

## Analysis of Influence of the Bicentenary of Florence Nightingale, 2020: Year of the Nurse and Midwife

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### Abstract

This article reviews coverage of Florence Nightingale in 2020, the bicentenary of her birth, named the Year of the Nurse and Midwife by the World Health Organization. It notes a small number of events and publications in celebration. It relates the emergence of five sources of false accusations against her, several of which go further than those already in the literature, even to “racism” and “genocide” against Indigenous peoples, and in each case without any factual basis. The article goes on to advance primary sources that show otherwise. In some cases Nightingale’s actual position was the opposite to that stated in the accusation. The article reviews references to Mary Seacole made by each of the authors, none of them with primary source evidence, and cites Seacole’s own memoir in refutation. Finally, it shows how the Prince of Wales in 2021 added to the Seacole mythology.

**Keywords:** *Florence Nightingale; False Accusations; Racism; Genocide; Bicentenary*

### Introduction

The World Health Organization designated 2020, the bicentenary of Florence Nightingale’s birth (1820 - 1910), to be recognized as the Year of the Nurse and Midwife. There were some celebrations and new research published [1,2]. Major organizations held special sessions on her work, notably the Royal Statistical Society, the Department of Statistics at Oxford University, and the Radical Statistics Group. A chapter on her statistical work was published in the provocative *How to Make the World Add Up: Ten Rules for Thinking Differently about Numbers* [3]. Nurses, however, were scarce in the celebrations.

The National Health Service, supported by the Royal College of Nursing, continued its apparent requirement that mention of Florence Nightingale must be paired with mention of her supposed equal nursing founder, Mary Seacole, a Jamaican businesswoman. This pairing of the two can be seen also in the announcement of the coronavirus pandemic temporary hospitals, NHS Nightingale hospitals, followed by an announcement of NHS Seacole rehabilitation centres, remarkably, given that Nightingale had much to advocate on convalescence, Seacole nothing. The secretary general of the Commonwealth, Baroness Scotland, put the two women together three times in her speech at the Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation meetings in London in March 2020, twice with Nightingale’s name first, once with Seacole’s first, with no explanation as to what Seacole actually contributed to nursing, or apparent knowledge that she never nursed one day in any hospital in any country, trained or mentored one nurse, or published so much as one article or book on nursing.

Nightingale was celebrated with the installation of a stained-glass window by artist Sophie Hacker, the “Calling Window” at Romsey Abbey, Hampshire. The Young Statisticians of the Royal Statistical Society inaugurated a fine Florence Nightingale badge, depicting her iconic polar area chart.

However, on account of the coronavirus pandemic, most of the many other celebrations planned were cancelled, postponed, or turned into virtual events. The planned renaming of the old Derby Hospital as the Nightingale Community Hospital, to be accompanied by the installation of a new statue, was indefinitely postponed.

Remarkably, the 2020 bicentenary saw the publication, in print and online, of articles not merely hostile to Nightingale but with new, extreme, false accusations. Five sources are discussed here, all from 2020, with one or more (some more than ten) false statements. These sources are here listed in chronological order of publication:

1. Print and online, by the president and Maori representative of the New Zealand Nurses Organization, an article approved by its Board of Directors, with not one positive acknowledgement of Nightingale’s contribution, but with misstatements on her views on nursing and feminism, as well as accusations of racism and advocacy of genocide of Maoris (Brookes and Nuku, April 2020) [4].
2. Online, an Australian journal republishing Brookes and Nuku, with added material by Australian nursing leaders that condemned Nightingale (Croakey, May 2020) [5].
3. Print and online, in a major American nursing journal by three registered nurses who also hold master’s degrees (Dillard-Wright, Walsh, and Brown, June 2020) [6].
4. Online journal based in India (*MEAWW*), a more nuanced article with positives as well as repeats of the negatives, repeating the false information on Mary Seacole in Brookes and Nuku (Smita, July 2020) [7].
5. Online American blog by a Canadian nurse/doctoral student/president of the Quebec Nurses Association/board member of the Canadian Nurses Association (Stake-Doucet, November 2020) [8]. There was not one positive statement about Nightingale’s work and the accusations against her were the most extreme. An online French translation included three ominous illustrations, titled Schoolgirls, Cells, and Disappearing [9]. The comments section to the original article included commendations as to its scholarship. However, only favourable comments were permitted to be posted.

Altogether, thirteen false accusations appeared in print and/or online, in English and French, in sources based variously in New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, and India, mainly by nurses. Only one source, the New Zealand Nurses Organization, permitted a reply [10], and one, *MEAWW*, permitted a comment [7].

### The pairing of Nightingale with another “nursing pioneer”

The linking of Nightingale with Mary Seacole as a nursing founder of similar importance does not entail an accusation, but is greatly misleading. All five sources listed above made only positives references to Seacole, while negative to Nightingale. Equivalency seems to be the policy of the National Health Service, which continues to make “Seacole Leadership Awards,” words that inevitably suggest that Seacole was a nursing leader. Remarkably, the Queen, in her 2020 Christmas message, after recognizing Nightingale and her bicentenary, swiftly added a reference to Seacole as another “nursing pioneer” [11]. A constitutional monarch, the Queen is obliged to follow the government line in her remarks.

Smita repeated a common misstatement, giving no source, that Seacole went to the War Office and other government bodies and “requested to be part of Nightingale’s team” but was not allowed to join [7]. However, Seacole did not apply, as can be seen by examination of the applications held at the UK National Archives, Kew. In her memoir, Mrs Seacole recorded that her first task on arriving in London

in autumn 1854 was to attend to her failing gold investments [12]. She did not state when she gave up on them and began to look for a nurse's job, but did say that she was motivated by the "fearful storm of 14<sup>th</sup> of November" that resulted in the disastrous sinking of a supply ship at Balaclava, news of which reached London at the end of the month [13]. Nightingale and her team had already left for the war on 21 October 1854. The second team had its last briefing and signed contracts on 1 December; it left England the following day [14], so Mrs Seacole missed that second nursing team, too.

Stake-Doucet praised Seacole for the "selflessness and grit with which she treated wounded soldiers" [8], an exaggeration when it is realized that this occurred for a few hours on three occasions during the two-year Crimean War (1854 - 1856).

### The new accusations against Nightingale: racism and genocide

The analysis here begins with the most serious accusations, of racism and even genocide, by Brookes and Nuku [4] and Stake-Doucet [8].

#### Accusation 1

Stake-Doucet writes of "Nightingale's racism and her political role in the genocide of Indigenous people under British rule." [8] Genocide? As in the Holocaust? The word "genocide" is made up of "genus," for race or ethnic group, and "cide," meaning to kill, as in homicide, suicide, matricide, and so on. Brookes and Nuku [4] condemn her for white supremacist views, without giving any examples.

#### Accusation 2

Continuing the racist theme, Nightingale is said by Stake-Doucet to have "counseled many key political figures," [8] although she mentions only Sir George Grey, twice governor of New Zealand. Next from Brookes and Nuku comes Nightingale's alleged "troubling role in colonization," with the "little-known fact" (undocumented) that she was a "close advisor" to Grey [4] (a point dealt with in detail later).

#### Accusation 3

Stake-Doucet writes, "Her writings on the subject show that she was a staunch supporter of British colonialism, even with the knowledge of the death and destruction left in its wake" [8]. Smita's accusation is similar, of Nightingale "colonizing the profession," and even blaming Nightingale for the British Colonial Nursing Service, dating it to 1940—an incorrect date, but whatever the date, Nightingale, who died in 1910, had nothing to do with it [7].

#### Accusation 4

According to Brookes and Nuku, "She believed Indigenous lives were a small price to pay for the expansion of the British Empire," [4] a charge made with not one reference and contradicted by so much of what Nightingale wrote.

#### Accusation 5

She considered Indigenous peoples to be inferior, and the British state a "civilizing' force", according to Stake-Doucet [8] and Brookes and Nuku [4]. Smita makes similar comments [7]. All these authors show a misunderstanding of the terms "civilization" and "civilizing", expressions from 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology, with no connotation of race. Rather, the term was used to denote the evolution of permanent settlements or cities, on the establishment of agriculture. Mesopotamia is typically considered the earliest civilization. Many non-white societies developed cities.

### Accusations on nursing and health care

#### Accusation 6

Nightingale's opposition to the state "registration" of nurses, alleged by Brookes and Nuku [4], is a frequently misunderstood contention. Her opposition was to the particular scheme proposed by the Royal British Nurses Association (RBNA), which proposal gave enormous power to (male) doctors, did not provide for deregistration in cases of malpractice or even criminal conviction, and hence failed to protect the public. The RBNA was headed by a non-nurse, Princess Christian.

#### Accusation 7

Again, with no documentation, the New Zealand authors accuse Nightingale of opposition to "higher education for nurses," which "undermined our professional autonomy" [4]. However, Nightingale for years promoted higher education for women. She mentored the first principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, advising on its building plans, and she advised on the renovations and assisted with fundraising for the New Hospital for Women, the first hospital where women doctors could practise [15].

#### Accusation 8

Brookes and Nuku claim that Nightingale fostered "the eventual dominance of the medical model of health" [4]. On the contrary, she insisted on nurses running their own profession, from hiring to discipline, promotion, and dismissal. Nurses would take medical instructions from doctors, for the obvious reason that doctors were medically trained and nurses not. On the principle itself, she could not have been clearer in the conclusion to *Notes on Nursing*, that neither medicine nor surgery could "cure," but only remove the obstacles to healing: "nature alone cures." Nightingale complained that "nursing" used to signify little more than "the administration of medicines and the application of poultices. It ought to signify the proper use of fresh air, light, warmth, cleanliness, quiet and the proper selection and administration of diet—all at the least expense of vital power to the patient" [16]. The nurse's task was to aid Nature, a point Nightingale continued to make in her late writing [17].

### Accusations of abuse of sex workers and anti-feminism

Stake-Doucet's accusations on germ theory and sex workers are, like those on racism, not only wrong, but the opposite of Nightingale's positions, as plainly said on numerous occasions.

#### Accusation 9

According to Stake-Doucet, "Nightingale believed that sex workers embodied evil that spontaneously generated disease. As Nightingale explained: 'When we obey all God's laws as to cleanliness,...,health is the result.'" [8] Nightingale's remark comes from an address to nurses she made in 1876, which had nothing to do with sex workers, but with improving sanitary conditions generally. Nightingale explained that "110,000 lives are needlessly sacrificed every year in this kingdom by our disobedience, and 220,000 people are needlessly sick all the year round. And why? Because we will not know, will not obey, God's simple health laws. No epidemic can resist thorough cleanliness and fresh air" [18].

This "social purity" view was held by the first woman doctor, Elizabeth Blackwell, who also approved of the compulsory locking up of suspected prostitutes, so long as "ladies" managed the institutions. Nightingale told Blackwell, 6 May 1871, that "the "compulsory locking up under women is as bad as under men" [15]. Far from being against sex workers and their welfare, Nightingale was a staunch opponent of the discriminatory Contagious Diseases Acts. She probably held up their adoption by two years (the first was passed in 1862), and she led the struggle for their repeal for some years after that. That legislation targeted women as suspected prostitutes in an attempt to reduce syphilis in the army and navy. The acts subjected women to compulsory diagnosis and treatment-with nothing similar for men. See her "Note on the Supposed Protection afforded against venereal disease by recognizing prostitution and placing it under Police Regulation,"

1862 [15]. Nightingale opposed the acts as ineffective—she showed that they did not result in lower rates of disease or death—and as an affront against the liberty of women. She also wrote a two-part article against the acts in a popular magazine under the pseudonym Justina (1870) [15].

Nightingale's views on this subject were held also by her colleague Dr John Sutherland, as is clear in an exchange on the Contagious Diseases Acts, that a woman, whatever her vices, "has inalienable personal rights, which none but such idiots as social legislators would venture to interfere with" [15]. By contrast, in a letter of 3 May 1871, Blackwell approved of "lock-up hospitals" for prostitutes so long as they were run by women, under a "lady superintendent" [15].

### Accusation 10

Brookes and Nuku asserted Nightingale's "anti-feminism" for her insistence on ethical standards for nurses: "that to be a good nurse, one must be a good woman."<sup>4</sup> It is hard to imagine how professional nursing could have been established without such insistence, for "nurses" so-called before training was instituted were notorious for drinking on the job, taking opiates, and demanding bribes for services.

Nightingale's feminism included, as well as being the major founder of the profession, decades of support for the vote for women, conducting the earliest empirical research on maternal death rates post-childbirth, and mentoring the first woman civil servant in the UK.

### Accusation 11

Stake-Doucet alleges that Nightingale was a "Victorian bigot", with no examples or sources given [8].

### Accusations on religion and political principles

#### Accusation 12

Stake-Doucet asserts that Nightingale "was steadfast in her belief of white Christian supremacy" [8], a point made with no references. Nightingale's openness to other religions would suggest otherwise, as in her visit to a mosque in Alexandria, Egypt, to see "where my fellow creatures worshipped" (1849) [19]. In the small hospital in Harley Street she ran in 1853 - 1854, she insisted that rabbis be as welcome to visit patients as Christian clergy [20]. She did refer to the "blessings of Christian civilization", but she also qualified it as "Christian in name, but far from Christian in reality". She agreed also that imperial rule was "violent", "overbearing", "self-seeking", and "oppressive" [21]. In a letter of 26 April 1860 to Sir George Grey, she was rude about the New Zealand missionaries: "what idiots those missionaries, not the converts, must be" [22].

#### Accusation 13

Stake-Doucet claims that Nightingale was "a product of her social class and its conservative values," [8] a damning indictment for someone who was a lifelong Liberal Party supporter and liberal in her values. Her views differed profoundly from those of her class. Her maternal grandfather, a radical MP, supported the admittance of Jews, Roman Catholics, and dissenters to the franchise. For decades he worked with Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce for the abolition of slavery. Nightingale was the earliest known proponent of what is now known as "universal access to health care"; that is, access to quality care based on need, not ability to pay. She articulated this principle in 1866 and 1867, and saw many reforms in that direction achieved. The launching of the National Health Service in 1948, by a Labour government, was the culmination of that long process of health care reform.

### What did Nightingale's "Colonial Statistics" papers say?

There is no doubt that Nightingale got the idea of conducting a study of colonial institutions from Sir George Grey, who had told her of declining Indigenous populations. She set to work to obtain data on colonial schools and hospitals in the various colonies.

In drawing up the questions, she had the assistance of Dr Sutherland, who had headed the Sanitary Commission sent to the Crimean War in March 1855, and whose work did so much to bring down the death rates. She also consulted the top medical statistician, William Farr.

Nightingale's paper appeared in two parts, "Sanitary Statistics of Native Colonial Schools" and "Statistics of Native Colonial Hospitals and Causes of Disappearance of Native Races," given at the meetings of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, where they provoked considerable attention [23]. This was followed by newspaper stories in the UK [24] and in Australia, as in the following example from a Melbourne newspaper:

Miss Florence Nightingale has once more emerged from her retirement to plead the cause of wronged and suffering humanity. Those ill-used and much enduring races, the aborigines of Australia, Africa, Ceylon and British North America, have excited the commiseration of this excellent lady, and in a pamphlet, which now lies before us, she raises her voice in their behalf [25].

In her analysis, Nightingale made it clear that the quality of data obtained was poor, but that it was, nonetheless, sufficient to conclude that the death rates of Indigenous school children were "double that of English children," and that "by far the greater part of the mortality is the direct result of mitigable or preventable disease" [23,26]. Clearly, Indigenous children should not be dying at a higher rate than English children, and the preventable diseases that killed them should be prevented. Most of the analysis then went to exploring how, an analysis limited to the state of medical knowledge at the time, predating germ theory.

### What advice did Nightingale give the Governor of New Zealand?

Nightingale's letters to Sir George Grey are available in two New Zealand archives, the Auckland Public Library and the Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, and have been published [26]. Grey's letters to Nightingale are at the British Library [27]. Inspection of them shows no advice, but rather information on available studies, citing Fenton [28] and Thomson [29]. She sent Grey the draft questions to be asked; he could not suggest any improvements [30]. He hoped that "now some advance will be made to the solution of a question which is for us as a nation of such great importance" and added that his wife hoped to go out with him [26,31]. Nightingale indeed was pleased, replying 26 April 1860 "I rejoice" [26]. Grey, however, had his wife put off the ship at Rio with allegations of adultery and they did not meet again for over 30 years.

In another letter to Grey, Nightingale explained that she was in communication with Sidney Herbert at his request about a sanitarium. In that letter (12 April 1860), she also regretted that the data were not up to giving practical advice. Nor was the study of Fenton, one commissioned by the government of New Zealand [26]. An abstract of Fenton appeared in the *Journal of the London Statistical Society* for that month. The purpose of his study was "to draw attention to the state of the native population—especially to its *decrease* in numbers—with a view to invite inquiry into its cause and suggestions of a remedy" [28]. Clearly the government of New Zealand was no more in favour of depopulation than Grey himself.

After completing her own research, in March 1864, Nightingale sent Grey a paper by Quatrefages, on the disappearance of Polynesian races [26,32].

### What Sir George Grey did and did not do as Governor of New Zealand

Grey served two terms as governor of New Zealand, 1845 - 1853 (during which he was knighted for his service) and 1861 - 1868; he was the longest serving governor of the colony. He also held posts as governor in South Australia and Cape Colony, South Africa. For him, depopulation was a problem to be addressed, and so he told Nightingale. Depopulation in New Zealand occurred throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before Grey's first term, and continued after his second. Further, depopulation was not the policy of other governors, or the New Zealand government.

Grey was a successful governor for the British government, people, and the settlers of New Zealand. One biography of him even calls him “hero” [33]. He effectively wrote the constitution of New Zealand in 1852. Its provisions included reserved seats for Maori representatives. Exceptionally for a governor, Grey learned the language, travelled with Maoris, and collected Maori stories and myths [34]. The journal of his 1849 - 1850 travels, in English and Maori, was published in 1851 [35]. He gave his collection, the major repository of Maori language materials, to the Auckland Public Library [36]. Those are the positives.

Under Grey, millions of acres of Maori land were alienated, mainly sold legally to settlers, an outlet for the over-populated home country [37]. This was assimilation, which he termed “amalgamation”, but under either name it was British government policy, and would remain so for more than a century more. Nightingale hardly advised Grey to do any of this. By the time of her first letter to him, in 1860, he had already been a successful governor for twenty years in three colonies, and was about to start his fourth post. On his death, he was buried in the crypt of St Paul’s Cathedral, a high honour.

### Evolution of the right to self-determination

The authors of the above accusations seem to have assumed that a right to self-determination, on governance, language, and culture, was widely recognized. But it was not at that time, and debate over it and its eventual adoption are the work of centuries. The core of the principle dates back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment call for sovereignty of the people, not the king. In 1789 the French National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man, Article 3 of which specifies that sovereignty resides in “the nation”. US President Woodrow Wilson used the principle in his “Fourteen Points” of 1918, on what should guide the peace settlement after the First World War.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 [38]. This foundational document proclaims that all are born free and equal in dignity and rights (Article 1). Article 2 specifies non-discrimination, including on the basis of national origin, and whether in a non-self-governing country or territory. Article 4 bans all forms of slavery and servitude. Similar principles carry on to Article 30.

Grey’s first term in New Zealand predates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by about a century. His second term predates British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s famous “wind of change” speech in South Africa in February 1960. British policy did, eventually, change, roughly a century after Grey’s time.

The next phase in the development of self-determination occurred in 2007 with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Its Article 3 declares that Indigenous peoples are free and equal to all other peoples and grants all the right to “self-determination”, which includes the right to pursue it with their own economic, social, and cultural views. “Forced assimilation” is expressly prohibited in Article 8 [39].

### Germ theory versus miasma theory

When Nightingale wrote “Sanitary Statistics,” as when she wrote *Notes on Nursing* and her early papers on hospitals in 1858 and 1859, germ theory had not been demonstrated [16,25]. These works preceded Joseph Lister’s breakthrough on antiseptic surgery, where the concept is present but without mention of “germs” [40]. Robert Koch’s “four postulates” theory of 1879 is recognized as definitive for establishing germ theory [41]. In the meantime, getting rid of miasmata (the habitat of germs), polluted air, water, or soil, largely got rid of the germs, too, so that, while miasma theory was incorrect as theory, it did not prevent good practice. On the irrelevance of germ theory to sanitary practice in India, see Iyer [42].

The Nightingale School gave rudimentary instruction on the subject as early as 1873 [43].

Nightingale herself made the switch to germ theory on the discovery of the cholera bacillus by Koch in 1883 [26,44,45]. Her support can be seen in her advice that slides be presented at village lectures in India to show “the noxious living organisms in foul air and water,” so that villagers would be motivated to clean up their sewers and drains [46].

In a Note on the New Zealand depopulation she sent to Grey, Nightingale listed as diseases of the New Zealander “fever, chest diseases, bowel diseases, skin diseases, scrofula, rheumatism,” which should be met with improvements in housing, diet, and exercise [26,47]. Note that the causes of these bacterial diseases were then simply not known.

### Modus operandi

The two articles with the most accusations (Brookes and Nuku<sup>4</sup> and Stake-Doucet [8]) provided endnotes that appear to substantiate their points. Several commentators on Stake-Doucet were persuaded, crediting the article for “scholarship”. Yet none of the sources cited in either paper contain any data, but only earlier accusations. Stake-Doucet included four citations of Nightingale’s “Sanitary Statistics” paper, a primary source and normally a good start. The quotations, however, were flawed, short, and out of context.

### Errors of omission

While misinformation about Seacole was presented in these sources, not one recognized her for her independent adventures, generosity, and publication of a fine memoir [12]. These positive, and accurate, credits appear elsewhere [48].

On the mistaken accusations of fault against Nightingale, these authors disappoint by failure to acknowledge any of her positive achievements, even more obvious in the year the coronavirus pandemic took hold. Nightingale was the great advocate, from 1860 on, of frequent handwashing. An adept researcher, she made the great breakthrough in ascertaining what caused the high death rates in the Crimean War hospitals, and what brought them down. With countries and regions varying widely in their approaches to preventing the spread of COVID-19 and treating its patients, this sort of “outcomes” research is badly needed [2].

The abuse of Indigenous children in residential schools in Canada has become an important issue to address. Yet the fact that Nightingale was the first person to expose their high rates of disease and death is conspicuously absent in Stake-Doucet [8].

It is easy to be respectful of sex workers in 2020, but that would have been unusual in Nightingale’s day; she was a leader in toleration.

At the end of the Zulu War in 1879, when it appeared that Britain would be acquiring more territory, Nightingale asked, “Have we succeeded so well in governing in India that we should want more lands to govern?” [49].

### Conclusion

These five sources demonstrate problems not only of scholarship, with glaring inaccuracies and lack of sources, but of ethics, the making of extreme accusations of wrongdoing without evidence. In the case of deceased persons, authors can act with impunity, for the dead cannot sue. But should freedom from lawsuits be a valid excuse? There are issues as well with the journals, in accepting articles so bare of evidence and in censoring comments while purporting to allow them. Finally, it is noteworthy that this trend has continued since 2020, notably in 2021 with a statement by the Prince of Wales, on International Nurses Day, that credited Seacole, with Nightingale, not only of saving many lives, but “pioneer [ing] the implementation of sanitary regulations in field hospitals,” although not even Nightingale deserves that credit, and she herself credited the Sanitary Commission. Neither of them worked in a field hospital, and Seacole was not even in the country, Turkey, where the (general) hospitals were, in which Nightingale ran the nursing!

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