Letters from the Crimea (review)

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Florence Nightingale. *Letters from the Crimea.* Edited by Sue M. Goldie. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1997. 326 pp. Ill. $18.95.

I must admit to a recurrent fantasy that soon American scholars interested in exploring the life and work of Florence Nightingale will not need to arrange a lengthy sojourn in Britain. Rather, they will simply want to make sure that their borrowing privileges at their local libraries remain intact. There they will find reprints of her classic works, edited versions of her more obscure writings, and a broad range of collections of letters that touch upon her personal dreams and her professional ambitions.[1] And now, with the addition of Sue Goldie's superb

1. For a recent review of edited works by Florence Nightingale, see Patricia D'Antonio, "Florence Nightingale by Herself," *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1995, *69:* 278–87.

Florence Nightingale: Letters From the Crimea, they might also find at home rather than abroad the much-needed window that will let them peer into the seminal event that gave final form to those dreams and ultimately drove Nightingale's much-vaunted ambition.

To return to reality, Goldie, mindful that much of what we think we know about Nightingale's Crimean experience comes from a handful of the more famous (and more flamboyant) extracts of extant correspondence, presents some one hundred letters in their entirety. Her selections include most of the letters Nightingale wrote to Sidney Herbert, her friend and Britain's secretary at war, during her early months at Scutari, as well as some of the official and unofficial correspondence she maintained with his sympathetic successors in the War Office. Alongside these, Goldie places the more personal letters Nightingale wrote to her patrons, her friends, and her family. Not surprisingly, these letters paint a devastating picture of the Crimean débacle from the penetrating perspective of a participant deeply invested in her own point of view. But under Goldie's light but salient editorial touch, they do more: as a whole, these letters document the development of a woman discovering not only how much she loved the taste of official power, but also how much good she could do with it for the soldiers she had come to love.

But Goldie's *Letters* also tell the story of a woman slowly realizing that power and determination alone rarely suffice. Nightingale willingly, perhaps even eagerly, fought her own war within the War—a war with the Army's overweeningly bureaucratic Medical Department, with nurses chafing under her leadership and demands for control, with staunch supporters in Britain more sensitive than she to issues of political timing, and with her own labile emotions. And she won what could well have been her own Waterloo had it not been, as Goldie points out, for the War Department's unswerving commitment to the introduction of female nurses into its medical corps. But the cost was enormous, not least because Nightingale never took Herbert's sound advice to lie low when criticized. She had a politically tin ear (and, try as she might, she had absolutely no "common touch"), which almost inevitably made bad situations worse—and she knew it. Thus if, in the end, the criterion by which a compilation of letters might be judged is whether it encourages a reader to give up deeply cherished convictions, then Goldie's edition succeeds brilliantly. I now find myself willing to reconsider Nightingale's post-Crimean retreat to her bed as less a reflection of a personality flaw (or, as other scholars have suggested, the sequelae of her bout with Crimean fever) than a mark of genius by a woman who knew she lacked the temperament to engage in the necessary politicking that accompanies sustained reforms.

Florence Nightingale has always fascinated historians and their readers alike, and she always will. In fact, she serves as a bridge between them. Fantasy aside, scholars will continue to return to Britain to mine the details of her life, but with the accessibility of collections such as Goldie's *Letters* (and the three additional volumes of letters she has planned) their arguments about the meaning of that life must now find a place among readers with ideas formed from many of the same sources. A quite daunting task awaits any scholar venturing into the

Nightingalian world of firm facts and partisan opinions, and this may be why we have yet to see a new, much-needed, full-scale biography of the lady. Such scholars might derive courage from reading *Letters from the Crimea:* the challenge of proving the worth of their work is not unlike that faced by Nightingale as she strove to prove the value of an efficient, organized, disciplined, and nonsectarian nursing department to the British Army's Medical Department.

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