assistants, have read the letters in the British Library about the unhappy events at the midwifery school at King's College when the superintendent, Mary Jones, was in dispute with the Governors and her chaplain. By using selected quotes he infers that Miss Nightingale was intriguing to support Mary Jones 'against all comers'. If the long correspondence is read in full, it is clear that Miss Nightingale and Mr Bowman were acting as arbitrators - a sort of nineteenth century A.C.A.S. Miss Nightingale had a horror of embattled religious bigotry; it destroyed her hope that nursing would emerge as a non-sectarian force.

There are a number of factual lapses. Professor Smith classified St Pancras and Highgate as separate infirmaries and asserts that they were both nursed by 'Nightingale nurses' which suggests that the important material on Poor Law nursing has not been read properly. Perhaps even more startling is the fact that Professor Smith repeats the myth that 'Mrs Wardroper educated her (Miss Nightingale) on nursing matters' and infers that they worked in harness, whereas there is a mass of evidence to show that this was far from the case. Miss Nightingale accepted Mrs Wardroper, faute de mieux, but was soon at odds with her and after a few years was doing her utmost to get the control of probationers out of her hands.

The whole book is shot through with similar misrepresentation of evidence. The references look impressive, but when they are read they do not always support the conclusions. For example, it is true that Miss Nightingale 'scolded Henry Acland' for presuming to want to register nurses under the medical aegis: a 'scolding', I would merit, well deserved. But to say that 'because of Miss Nightingale's obduracy thousands more parturient women were to endure needlessly prolonged pain, mismanagement and death before the midwifery situation could be remedied' is just silly. The medical profession soon found that it had no power to 'register' other groups and the situation was not remedied until public opinion overruled medical vested interest in keeping midwives down.

At the end of the day we have to ask why, if Miss Nightingale were such a liar, bully and intriguer, did she attract the oftimes inordinate affection of many intelligent men and women? Even allowing for the sentimental heroine worship that charismatic nineteenth century women attracted, you surely cannot fool all the people all the time - or even most of the time. Moreover, why, if she was so constantly malevolent, were the results of her work generally good? And, as Professor Smith admits, 'she gave nursing a public standing and independence within the medical hierarchy that it would otherwise have taken much longer to consolidate'. He is arguing with Lord Acton that 'doers of good deeds must be good in themselves'. Alas, quite unpleasant people often produce good works.

The icon certainly needs to be looked at more critically, but this is not best done by throwing a pile of bricks at it. If you do that, you may find that all that happens is that the readers get splinters in their eyes.

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