jottings, but also copies and drafts of letters – and corrections of drafts. Identical, or almost identical, phrases in her letters sometimes make her seem like an actress rehearsing lines for a favourite role. At her death, paper was scattered through practically every corner of the first floor of her house at 10 South Street, even 'inside piano stools, behind coal scuttles, under sofas'. She had enough letters in her drawers, she had written in 1895, 'to cover Australia'.

Today, the collection at the British Library, the second largest among personal archives after that of Gladstone, fills almost 200 bound volumes,

and this represents merely the tip of the iceberg. At Claydon House in Buckinghamshire, the home for thirty years of Nightingale's sister Parthenope, Lady Verney, there is another massive collection, which includes Florence Nightingale's letters to her parents and sister, and correspondence between members of the extended Nightingale family network, over a period of more than a century. The Greater London Record Office holds a third major Nightingale archive connected with the running of the nursing training school founded in Florence Nightingale's name at St Thomas's Hospital, in 1860. In addition to these, there are some 200 smaller holdings of Nightingale papers around the world. Although there are significant gaps in the records – some sanctioned by Nightingale's family and executors, who destroyed certain letters after the appearance of the two authorized biographies by Sir Edward Cook and Ida O'Malley – Florence Nightingale's life is one of the best documented of the Victorian age, certainly the best documented of any Victorian woman. And previously unknown letters continue to materialize, most dramatically during the Second World War, when it was only quick thinking on the part of some individual that prevented Nightingale's forty-seven surviving letters to one of her Crimean War colleagues, Reverend Mother Mary Clare Moore, from being burned during the attack by a V-2 rocket which destroyed the Convent of Mercy in Bermondsey.

It might, though, have all turned out rather differently. As a young woman, in her first professional appointment, in 1853, as Superintendent of the Upper Harley Street Establishment for Gentlewomen during Illness, Florence Nightingale had conceived of a time when she might start keeping her letters, 'and after my death gratify the public with them'. Post-Crimea, however, and fame and influence made her more wary of the likely incursions of posterity, causing her to make radically different plans. 'Destroy', 'Return', 'Burn' are words which appear regularly from this time, scrawled across the upper left-hand corner of her letters. In 1860 she begged Henry (later Cardinal) Manning to burn her letters to him, adding that 'I have alas! met with such treachery in my poor life that any carelessness on the part of those I <u>know</u> to be friendly to me might easily be turned to bad account'; and four years later she recorded in a private note that she had 'taken effectual means' that 'all my papers' would be destroyed after her death. A clause in Nightingale's will of 1896 confirmed this arrangement. She 'earnestly entreated' her

friends and executors that all her letters, papers and manuscripts, with the exception of those relating to her work for India, be destroyed 'without examination'. Five years later she changed her mind. She still believed that the majority of her papers should be destroyed, but she was bequeathing them to her cousin Henry Bonham Carter, leaving him with the difficult decision of what to preserve. Evidently he couldn't bring himself to effect their mass destruction either.

Why did Nightingale change her mind? She was certainly not oblivious to the threat posed by biography. 'I earnestly wish that no . . . biography of me should be given by my family or friends,' she insisted in 1862 when the onset of severe spinal pain made her 'impatient for death'. Thirty years later, she joked, 'Well might Sir Cornwall Lewis say: "A new terror is added to death",' after learning that her letters to Sidney Herbert had been lent to his biographer, Lord Stanmore, without her consent. Yet she allowed plenty of material that was damaging to her own reputation to survive.*

In the end its survival may simply be attributed to the fact that, towards the end of her life, Nightingale lacked the time and energy to embark on such a massive process of sorting and disposal. Alternatively, it could be seen as an expression of a lifelong inner conflict between a natural desire for recognition, and a deep religious conviction that she must walk invisible and avoid the snares and delusions of self-love. Or it may be that writing itself was so much a part of her identity that ultimately she could not bear to see her literary remains consigned to the flames.

For writing was Florence Nightingale's lifeblood. This was a woman, after all, who even while in the depths of delirium in the Crimea, in May 1855, insisted on being brought pen and paper, and only with these in her possession did she become calm. In her later years, as one visitor, the writer (and former Nightingale nurse) Flora Masson, remembered, a pencil and a notebook lay always close at hand. The editors of Nightingale's selected letters have observed that 'Experience appears to have taken on a reality only when it had been ordered and fixed in writing'; and sometimes the intensity of the moment seeps through into the very act of writing as she stabs at the page with her pen or pencil.

* This doesn't include the family letters at Claydon, the preservation of which Nightingale might well have baulked at. Her sister Parthenope, with her instincts as a historian, was scrupulous about ensuring their survival.

From an early age she was a compulsive autobiographer. Between the ages of eight and ten, Nightingale wrote down her earliest memories in a series of notebooks, as part of a French exercise, which she called 'La Vie de Florence Rossignol'. In this, and in other childhood journals, she combined vivid impressions with a precise recall of incident and event.

Later, in her twenties, when reacting against the regime of enforced idleness imposed on women of her class, Nightingale rejected writing as only a substitute for living. 'I think one's feelings waste themselves in words,' she told a sympathetic friend who had suggested that she become a writer. 'They ought to be distilled into actions, and into actions which bring results . . .' Yet after she returned to England from her brief burst of heroic action during the Crimean War, and was confined to her bed or couch as an invalid, she found that words themselves became a conduit to action, as she set about communicating in writing her plans for change and reform to a band of collaborators. A vast amount of day-to-day business was conducted by the exchange of notes between Nightingale in her bedroom upstairs at South Street and Dr John Sutherland, and other members of her secretariat, downstairs. Sutherland, her chief assistant and adviser on sanitary matters, sometimes received as many as half a dozen notes a day (he was also partly deaf, so this mode of communication served a further useful purpose).

These notes are testimony to a prodigious amount of work in progress, but it is in her letters that Florence Nightingale is revealed in all her extraordinary versatility and intellectual power. At least 14,000 are known to exist: the earliest dates from 1827 when she was seven years old; among the last, eighty years later, in December 1907, is one acknowledging, through an amanuensis, a message and gift of flowers sent by Count Metternich on behalf of Kaiser Wilhelm II. 'That power of writing a good letter whenever one likes' she considered 'a great temptation'. She cursed the Penny Post and wished it were in California, writing that one of England's misfortunes was its 'confoundedly cheap postage'. As a young child she had a weakness in her hands and didn't begin to write in cursive script until the age of ten (her printed lettering in her first letters is like sampler stitching); but her mature handwriting, often in the special HB pencil obtained directly from the War Office, is, thankfully, 'firm and beautiful'.

Many of Nightingale's letters display her brilliant powers of exposition and grasp of detail. She could, for example, 'dash off 10 pages of

advice on steam boilers, 13 pages on the use of Parian cement for hospital walls, 12 pages on floor polish, and 6 pages on tea-making'. She also knew how to adapt her style of writing to a particular correspondent in order to achieve her aim, and could resort to flattery, cajolery, scolding, even bullying when it suited her purpose. Most of all, she knew how to deploy a pungent phrase, and her often devastating use of wit and irony is one of the great pleasures of much of her writing, in particular of her letters.

But while these letters are a tremendous resource for the biographer, they also contain an in-built trap. For Florence Nightingale's epistolary world is one of black and white values with few intermediate greys. It is all too easy to be beguiled by her heady sense of the dramatic, and to be drawn unwittingly into accepting her point of view without assessing the true merits of the case. And this applies as much to family matters as it does to the wider social and political arena, for instance, of nursing reform or the health of the Army. Benjamin Jowett once chastised her for a tendency to exaggerate, a fault she claimed to share in common with many other members of her mother's family, the Smiths.

Finally, the sheer quantity of material brings its own problems in tow. For many years in the latter part of her life Florence Nightingale spent at least twelve hours a day writing (letters were often composed 'by candlelight', at four or five in the morning, before London was awake). It is a staggering rate of productivity. How, though, can any individual biographer hope to encompass, let alone resolve, all the contradictions and paradoxes contained in her writings over the span of a very long life? Let Henry James have the last word here, and one that I have taken as a warning. In *The Aspern Papers* he writes darkly of 'the most fatal of our human passions, our not knowing where to stop'.

William and Fanny Nightingale were in Italy on an extended honeymoon tour. Like many other English travellers of the time they were taking advantage of their new-found freedom to explore the continent now that the Napoleonic Wars were over. But there was another reason, too, why a prolonged absence from England must have appeared a good idea. The Nightingales had no suitable home to move into – or, at least, not one that met Fanny's exacting standards. Furthermore, by happy accident their time abroad would ensure that they avoided the upheaval caused by what Fanny's youngest sister Julia blithely referred to as 'the

ruin of the family'. For within a year of the Nightingales' departure from England, Fanny's father, William Smith, the distinguished Member of Parliament for Norwich, faced financial disaster when his wholesale grocery business, the foundation of his fortune, collapsed. On the brink of bankruptcy, Smith would lose his country seat at Parndon in Essex and his London home near St James's Park, together with much of his magnificent art collection and library. For the last fifteen years of his life, William Smith and his wife Frances would live in straitened circumstances, often dependent on their children's support.

William Smith's personal fortune disappeared almost overnight, but the collapse of his business did not alter his commitment to his political and humanitarian principles. In terms of a life pledged to the service of ideals, and fired by a strong religious faith, William Smith is his granddaughter Florence's most obvious progenitor. At the height of the parliamentary debate on the abolition of slavery in 1797, one of the great causes of his political career, Smith had derided the argument of expediency, declaring that 'no system of commercial policy should be allowed to exist for a moment, which was repugnant to moral duty'; and it was moral duty combined with a rational belief derived from his Dissenting background that encouraged Smith to adopt another major crusade, that of religious freedom. He lived 'as if to prove how much a man of ardent benevolence may enjoy of this world's happiness, without any steeling of the heart to the wants and calamities of others', was one assessment after his death. '. . . If he had gone mourning all his days, he could scarcely have acquired a more tender pity for the miserable, or have laboured more habitually for their relief.'

The Smiths came originally from the Isle of Wight, where seventeenth-century records show them to have been of fairly humble stock and members of the congregations of Independent chapels. By the mid-eighteenth century, the family had become prosperous members of the merchant class. Samuel Smith, William's father, has a small foothold in Jacobite folklore as one of those who, despite his strong Hanoverian sympathies, provided financial aid to the penniless Flora Macdonald when she was imprisoned in the Tower following the failure of the '45. Samuel was proprietor of the Sugar Loaf, a successful wholesale grocery business off London's Cannon Street, in St Swithin's Lane, which imported tea, sugar and spices from around the world. In 1754 he consolidated his fortune by marrying Martha Adams, daughter of a

wealthy Dissenting family, who brought with her a substantial dowry and the promise of a great inheritance from brewing and distillery. She bore four children in quick succession before dying in childbirth, at the age of twenty-five, in 1759.

Of these four, only William, born in 1756, survived infancy. He was doted on by his father, who planned for him eventually to take over the business in Cannon Street. Zoffany's dual portrait of Samuel and the young William portrays them as richly dressed merchant princes, the father teaching the son a lesson in geometry. William's 'future destination' was for trade, his father told him in 1769, 'but learning is not incompatible with it – on the Contrary it facilitates the conducting of it and gives a person a superiority in his sphere of action'. William Smith did indeed enter the family firm, but by his mid-twenties he was straining for political action, and as part of the mercantile class he had little choice but to buy his way into Parliament. In 1784 he paid £3,000 to be returned as Member for the rotten borough of Sudbury. He lost that seat in 1790, but soon found another at Camelford. Smith remained MP there until 1802, when he was elected to Norwich, a seat he would hold, with the exception of one year, 1806 to 1807, until 1830. Initially, he was loyal to Pitt, but within a decade he had transferred his allegiance to the Whigs and become a follower of Charles James Fox.

William Smith's enthusiasm and support for any number of diverse interests and causes throughout a long career are among his most appealing qualities. For example, his devotion to art made him an active participant in the affairs of the British Institution (later the National Gallery), as well as a patron of Norwich artists like John Sell Cotman and John Opie; his scientific interests led to his intervention with the government on behalf of Charles Babbage and his computer; and his political involvements encompassed both the more adventurous and the mundane, the Greek Committee to raise support for the Greeks' struggle for independence against the Turks, as well as British Fisheries and the Thames Tunnel Company.

Three projects of reform, however, remained the most cherished objectives of Smith's working life: the abolition of slavery, the extension of religious liberty, and the reform of Parliament itself. He was an early advocate of a programme of moderate Whig reform, proposing a household franchise together with an end to corruption and the undue influence of the Crown. If he was a minor player in the events leading to the

Great Reform Act of 1832, the same could hardly be said of Smith's role in the abolitionist campaign. Here he worked closely and decisively with William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and other members of the Clapham Sect, to heal what his granddaughter Florence Nightingale was one day to call 'the open sore of the world'. As a child, Florence often heard the battle for the abolition of slavery fought over again in conversations among her aunts and uncles; and it was a subject reflected in Florence's childhood scrapbooks, into which she copied and illustrated William Cowper's anti-slavery poems 'The Morning Dream' and 'The Negro's Complaint'.

William Smith's association with the Clapham Saints, the 'prosperous and pious' evangelical sect dedicated to the abolition, first of the slave trade, and subsequently of slavery itself, went back many years. In his teens Smith had lived with his father at the family home in Clapham and later, as he began married life, he moved to Eagle House, a large property on the west side of the Common. The Thorntons were close neighbours, and Henry Thornton, later a prominent economist and governor of the Bank of England, who was to become a leading member of the sect, was one Smith's childhood friends. Although Smith had left Clapham by the time Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay and other Saints colonized the village as their headquarters, the ties with the Thornton family remained strong, and were an important factor in making Smith an ally of the evangelicals in their fight for abolition.

Smith's commitment to the anti-slavery movement was inspired by a deep religious conviction that it was 'impious' for one man to deprive another of his freedom, and one of his first steps in support of the cause was to boycott the import of slave-produced sugar, even though such an action hurt his own business interests. He worked tirelessly, mobilizing public opinion, examining witnesses and furthering the parliamentary case for abolition. Politically, Smith acted as an essential bridge between the conservative Saints and his own party, the Whigs, and it was Fox who, as foreign secretary in 1806, moved the motion for the abolition of the slave trade, just days before his death. To his great disappointment Smith, who was briefly out of the Commons, having lost his seat in the previous year's election, was unable to contribute his own vote for abolition, which was carried with a triumphant majority in February 1807.

An end to slavery itself was one of his major goals for the next quarter of a century. Writing in the 1820s to his son-in-law, William

Nightingale, to ask for his help 'to procure an Anti-Slavery Meeting', Smith observed that his own 'Head, Heart & Hands, have been turned to this subject for the last 40 years . . . and, go on to perfection, it will & must – nothing can stop it'. His confidence was not misplaced. Smith lived just long enough to see Parliament commit itself to the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies.

The stout member for Norwich, with his 'heart-stirring laughter', was popular among members of the Clapham Sect. Wilberforce himself, Thomas Clarkson and Zachary Macaulay expressed deep affection for him as if he was one of their own. But as in politics, so in religion, Smith and the Saints were divided. Despite their best efforts to convert him to their Evangelical beliefs, Smith remained an avowed Unitarian.

He had become a Unitarian in the late 1780s, under the influence of Thomas Belsham. Belsham, later minister of London's Essex Street Chapel, one of the more respectable Unitarian congregations, was the outstanding preacher of a revived Unitarianism, which saw it transformed from an intellectual movement into an important denomination, small in numbers but strong in appeal. The fundamental tenets of Unitarianism – rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity, denying the divinity of Christ, as well as disputing such beliefs as original sin and the atonement – were a product of a new rationalism, influenced by the ideas of Hobbes, Locke and Newton, that did not sit easily with traditional Christianity, and which consequently had a profound impact on Dissenting thought.

It was a dangerous time to be a Dissenter. The sympathy shown by some Dissenters to the reforming ideals of the French Revolution made them the favoured scapegoats of the mob at a time when Roman Catholics were being treated with a greater degree of tolerance. In the summer of 1791, the Birmingham home of William Smith's friend Joseph Priestley, Unitarian theologian and chemist, the discoverer of oxygen, was burned to the ground in one such attack, his books and scientific instruments destroyed.

Sydney Smith, only half-jokingly, called William Smith 'the head of the Unitarian Church', and 'the dissenting king'. In 1813 William was responsible for drawing up and guiding through Parliament the Unitarian Toleration Act, which made the denial of Christ's divinity no longer a crime. But his fundamental belief in the individual's right to religious liberty without state persecution had by that time led him to assume a broader responsibility for his fellow Dissenters. Between 1805 and

1830 he served as chairman of the Dissenting Deputies, a committee of Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists, originally established to take care of the civil affairs of Dissenters, and towards the end of his time in office, Smith campaigned successfully for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, one of the great symbols of prejudice against Dissenters.

Smith's own religious observance reflected his liberal stance. He was certainly not narrow or bigoted, was happy to attend the established church 'when no chapel of his own persuasion was near', and prepared to hear any preacher of note whatever his theological views. That spirit of free inquiry into religious matters, so central to William Smith, was also to be his most significant legacy to his granddaughter, Florence Nightingale.

In 1781 William Smith married Frances Coape, from an old and wealthy Dissenting family from Nottinghamshire. Frances was deeply religious as well as being something of a bluestocking, with a strong taste for theological disputation. Few escaped her sharp tongue, which made no allowances for rank or distinction. She and William were a loyal and devoted couple. They had twelve children: two died in infancy, but the remaining ten all lived well into old age. Martha (known as Patty) was the eldest, born in 1782, followed by Benjamin (1783), Anne (1786), Fanny (1788), Adams (1789), Joanna (1791), Samuel (1794), Octavius (1796), Frederick (1798) and Julia (1799). To accommodate this growing family, and to signify his new social and political position, William purchased Parndon Hall, near Harlow in Essex, in 1785. With an estate of 260 acres, and a house gradually enlarged to some twenty rooms, twice its original size, Parndon provided, if not an elegant, then at least a convenient residence for entertaining the Whig elite, and for housing William's sizeable library. In London, close to Parliament for the session, William bought 6 Park Street, a handsome Adam house overlooking Birdcage Walk, which housed his expanding art collection. By the mid-1790s, Rembrandts, Cuyps, Gainsboroughs hung alongside Smith's prized possession, Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait of *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse*.

Frances Smith was more spartan in her ways than her husband, and tried to impress her frugal habits on her children, though for many of them their father's extravagance was a way of life to which they became

accustomed, and which as adults they would find difficult to match. As Patty reminisced in the 1840s: '. . . Horses, Pictures, Travelling, Masters, Artists, Society & all that belonged to the Parliamentary life – have ever made me feel the mere routine of riches.' More to Mrs Smith's taste were simple family holidays, travelling around England, Scotland and Wales in the sociable, an open carriage with facing side seats; or with herself and William in the phaeton and the children and maids crammed into the chaise. She kept a series of journals on these tours of the country, which express her delight in recording her observations of everyday matters: the local industry, for instance, like the copper mines of Cornwall, or a visit to the Lancashire cotton mills 'where the cotton is carded, roved, and spun by one large master-wheel'.

The upbringing of the five Smith girls was privileged in more than just material terms. Florence Nightingale's education, supervised by her father, is often singled out for having been advanced by the standards set for women in the first half of the nineteenth century, but in its own small way, her mother Fanny's schooling was also ahead of its time. Like other Dissenters of the period, William Smith took pains with his daughters' education. They were taught entirely at home by visiting teachers, except for Joanna, who went to school for a while, and the evidence suggests that opportunities for learning were taken very seriously. Joanna's diary for 1806 gives a broad outline of the main curriculum when it states that 'Music, French, Italian and Drawing for Fanny, I, and Julia this year has cost £47.15.0.' There was also the luxury of their father's library, the delights of which Patty, nicknamed 'Bookworm', regularly sampled. Access to its two 2,000-odd volumes undoubtedly contributed to Patty's intelligence and wit, for which she had won something of a reputation by her twenties.

The children's martinet mother was always ready to crack the whip when necessary. 'Julia dwells much on my mind,' Mrs Smith wrote when her youngest child was thirteen. '. . . I wish she would translate Dante, 2 cantos a week . . .' Something of her carrot and stick approach can be seen in a letter she wrote to her eight-year-old son Octavius in 1804:

> . . . You are in general a very good Boy at rising in the morning, and I well remember that you are usually the first to tap at my door with 'Mama. Mama it is Octavius' and if Octavius continue to be so early, and to improve in regularity, mama will increase in her love to him . . .

All the children benefited from their father's position at the centre of current events, though on one occasion it proved too close for comfort for Smith himself. On 11 May 1812 he was in the lobby of the House of Commons when a shot rang out and a small figure fell at his feet. Raising the wounded man, he discovered him to be the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, mortally wounded by an assassin's bullet. That evening, 'very much affected', Smith returned to Park Street, 'with his hands covered in blood', as Fanny noted in her diary, and one of the dead man's gloves in his pocket.

Proximity to other national occasions produced happier memories. Patty could remember as a child seeing George III being driven in state to St Paul's in 1789 to give thanks for his recovery from his first attack of madness; six years later, she witnessed the arrival of the Prince of Wales's bride, Princess Caroline of Brunswick, dressed in green satin laced with gold and wearing a beaver hat. As a young woman in the summer of 1811, Patty described to her sister Fanny the 'crush at Carleton House', the Prince Regent's London home, where the 'most elegant rooms' were decorated in purple velvet and gold. The summer months brought interesting visitors to Parndon. A 'little dark man' at dinner turned out to be Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, Joanna recorded, was 'a most extraordinary man, holds forth like a book, in such language as I never heard before'.

The voices of the five Smith daughters have come down to us vibrant and clear in their letters to each other, bickering and bantering like Jane Austen's five Bennet sisters (in contrast to their five male siblings, whose correspondence has largely disappeared). As she approached womanhood Fanny, with her rich brown, wavy hair, slim figure and vivacious personality, was widely acknowledged as a beauty. 'She is daily improving in her appearance,' her mother wrote when Fanny was twenty-one, adding with a sniff of disapproval, 'to which her own eye is not blind.' At sixteen Fanny had attended her first ball where, her sister Anne reported, 'she was very much admired and got very beauish partners'. Fanny had celebrated her 'entry into the beau monde' by dancing until two o'clock in the morning. Dancing – along with going out in the carriage for 'a good deal of shopping' – was still one of Fanny's favourite activities almost a decade later. In the winter of 1812 she went to a ball for 120 people and danced seven dances, one of which consisted of some fashionable steps known as 'Lady Frances Pratt's Fancy'. But life was

not all fun and self-indulgence. She attended a dinner for 'the poor children' and presented them with new bonnets for Christmas, and occasionally she taught in a local school. There was a serious, not unintellectual, side to Fanny that can sometimes be glimpsed beneath the carefree surface.

However, despite her attractiveness, Fanny, by her late twenties, was still unmarried. She was certainly not devoid of suitors, but all of them seem to have fallen short of the standard she had set for a prospective husband. Her brother Ben, clearly alert to how particular his sister could be, commented on one eligible candidate: 'I considered him and his 8000 a year to your special predilection – Dance with him, don't snub him – but let the speculation of your eyes speculate not harshly . . .' Perhaps the sophisticated company of her father's friends had spoilt Fanny; or perhaps it was simply that she could find no one to live up to her father's example of decency and kindness. Whatever the reason, in 1816 she made a sudden, ill-fated decision to marry James Sinclair, the third son of the Earl of Caithness. Sinclair was almost a decade younger than Fanny, a captain in the Ross-shire Militia, with no prospects beyond his army pay, and already a large accumulation of debt. Both families were against the match. The Earl of Caithness, writing to Fanny's father about this 'very thoughtless young man', regretted that 'it is quite out of my power to remove the obstacles that stand in the way to the union of your aimiable [sic] daughter with our son'. To Mrs Smith, Caithness's letter was decisive. For James Sinclair to marry at all would be 'highly improper', she told Fanny, who had fled to Brighton to nurse her broken heart:

> We have laboured under a temporary illusion, and we have persuaded your Father to go farther than he ought to have done . . . and all this you should thoroughly consider and the understanding God has given you will enable you to overcome the regret you feel and to agree that it is better for all parties that the affair should terminate.

Before signing off, Mrs Smith could not resist a parting shot of her customary priggishness: 'I hope you do not . . . lie abed till near ten o'clock, for that will prove an effectual mode of defeating every good your present situation might afford.'

It was left to William Smith to put matters more considerately. He begged Fanny to 'look as well to what you have escaped, as to what you

have lost'. But even he could not overcome the unsuitability of young Sinclair for his daughter:

> His profession, his family would have suited you – but his Understanding, his Want of Energy could not. With regard to his love for you, which you call disinterested, I own, I call it passionate – no more. The difficulties he clearly overlooked . . . which with most men, of no larger income than his, [are] usually a reason for giving up a woman, rather than pursuing her.

The affair ended. At twenty-eight, Fanny's marital prospects looked bleak, and she must have envied the happiness of two of her sisters. Anne, two years her senior, was already celebrating the second anniversary of her marriage to George Nicholson, son of a prominent Dissenting family from Guildford, and a promising young lawyer in the Inner Temple; while that Christmas of 1816, Joanna, Fanny's junior by more than three years, was married to John Carter, the newly elected MP for Portsmouth.

Another suitor, though, hovered in the background. This was William Nightingale of Derbyshire, who had recently changed his name from Shore.

On one of the family's carriage trips across country, fourteen years earlier, in 1803, the Smiths had paid a visit to the William Shores of Tapton Hall, in Ecclesall, near Sheffield. The Shores, an old Sheffield family who could trace their descent back to the fifteenth century, had started the town's first banking business in 1774. Their prominence as a Dissenting family, and latterly as a Unitarian one, together with their support for parliamentary reform, had caused their paths to cross with those of William Smith. William Shore's oldest brother, Samuel, was a trustee of Sheffield's Upper Chapel, and a generous subscriber to the Essex Street Chapel in London, which William Smith attended; he was also a member, like Smith, of 'The Friends of the People', a society pledged to pursue constitutional reform on 'temperate principles'.

William Shore lived with his wife Mary, and their two surviving children, a son, also called William, and a daughter Mary (known as Mai). In her journal describing her 1803 visit, Frances Smith observed that William, 'a lad of about ten years of age, has had £100,000 left to him by a Mr Nightingale, with the whimsical prohibition of neither benefiting himself while under age, nor suffering his daughters to inherit. Should he not have a son it goes to his sister.'

The Nightingale connection descended through Mrs Shore. Born Mary Evans, her mother Anne had been a Nightingale and it was Anne's brother Peter, Mary Shore's unmarried uncle, who had made the bequest to the young William Shore. The 'whimsical prohibition' was the least of Peter Nightingale's eccentricities. He had acquired a reputation in his home village of Lea in north Derbyshire as 'Mad Peter Nightingale', the daredevil sporting squire, who rode in midnight steeplechases, and was a hard drinker and gambler. Nonetheless Peter was a man of solid business acumen. Earlier generations of Nightingales had been lead smelters and merchants, and Peter built on their investments to become a man of some substance on the profits of lead and cotton. He also speculated wisely in property, purchasing the Cromford Estate, close to Richard Arkwright's new cotton mills, before selling it on at a sizeable profit. When the Smiths called on the Shores in 1803, Peter Nightingale had only recently died, in the tumbledown half-farm, half-manor known as Lea Hall.

Mary Shore had inherited something of the Nightingale wildness, having been headstrong and difficult as a young girl. Her son, William, however, thin and lanky like his Shore forbears, was of an altogether calmer and more easygoing temperament. The Nightingale inheritance, which would be his at twenty-one, would turn out to be something of a mixed blessing. Of course, the security it provided meant that he never had to learn a profession, and could follow the life that best suited him, that of a country gentleman, with cultivated, dilettante interests. Equally, though, it inclined William towards indolence, which increasingly, as the years passed, would leave him with a sense of aimlessness.

William Edward Shore had been born in Sheffield on 15 February 1794, and educated at Higham Hall in Epping Forest, which Fanny Smith's brother Octavius also attended, and where the headmaster, the Reverend Eli Cogan, was a Unitarian minister. At the age of seventeen in 1811 he matriculated as a pensioner at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was a contemporary of Fanny's brother Sam. However, his position as a Dissenter meant that, under the University statutes, he was unable to take a degree. The expectation of a fortune led him to mark time. He spent 'a term or two' in 1813–14 at Edinburgh University, attending classes in literature and also, more unusually, in medicine, and was on a tour of the Western Highlands in early 1815, staying with the family of the Laird of Rothiemurchus, when he came of age and succeeded to his inheritance. 'Mad Peter' had tied one additional con-

dition to his bequest: William must 'assume and take upon himself . . . the sirname [sic] of Nightingale'. While his Scottish friends joked about 'the ridiculous name', William Shore proceeded to become William Nightingale by royal licence.

William was first introduced to the Smith family as a schoolfriend of Octavius's, and appears to have quickly become something of a favourite with other family members. Stray references in Smith letters show him to have been a welcome visitor at Parndon as early as 1811, though confusion over William's adopted surname meant that latterly he was 'sometimes called Knightingale or just plain Night'. At what point he ceased to be just a friend of her brother's, and became a serious prospect as a husband for Fanny is unknown; but in the wake of the Sinclair débâcle, his suitability may have been brought startlingly into focus. In the spring of 1817, while Fanny was in Brighton, her elder brother Ben acted as a courier for their 'affectionate correspondence'. True, William was six years younger than Fanny, but then she clearly had a penchant for younger men. There was no worry about money either. The Nightingale fortune meant that Fanny would be kept in the manner of living to which she had become accustomed. William was besotted with her too. For more than half a century, he would prove attentive, patient and extraordinarily compliant to her will.

The news of William and Fanny's engagement in the spring of 1818 was greeted warmly by both Smith and Shore parents. 'I am always saying to myself,' wrote Mr Shore to Fanny, ' "I don't wonder she has got possession of William's heart for I am sure she has won mine".' William's kindness thawed even Fanny's mother, though this did not prevent her mixing her congratulations on their wedding day with a heavy dose of gloom: 'May God in his infinite mercy keep you both, may you go hand in hand happily through this life, but may you never forget that there is a better.'

Fanny 'thinks Nightingale the best man she ever saw & says she has nothing left to wish under heaven', Julia wrote to Patty Smith, who was abroad with their brother Ben, and would miss the wedding. 'It is very clear that he is of the same opinion with her. You never saw anything like the brightening up of his face, he seems so thoroughly happy . . .' They were married by the Reverend William Dealtry at St Margaret's, Westminster, on 1 June 1818, a boiling hot day. William Smith's 'roaring' at the reception afterwards was 'quite disgusting', reported

Julia, though 'whether he was drunk with wine or joy I cannot tell'. One thing marred the happiness of the occasion. Although they were staying in London, neither of the Shore parents was invited to the ceremony. Mai Shore, William's sister, had been present, but she had apparently been made to feel uncomfortable at being unsuitably dressed in the church. 'Don't you think your Mother & I ought to have been at the wedding?' Mr Shore asked his son plaintively. 'I have heard it strongly insisted on by people who are correct judges.' With no evidence of disagreements or tensions, the exclusion of the Shores is something of a mystery. Was William Nightingale perhaps worried that his parents, of traditional Dissenting stock, would embarrass him at a fashionable London wedding? Deprived of a seat in the church, Mr Shore rode to the Uxbridge Road, where he waited for two hours in the hope of seeing the couple pass on their way to Parndon, where they were spending their first week of honeymoon.

From Parndon, the Nightingales travelled on to Kynsham Court, in Presteigne in Herefordshire, a house built in the middle of the previous century, and owned by Lord Oxford. Briefly occupied by Lord Byron six years earlier, Kynsham was a modest country seat in a beautiful setting, perched on a thickly wooded hillside high above the valley of the River Lugg. William had entered already into protracted negotiations to buy Kynsham, and, like him, Fanny was enchanted by the house. She was a good deal less impressed by either of the houses on the Nightingale estate at Lea, both of which required a considerable amount of renovation before they could be inhabited as family homes.

For the time being, though, the question of where they were to live was put to one side as Fanny and William set out for the continent. With them went Fanny's maid, Frances Gale, known as 'little Gale', a woman in her early thirties, so stunted in growth that she was often referred to as a dwarf. Gale was devoted to Fanny and had cried so much at the prospect of her mistress's departure that the Nightingales had decided that she should accompany them. After some months in Rome, by the late autumn the party had reached Naples where they decided to settle. Fanny had quickly become pregnant following her departure from England. The need to produce a male heir was paramount so that the Nightingale inheritance could be passed on directly to the next generation, and Fanny had passed thirty at her last birthday.

On 19 April 1819 a baby girl was born. '. . . It was a little disappoint-

ment not being a son,' Gale admitted in a note to Fanny's sister Joanna, a sentiment seconded by the child's grandfather William Smith, who as usual tried to put the best construction on matters: 'As for the sex, perhaps it might have been better; but I am disposed to give the little Female a most cordial welcome – & there are advantages to a Mother in having the eldest born of her own sort.' Five weeks later the baby was christened Frances Parthenope, Parthenope being the Greek name for her birthplace ('what a hard name says one, what a fine name says another'). Gale pronounced her 'quite a Buty'.

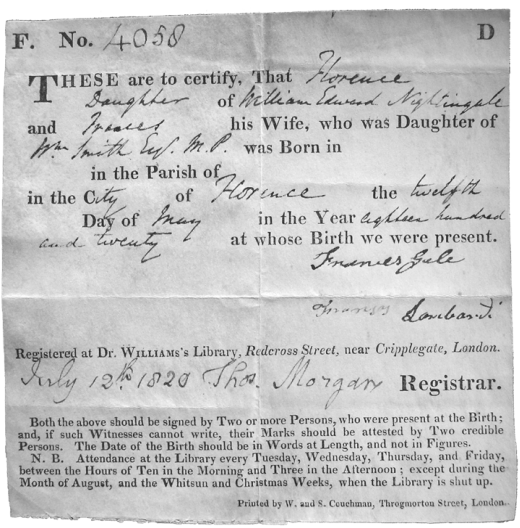
Less than a week after the birth, however, William Nightingale fell ill, and was diagnosed with malaria. He had scarcely begun to recover when one of Fanny's breasts became seriously inflamed. They had been intending to move on to Castellammare, but suddenly had to alter their plans and remain in Naples, which was hot and deserted in the summer months. 'The cruelty of the case,' William explained in some misery to Joanna Carter, 'is that Fanny is by no means sure that she may not lose her milk & this would be the greatest of misfortunes that could happen. We have not a soul to console us but doctors and servants . . . a dreadful mélange of medical society, & a shop full of medicine will be our souvenirs of Naples.'

On top of this, 'a cargo of bad news' reached them from England, that William Smith's business had failed, and that he was facing ruin. Julia reported that 'We shall have, selling Parndon & everything, somewhere about £1000 a year (more or less) left.' William Smith was in a 'torment', she wrote a little later, as Parndon went up for auction and Park Street was let, while 'my poor mother is the only one who moans without ceasing . . .'

The end of the year found the Nightingales still in Naples, waiting for the weather to change so that they could travel. The intense summer heat had given way to violent siroccos, and latterly to heavy torrents of rain. The good news was that Fanny was pregnant again. She feared that she would be unable to suckle the new baby, as one breast was 'so injured that it may never recover', but she was hopeful that the child would be a boy. In February, with Parthenope swaddled up into a neat parcel like an Italian bambino, the family at last made their way to Florence. Towards the end of March, William leased the 'Villa called Colombaja, in the Parish of St Illari Podesteria dell Galliozo', hired Umiliana Pistelli as wetnurse, and waited for the birth.

Florence Nightingale was born on 12 May 1820, and christened in the grand salon of the villa on 4 July by another visitor to the city, Dr Thomas Trevor, the Prebendary of Chester, and an old Trinity friend of her father's. Ahead of the family, Gale was sent back to England on a special mission. At Dr Williams's Library in London's Cripplegate, she recorded Florence's birth in the Protestant Dissenters' Register, thereby linking her to the religious traditions of her forefathers.

Fanny and William Nightingale would have no more children. Whether by accident or design, this absence of a larger family was to have serious repercussions, in years to come, on the smooth running of their domestic life, when their younger daughter decided to renounce her duty, and break away from the constraints of home. When that time arrived, Florence Nightingale, with the mathematical precision and dramatic sweep so characteristic of her, would find bitter reason to record that the size of a family lies in inverse proportion to its potential as an instrument of repression and imprisonment.



F. No. 4058 D

THESE are to certify, That Florence Daughter of William Edward Nightingale and Frances his Wife, who was Daughter of Wm Smith Esq. M.P. was Born in in the Parish of in the City of Florence the twelfth Day of May in the Year eighteen hundred and twenty at whose Birth we were present.

Frances Gale

Fanny Lombard

Registered at Dr. WILLIAMS's Library, *Redcross Street*, near *Cripplegate, London.*

July 12th 1820 Thos. Morgan Registrar.

Both the above should be signed by Two or more Persons, who were present at the Birth; and, if such Witnesses cannot write, their Marks should be attested by Two credible Persons. The Date of the Birth should be in Words at Length, and not in Figures.

N. B. Attendance at the Library every Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, between the Hours of Ten in the Morning and Three in the Afternoon; except during the Month of August, and the Whitsun and Christmas Weeks, when the Library is shut up.

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