

A 'REGION OF INDECENCY AND PRURIENCY'

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT, FEMALE COMMUNITIES AND HEALTH CARE IN COLONIAL NEW SOUTH WALES

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The focus of this paper is on the religious conflict that nearly destroyed the attempt to introduce reformed nursing, as advocated by Florence Nightingale, into the colony of New South Wales. Religious conflict, arising from belief and bigotry and enflamed by images of medieval martyrs, had a major impact on the social and political life of the colony. Such conflict peaked in New South Wales during the 1860s-80s and especially in 1868, the year the Nightingale nurses arrived. Reforming nursing was far from the seemingly innocuous act it might appear. Nightingale nursing had a major impact on the health care system and challenged accepted notions of women's work. The influence of these founding years reverberates in modern nursing. Reforming nursing also exacerbated major anxieties about women's communities. These anxieties were revealed in a somewhat farcical public brawl in 1870 between the advocates and opponents of reformed nursing, Catholics, High Church Anglicans and Evangelical Protestants.

INTRODUCTION

On 5 March 1868, six nurses landed in Sydney. All had been trained at the Nightingale School of Nursing, St Thomas' Hospital, London, the training school set up by the Nightingale Fund to reform civilian nursing. The Nightingale Fund had been created during the Crimean War in appreciation of Florence Nightingale who headed the teams of nurses sent to succor the soldiers.

The New South Wales Government paid the six nurses' passages and guaranteed their salaries for three years. Lucy Osburn, as the newly appointed Lady Superintendent of the Sydney Infirmary and Dispensary (now Sydney Hospital), was in charge of the nurses. They had been selected by the Nightingale Fund and approved by Florence Nightingale herself to reform nursing at the Sydney Infirmary and to train nurses so that they would spread Nightingale nursing throughout the colony.¹ Their arrival was a significant event in the history of Australian health care. Effective nursing with an emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness was, and is, essential to health care.² The medical practitioners at Sydney Infirmary

were particularly aware of the importance of nursing to their increasingly effective medical practice, arising from advances such as the use of anaesthetics in surgery. For years they petitioned the hospital board to employ trained nurses.³ The arrival of Lucy Osburn as Lady Superintendent was also a major milestone in women's work. Nightingale style nursing was a major new avenue of work for upper working-class and lower middle-class women. Lucy Osburn's role as Lady Superintendent was also innovative; a public assertion of the right of upper middle-class women to retain their high status as 'ladies' while also being paid a salary.

The introduction of Nightingale nursing to the colony of New South Wales was also, as argued below, a significant event in Australian religious history. Nursing may sound innocuous but it was to significantly add to the religious tensions of the colony in the late nineteenth century. To the nineteenth century mind, morality arose from religious beliefs. As Nightingale nurses claimed to embody physical and moral purity⁴ inevitably they were assumed to be acting from religious motives. Suspicious colonials were soon asking, which religion?

COLONIAL BEGINNINGS

Colonial Secretary Henry Parkes was among those who warmly welcomed Osburn and her nurses on their arrival in Sydney on the 5 March 1868. Parkes had written the letter to Florence Nightingale asking for nurses to come to Sydney.⁵ He had recently borne the brunt of church opposition to his 1866 Public Schools Act and had been especially vilified as an enemy of Irish Catholics.⁶ He may have

hoped that the introduction of Nightingale nurses would reinforce, without controversy, an image of statesmanlike concern for social welfare. If so, his political judgment erred.

At first, Osburn and her nurses were a political triumph. Osburn was befriended by the colonial elite but the real public relations coup occurred a week after the nurses' arrival. At a dusty, overcrowded picnic in his honour, Australia's first British royal visitor, Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, was shot in an assassination attempt. He was taken to Government House where the royal naval surgeon extracted the bullet, and two of Osburn's nurses successfully nursed him back to health. The influential surgeon Alfred Roberts, who had attached a detailed memo in support of Parkes's proposal in that first letter to Florence Nightingale, was therefore denied a role in the drama. He somewhat sourly wrote to Nightingale about the resultant publicity for the nurses: 'our Sisters nursed him [the Prince], he was pleased and therefore our Sisters are fashionable folk'.⁷ Even the irreverent newspaper, the *Sydney Punch*, which was later to vehemently oppose Osburn, extended a public welcome to Osburn and her five nurses, hailing them as 'fair sisters of charity'.⁸ Such phraseology should have served as a warning.

The public relations honeymoon lasted little more than a year. Soon Osburn was the focus of enormous opposition. A range of difficulties, including badly built, vermin-infested hospital buildings, chronic ill health, social isolation and loneliness, exacerbated her position. By the end of her first three-year term, Osburn had aroused a sadly impressive number of opponents. She had alienated all but one of

the five nurses who had come out from Britain with her. She had aroused the enmity of Alfred Roberts, a major problem as he was a dominating force in Sydney medical circles and also corresponded with Florence Nightingale. Many members of the Infirmary's Board also regarded her with hostility. Finally, Osburn had the added problem of the withdrawal of support by Florence Nightingale and members of her circle. It is one of history's ironies that while historians have agreed that Osburn succeeded in founding Nightingale nursing in Sydney during her sixteen and a half year term, Nightingale did not think so.⁹ The religious conflict examined below was just one aspect of the conflict over nursing at Sydney Infirmary.

ODIUM THEOLOGICUM

Religious conflict was just one of the issues, but it was a crucial and very public issue. Florence Nightingale was deeply religious and very aware of the problems of religious conflict—of *odium theologicum*.¹⁰ Nightingale was particularly concerned that her nurses should not be caught up in Protestant fears about the gains made by a resurgent British Catholicism since the repeal of the Penal Code in Ireland and the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act in England.¹¹ Fear of Catholicism meant that the number of Catholics admitted to the Nightingale School of Nursing was deliberately limited, with the result that the Nightingale Lady Superintendents, Matrons and Sisters, in London and in Sydney under Osburn, were all Protestants. In the early 1890s, Angelique Lucille Pringle was forced to resign as Matron of the Nightingale Training School and St Thomas' Hospital. Florence Nightingale

considered her as one of the best of her Matrons, the 'best and ablest woman I know' and called her 'Pearl' for her outstanding qualities. Such qualities were irrelevant when Pringle converted to Catholicism; there was no question that her conversion meant she had to resign.¹²

The potential for conflict between Protestants and Catholics intensified from the 1850s in Britain and Australia. From this decade the Catholic Church hardened its doctrinal line on a number of issues and benefited from a number of high profile converts including Cardinal Manning. Manning had been a member of the High Church wing of the Church of England, that part of the church that had most in common with Catholicism. With the example of Manning and others, there was good reason why Evangelicals feared High Church practices as leading to conversion to Catholicism. There was also good reason why many of Nightingale's nursing Superintendents and Matrons belonged to the High Church wing of the Church of England.

The attraction of Nightingale nursing for High Church women lies in the origins of nursing and its transformation in the nineteenth century. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were broadly two different categories of nurses. The first category, and majority of nurses, were working-class men and women who nursed members of their own sex and learnt nursing through experience. The women amongst these nurses were, in part unfairly, permanently stigmatised by Charles Dickens in his 1844 novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, especially with his character Sairey Gamp. Gamp was working class, coarse and unfeeling, unskilled and prone to drink. The second category of nurses

were members of religious orders. From the 1840s, these included a number of Church of England Sisterhoods, inspired partly by the example of Pastor Fliedner in Germany and his revival of the order of Deaconesses.¹³ The primary inspiration for nursing sisterhoods, however, came from the much admired Catholic Sisters of Charity. A common cry of the day, including the *Times* in its reports which led to Florence Nightingale being sent out to the Crimean War, was: where are the Protestant Sisters of Charity?¹⁴

By the end of the century, there was a third category of nurse, the Nightingale nurse. In many ways they were the Protestant answer to the fame of the Sisters of Charity. These nurses were inspired by Florence Nightingale's role as the Lady of Lamp in the Crimean War during 1854-6. From 1860 they were trained at the Nightingale Fund financed School of Nursing, St Thomas' Hospital, London. Nightingale nursing essentially referred to orderly, disciplined, trained, female controlled nursing care which emphasised hygiene and moral, as well as physical, cleanliness. What made Nightingale nursing different, and so widely acceptable in a Protestant society, was that it offered a unique synthesis of the two previous types of nurse. Nightingale nursing was initially carried out by much the same type of women who had been stigmatised as Gamps but they were now under the control of Sisters who were ideally middle class and 'ladies', inspired by a vocation, not to religious life, but to nursing.¹⁵ Religion was explicitly used to inspire this sense of vocation. Henry Bonham Carter, Nightingale's trusted cousin and Secretary to the Nightingale Fund, for example, advised Nightingale in 1871 that the Probationers

at the Nightingale School of Nursing needed more bible classes 'to keep them above the mere scramble for a remunerative place'.¹⁶

Demanding the same dedication as professed sisters, Nightingale nursing inevitably shared many of the features of the religious Sisterhoods. This tendency was reinforced as Nightingale nursing superintendents, like Osburn, did their midwifery training at Kings' College Hospital, under the nursing control of St John's House, a Church of England Sisterhood.¹⁷ It was due to this arrangement that the *Protestant Standard* was able to repeat the accusation that Mary Jones, Superior of St John's House, was the model for Lucy Osburn's nursing style and not Florence Nightingale.¹⁸ Features in common to both groups included the title of Sister and living in tightly controlled communities. Both wore uniforms which, for nursing sisters, increasingly included the veil. Nightingale nursing and many of the sisterhoods, at least at this time, also had two recruitment streams—one for working-class women, the other for educated, middle-class women. For example, middle-class, educated women entered the Sisters of Charity as choir sisters; less educated working-class women became lay sisters. Similarly, middle-class, educated women entered the Nightingale Nursing School as Lady or Special Probationers (students) and became Sisters; in Sydney under Osburn they were called Sister Probationers. Less educated working-class women entered as Nurse Probationers and became, and stayed, Nurses.¹⁹

The most significant feature in common between Nightingale nurses and members of religious sisterhoods such as

the Catholic Sisters of Charity and the Anglican Sisters of St John's House, was that they were communities of women with a woman in charge. Nightingale insisted that the most important aspect of her reforms was that nurses were under the leadership of 'one female head'.²⁰ Nightingale nursing involved women who lived in and also resulted in a lowering of the age of nurses. Nurses who learnt from experience tended to be older and often widows. The Nightingale nurses, however, needed to be trained and so were younger. Ideally, the Nightingale nurse was between twenty-five to thirty-five years old; in practice both in England and in Sydney, the majority were in their early twenties.²¹ The idea of a female-controlled community, including young girls, led to all sorts of horrors in nineteenth-century minds, not excluding Catholic Archbishops (as the Sisters of Charity in Sydney discovered).²² The feminisation of religion was occurring but women were seen as more child-like, emotional, illogical and more easily influenced than men. A community of women, including young women, without male headship, was seen as inevitably leading away from rationality and true belief. For Evangelical Protestants the fear was that such potentially emotionally unstable communities were vulnerable to the ever-waiting enemy: Rome.

Lucy Osburn was one of the Nightingale nursing leaders who strongly identified with the High Church wing of the Church of England. It is highly likely that Nightingale, during one of her meetings with Osburn before she left for Sydney, advised her to avoid religious conflict by being discreet about her High Church beliefs. In early 1868, as Osburn's ship was nearing Sydney, Florence Nightingale

wrote to another new nursing Superintendent that 'Any expression of High Church views or exhibition of High Church practices would be injurious to the success of the Nursing'.²³ If Nightingale did not, by some unlikely chance, give a similar warning to Lucy Osburn before she left London, she was soon to do so in writing. As early as December 1868, nine months after Osburn arrived in Sydney, Nightingale's key adviser Henry Bonham Carter, knew enough to write to Nightingale that he feared Osburn was 'bent upon Sisterhood notions'. He had heard that she called herself 'the Lady Superior', following Mary Jones the Head of the St John's House Sisters, and had changed the nurses' uniform to be more like that of a religious sister. He advised that 'This is likely to do harm at Sydney where there is a good deal of party spirit R[oman].C[atholic]. & Protestant. Could you give her a hint to avoid this & keep the nursing as "secular" as possible in outward appearance.'²⁴ Nightingale's letter has not survived, but one of Osburn's letters at this time makes it clear she was replying to these concerns.²⁵

With hindsight, there was little chance that religious controversy could have been avoided. As Malcolm Campbell has demonstrated, religious bigotry intensified in eastern Australia during 1865–85. This bigotry was fuelled by the arrival in January 1868 of sixty-two Fenian (militant Irish nationalist) prisoners in Western Australia. Henry Parkes intensified public hysteria by claiming the would-be assassin of Prince Alfred as part of a Fenian conspiracy.²⁶ Of all years, 1868 was the worst possible time to introduce a nursing system that could be confused with a Catholic sisterhood. In addition, the only other

trained nurses in the colony were Sisters of Charity who had established St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney in 1857. As Osburn reported, there was the common belief in Sydney that Florence Nightingale was Catholic so it was logical to believe that she had instituted her system of nursing along Catholic lines.²⁷ The large and cumbersome Board of Sydney Infirmary could only make the conflict worse, as it did with most issues it dealt with. As with the majority of large Sydney charities at the time, the Infirmary Board was reputed to be militantly Evangelical but to gain government subsidies needed its governing body to be 'unsectarian'.²⁸ The Board therefore represented the range of major religions in Sydney. It included Father Dwyer, a Catholic Priest who clashed with Henry Parkes over the treatment of Prince Alfred's would-be assassin, and at least one Jewish member, Joseph Raphael. Raphael was rigidly conscientious in all his duties, a meticulous and highly skilled craftsman responsible for making Lucy Osburn's beautiful cedar office furniture that is still in the Nightingale Wing of Sydney Hospital today. He was also described, by one of his many opponents, as 'the foulest-mouthed man in Sydney'.²⁹ The Board was not a harmonious mix.

Nevertheless, Osburn did not take Nightingale's advice. She highlighted any similarity with Sisterhoods by wearing, as indicated in contemporary photographs, a large cross around her neck.³⁰ She wrote in terms of taking her 'vows' when she entered nursing at St Thomas' Hospital and, in her own words, was prejudiced in favour of religious sisterhoods.³¹ Her management style also made her vulnerable to accusations that she ran nursing

like a convent. Osburn had little concept of personal privacy or of other's rights and, for example, was severely criticised by Nightingale for opening the mail of one of the English Sisters. Osburn not only opened the Sister's letter, but she replied to it herself and did not tell the Sister she had done so for some time.³²

THE 1870 INQUIRY

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that in 1870, just two and a half years after Osburn and the nurses arrived in Sydney, religious tensions resulted in a public inquiry.³³ The inquiry was not a small matter. Osburn was correct in judging it had the potential to destroy her work and result in her dismissal. Government-supported charities such as the Sydney Infirmary needed to demonstrate that they were unsectarian. If the charges against Osburn were proven, the government could be effectively accused of supporting sectarian practices. The inquiry was chaired by the highly respected clergyman, Alfred Stephen, and reported extensively in the papers. It took evidence for six weeks and investigated eighteen allegations made over almost one year by the Evangelical newspaper, the *Protestant Standard*. The allegations focused on favouritism by Lucy Osburn towards the hiring and treatment of Catholic staff and of alleged anti-Protestant activities, most notably an order to burn some Bibles.³⁴ The *Protestant Standard's* call for an inquiry was given greater resonance by being in the name of 'religious freedom'.³⁵

The seriousness of the inquiry and the mutual suspicion and fear fuelled by religious conflict is well illustrated in a letter from Lucy Osburn to Florence Nightingale,

written on 7 September 1870.³⁶ Lucy Osburn wrote that she initially dismissed the matter as yet another attempt at trouble-making by her staff: 'Blundell [one of the English Sisters] & the [Infirm] Chaplain had written the statements [for the *Protestant Standard*] I knew'. She made clear her disdain for the press: 'I looked upon the papers much in the same light as one looks upon mosquitoes on a hot day annoying but beneath notice'. She was to learn, however, that some mosquitoes carry a deadly bite. So too could those she considered beneath her. She had grown up in a world with people sharply delineated by status and class. Her world had taught her that as a Christian she was above a Jew; as an English daughter of a wine merchant, she was above publicans and colonial merchants; as a liberal she was above a radical; and as a 'lady' belonging to the Church of England, she was above vulgar dissenters. Then her fate, and the fate of nursing at Sydney Infirmary and all it involved, was in the hands of those very people. Her prejudices were clear in her descriptions, without naming them, of the inquiry members. Joseph Raphael dismissed as 'A violent loud spoken Jew'; another simply categorised as 'a retired publican' and William Alderson, the protectionist and wealthy employer, dismissed as 'a leather merchant good-natured [sic] & ignorant & always on the side of the people against the authorities'.³⁷ Then there was the man Osburn considered 'worst of all a sour-faced bigoted, harsh cruel-looking Presbyterian minister who appeared all the time as if he w[oul]d. like to flay me before burning me', Robert Lewers.³⁸ Osburn believed that Lewers had been deliberately elected Secretary to the Infirmary Board 'by the

Orange clubs ... to persecute me'.³⁹ Osburn did not view all the nine members of the inquiry as enemies, some she thought were indifferent and a few 'most sincere friends'.⁴⁰

In her letter to Nightingale about the inquiry, Osburn 'tried to laugh at the thing as an absurd farce but as I saw all my work of 3 years destroyed by it my laughing was often near to crying'.⁴¹ She had previously faced dismissal when members of the Nightingale Fund heard that she had written an indiscreet, gossipy letter about her conversations alone with the convalescent and handsome young Prince Alfred. Now for the second time in two years she faced disgrace, partly through her own actions.⁴²

Although the inquiry was so serious, Osburn found it hard not to be contemptuous of the proceedings when, as she wrote, 'I was called in myself ... the first thing I was treated to, [was] a fight between the Chairman & the Jew'.⁴³ She tried to explain why she had ordered Bibles to be burnt. The Chaplain had told her about old papers and books which he had found in one of the underground rooms of the Nightingale Wing, and that he had had the intact ones cleaned. He suggested that the rest, including portions of Bibles, be put in a box and 'must be destroyed as they were full of vermin'.⁴⁴ The justification for, and the effectiveness of, the new Nightingale nurses were their moral purity and physical cleanliness. As the embodiment of the new, cleaner Nightingale nurse, Osburn fought a never-ending fight against vermin in the badly built, decaying old building that housed the patients. She had slept in the building her first night in Sydney, when as she wrote, she 'never closed my eyes', the bugs were in

such numbers 'that I dare[d] not'.⁴⁵ She had described the paper on her bedroom wall moving with the numbers of bugs scuttling behind it. The only vermin-free building on the site was the freestanding Nightingale Wing, completed some months after she arrived, and home to her and the female staff. Her statement to Nightingale was surely a major understatement: 'I was horrified at the thought of bugs in the new house'.⁴⁶

She knew the religious politics of the day; her father had published a book about his fear of insidious Catholic influences.⁴⁷ It is improbable that as a child she had not learnt about Protestant martyrs who died in agony for printing and distributing bibles. It is equally likely that she knew that burning as opposed to burying books had a historic, symbolic horror. Most of those who gave evidence at the inquiry, including the Yardman asked to burn the material, the Chaplain and the Superintendent of the hospital all revealed their horror at burning rather than burying religious texts.⁴⁸ Yet, as she wrote, 'I told the yardman to burn the rest although the Chaplain had said torn spoilt portions of the Bible were among them'. She added that these portions were 'so full of bugs' but she must have known that was besides the point.⁴⁹ Why burn and not bury? She could only respond by complaining that her order to the yardman 'has now been magnified into a systematic & determined burning of Bibles on my part'.⁵⁰ Lucy Osburn had acted impulsively and thoughtlessly, as she would too many times, underestimating the reaction of others and the virulence of religious fears and suspicion.

In her letter to Nightingale she was determined to rise above the nuisance, the

mosquito bites of the press, the inquiry and the sectarian turmoil she had created, so her final comments stressed the farcical aspect of the inquiry. When they were hearing her evidence, she wrote, a dispute occurred between Father M. Dwyer and the Reverend Lewers: 'something turned up wh[ic]h. set the R[oman]. Cath[olic]. priest on to the Presbyterian minister & the bickering fighting sparring & temper shown were quite amusing, that about ended the séance nobody c[oul]d. calm down after the excitement to ask anything – so away I went'.⁵¹

Away she went but the cause of reformed nursing, and thus effective health care and a redefined occupation for women, was irrevocably tarnished with sectarian suspicion. Eventually the inquiry vindicated her: 'there has been no sectarian predilections manifested by the Lady Superintendent to affect the interests of the Institution'.⁵² The *Protestant Standard* consequently rejected the process as reflecting the 'very essence of Popery'.⁵³ The issues therefore lingered on and were partly resurrected in the 1873–4 Commission into Public Charities whose first report was on the Sydney Infirmary, and which again vindicated Osburn.⁵⁴ The issue again died down but simmered beneath the surface.

The sectarian passions evidenced during the inquiry are revealed by the stereotypical images that each side evoked. Osburn tried to keep her letter to Nightingale light but still her opponents appeared to her as in a nightmare of religious bigotry, with medieval images of flaying and burning.⁵⁵ In general, especially when writing to the august Florence Nightingale, Osburn's supporters were more moderate but still blamed evangelical nastiness.

Judge William Windeyer, who was a less than impartial chair of the 1873–4 Commission into Public Charities which inquired into Osburn's role at the Sydney Infirmary, informed Nightingale that Osburn's opponents were a 'clique of ignorant fanatics'.⁵⁶ Henry Bonham Carter quickly passed on the opinion of his wife's cousin, Elizabeth [Macarthur-] Onslow, who wrote that Osburn's problems came from 'ill natured attacks of the evangelical party'.⁵⁷

The *Freeman's Journal*, a Catholic paper, drew upon images of wronged, defenceless womanhood:

The victim is a lady – unmarried – and as far as we know without any other kind of protection from ruffianism than her sweet life and virtues afford. She can invoke no marital or fraternal horsewhip to vindicate ... has no support save that of a good generous public sympathy with a brave gentle life – and that feeling of scorn of libellers of women. As Catholics we can admire virtue wherever it is to be found, and as men we abominate the people who slander women.⁵⁸

One can almost hear the background violins and imagine the reporter's regret that Osburn was not also a poor Irish mother. Such writing, while typical of the *Freeman's Journal*, did Osburn few favours in her attempts to establish a public role for employed, middle-class women.

Neither Osburn nor her supporters, however, could match her opponents for hyperbole. Religious conflict, although played out in a remote Australian colony in 1870, relied on emotional images drawn largely from medieval Europe. The *Protest-*

ant Standard and *Sydney Punch* lead the religious charge against Lucy Osburn. There were a number of stock phrases used when describing Osburn and her nurses. The nurses' home was the 'Nightingale nunnery'; Osburn was the 'lady Abbess'; her policies were that of 'High Churchism and semi Popery' and the nursing students were referred to as 'novitiates'.⁵⁹ Osburn was criticised as 'aping the dress style and manners' of a head of a convent.⁶⁰ A nurse in uniform was described as being 'in all the splendour of the Gamp nunnery livery' and the nurses as living in a 'Misses Gamp nunnery'.⁶¹ The latter phrases were wonderfully economical insults inferring that the nurses were actually like Charles Dickens's stereotype of the pre-Nightingale nurse, Sairey Gamp, but dressed as nuns. The *Sydney Punch* claimed that the Nightingale wing had twenty rooms and was solely for four British nurses' accommodation.⁶² In reality there were six British nurses and the Nightingale wing accommodated all the other female staff as well as Osburn and her team. There was particular stress on the youthfulness of the nursing students with the *Sydney Punch* recommending that the Infirmary should 'return each silly would-be Nightingale to her mother, with a birch rod as a present'.⁶³ The following year it described Sydney Infirmary: 'a seminary of empty-headed girls ... so called "probationers" ... accepts as novitiates hysterical chits of eighteen, and inducts them under the specious film of maudlin sentimentality into a region in which indecency and pruriency may sate an unhealthy appetite'.⁶⁴ When the above was written, Osburn's Nurses' Register indicates that only one probationer entered when she was eighteen years old,

and the entry age of the rest ranged from nineteen to thirty-eight years old.⁶⁵

The opposition to Osburn was not just posed in terms of individual abuse but also of national pride and the defense of traditional Protestant values. The issue quickly transcended parochial issues such as nursing, patient care or women's work. Osburn's opponents, especially the Scottish Haldane Turriff, one of the Nightingale-trained Sisters who had accompanied Osburn to Sydney, defined themselves as stout-hearted defenders of Protestant independence against convent discipline and Catholic submission. The Scottish theme was picked up in the colonial parliament by another Scot, David Buchanan, a firebrand whose invective matched that of Joseph Raphael. Buchanan was reported as claiming, in one of his famed tirades, that the issue was religious liberty, the same issue that had caused the 'whole covenanting war in Scotland'. He warned 'when Scotland rose up', other nations had better beware. Osburn was guilty, he accused, of 'vulgar, insolent tyranny ... foul and gross tyranny'.⁶⁶

How easy it was to exploit religious emotions was revealed by the actions of another of the Nightingale-trained British Sisters, the English Annie Miller, who accused Osburn of not allowing her to attend her Congregational church. Annie Miller's complaint too became an issue of religious liberty and was raised in the colonial parliament and in the press.⁶⁷ Miller's case was finally discredited at the 1870 inquiry by her own minister and by the claim that it was she, not Osburn, who had placed a crucifix in one of the hospital's public rooms.⁶⁸ The extent to which religious issues were management issues is also revealed by Osburn's insistence that all the

Sisters and Nurses attend church service in the Infirmary's Boardroom on Sunday mornings rather than go to their own churches. Osburn was reported as stating the reason was that if they did go to church on Sunday mornings she would not know 'when I should see their faces again'.⁶⁹

Nightingale nursing with its emphasis on cleanliness, working from a vocation, and creating a female community, was a new concept in the colony. Religion complicated almost every attempt of Osburn to establish a stable foundation for the new nursing. How difficult any one issue could be is illustrated by the problems Osburn encountered over what to call her staff and herself. At both the 1870 inquiry and the 1873 Public Commission, there were objections to the 'Head Nurses', as the objectors called them, being called 'Sisters'. Although the title Sister was traditionally used in a number of English hospitals, many people in Sydney assumed it meant membership of a religious order. Osburn made it worse by using the Sisters' Christian names, for example, Sister Mary or Sister Annie, a practice that reminded her critics of convents. Then there was the vexed problem of Osburn's title. Nightingale fussed over trivial details regarding Osburn's coming to Australia and, for example, spent an enormous amount of energy deciding what books to present to each nurse, but she left important details to chance.⁷⁰ One of these details was Osburn's title—Nightingale referred to both Matron and Lady Superintendent. When Osburn arrived in Sydney, she discovered practical objections to both titles.⁷¹ So she unwisely adopted the title common to heads of religious sisterhoods, that of 'Lady Superior'. Osburn's title became a

matter of political bickering so that in 1870 a question and answer in the Legislative Assembly referred to her as 'the Head Nurse', 'the Superintending Nurse', and 'the Lady Superintendent'.⁷² Osburn's critics, such as the *Protestant Standard*, alleged that she also insisted on being called 'Your Ladyship'. This was denied and was probably a corruption of the habit of some on her staff to refer to her as 'the Lady'.⁷³ Eventually the virulence of opposition, and presumably Nightingale's warning, caused Osburn to abandon the title Lady Superior. She claimed indifference and that she then called herself by no title other than 'the nurse from England'.⁷⁴ Osburn's successors, less able to demand such high status, were called 'Matron'.

The impact of religious conflict on the attempt to reform the health care system of the colony by provided trained nursing, however, went far beyond short-term squabbles about titles. Two longer-term influences were on recruitment and management style. The controversy, and the belief that Osburn favoured Catholics, not surprisingly appears to have adversely affected recruitment especially of those stalwarts of Sydney philanthropy, Evangelical women.⁷⁵ No members of Sydney's leading Evangelical families put themselves forward to be trained by Lucy Osburn as a Sister. This lack of such committed, energetic women was a major loss for modern nursing's foundation years.

The issue of management style is more complex and needs to be shorn of the emotionalism and bigotry that motivated Osburn's opponents. It was with some justice that the *Protestant Standard* described Osburn as one who 'loves convent style, convent look, convent discipline

and convent subserviency'.⁷⁶ The subsequent management style of 'Nightingale' nursing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was quite unusual in terms of labour relations. It was a style that leaves historians so uncomfortable that even general surveys of women's and labour history can ignore nurses, one of the largest categories of women workers.⁷⁷ Nursing's management style owed much to domestic service but was justified by the need for a vocation. It was a highly personal style which could lead both to the warm memories many nurses have of the Nurses' Homes and to the endemic bullying which is a major problem in contemporary Australian nursing.⁷⁸ One example of just how different nursing was to other forms of work is revealed when we read that it was the duty of the night nurses at the end of their shift at Wollongong Hospital in the 1930s to report to the Matron while she was still in bed—'the last nurse had to prepare her bath'.⁷⁹ Similarly, the anxiety expressed even in the 1960s that Nurses' Homes resulted in 'a convent-like existence' can be too easily dismissed as mere homophobia or Protestant angst.⁸⁰ It may also have been an aspect of the enduring legacy of Nightingale-style nursing, and the religious prejudices of its founder in the Australian colonies, Lucy Osburn.

CONCLUSION

Religious belief and its ugly reverse side, bigotry, strongly influenced all aspects of social policies in New South Wales, especially during the 1860s to 1880s. Nursing reform was an essential part of the modernisation of health care in the colony. Nurses' claim to be motivated

by a vocation and to embody cleanliness associated it, in the popular mind, with religion and sectarian convictions. Osburn's religious beliefs, and the resultant controversy, adversely affected recruitment and was almost the undoing of reformed nursing in Sydney. There is substance to the claims that her management style was based on the convent and sisterhoods. It was, for both better and worse, a style that indelibly shaped Australian nursing, health care and women's work.

If nursing was strongly affected by religious controversy, then the reverse was also true. The religious controversy surrounding nursing preoccupied both the press and parliament for at least a year; it was the subject of the 1870 inquiry, explored in this paper, as well as a focus of the Commission into Public Charities in 1873. They resonated with fears about communities of women and medieval images of persecution. The nursing controversy is an important reminder how religious conflict had a pervasive impact on attempts to improve social welfare in the colony of New South Wales.

ENDNOTES

¹ Florence Nightingale (hereafter Nightingale) to Henry Parkes, 24 October 1866, Correspondence Florence Nightingale and the Colonial Government, Australian Joint Copying Project, Mitchell Library, Sydney. See also, *The Sydney Mail*, 22 February 1868.

² Carol Helmstadter, 'Old nurses and new', *Nursing History Review*, 1, 1993, pp. 43–70.

³ *New South Wales Legislative Assembly, Votes & Proceedings*, Vol. IV, 1866, Correspondence respecting David Gibson, p. 3.

⁴ Alison Bashford, *Purity and Pollution: Gender, Embodiment and Victorian Medicine*, New York and London, St Martin's Press and Macmillan, 1998.

⁵ Henry Parkes to Nightingale, 21 July 1866, BL ADDMSS 47757.

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¹⁷ Lucy Osburn (hereafter Osburn) to Nightingale, 30 October 1867, BL ADDMSS 47757.

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