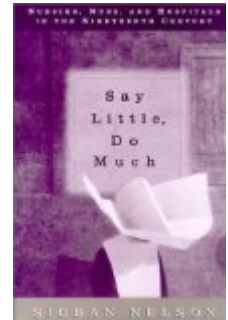


Sioban Nelson. *Say Little, Do Much: Nursing, Nuns and Hospitals in the Nineteenth Century.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. 240 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3614-9.



Reviewed by Katherine Burger Johnson

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Giving Nursing Sisters Their Due

Sioban Nelson has written an excellent volume that helps fill a gap in women's history and the history of medicine. In *Say Little, Do Much*, Nelson, a senior lecturer at the School of Postgraduate Nursing, The University of Melbourne (Australia), examines the role of religious women (Roman Catholic and Protestant) in Britain, North America, and Australia, in the development of professional nursing and the establishment of hospitals in the nineteenth century. Countering the much-accepted notion that Florence Nightingale was the primary founder of the nursing profession, Nelson presents several case studies that examine the work of nursing sisters in various settings in the English-speaking world from the early 1800s into the twentieth century.

Thorough research is the mainstay of this volume of essays, which challenges, but does not malign, a much-accepted historical viewpoint on the origins of professional nursing. Nelson's citations are detailed and show an understanding of sources, and sometimes the lack thereof, relating to nursing and medical history, the life of reli-

gious communities, and women in general. Each chapter is a case study of a particular group or groups of religious women--sometimes orders of Catholic nuns, sometimes vowed Protestant women, sometimes others. The book is not an overview or a historical narrative as the title may indicate, but a series of stand-alone essays that have been edited to serve as a single volume. This reviewer would have liked the description of the book to say just that, but this is a minor complaint.

Chapter one is subtitled, "Veils of Invisibility-Nursing Nuns," and is true to that title. It really serves as the introduction, explaining the author's purpose and approach, while putting the research in context. It outlines the entire book, explaining the topic of each individual essay, showing what is being addressed and why, along with presenting some very important points: the connection between the sacred and the secular, the similarity of the vowed and unwowed women, and the link from nineteenth-century women in vocations to the emergence of twentieth-century professional women.

Nelson's first essay looks at nursing history, religious history, and women's history, and how they deal with the history of religious communities of women. Religious women were at the forefront of social action in the area of health care, yet this activity not given credit, neither in contemporary accounts, nor by many historians. By ignoring the works of these communities of women, Nelson successfully argues that both history and the way we deal with the present is distinctly colored. The Daughters of Charity and their work in the Northeastern United States is the subject of the next essay. Roman Catholic nuns were a very visible symbol of Catholicism in mainly Protestant nineteenth-century United States. Yet, despite suspicion and some downright hatred, their work through epidemics and wartime earned them the devotion of Protestant and Catholics alike.

The next essay deals with the Sisters of Mercy at Bermondsey, who in 1839 established the first convent in England since the Reformation and over the next several years established twenty-two establishments to help the poor, including a hospital, in London. They also answered the call for nurses in the Crimea and departed for France before Florence Nightingale. Nelson shows how the nuns established a groundwork that was built upon by Nightingale, while highlighting the similarities between these sisters and the Nightingale nurses. Traveling across the globe, Nelson looks at the English Nightingale nurses and the Irish nursing nuns who established the nursing profession along with hospitals in New South Wales, Australia. The Sisters of Charity arrived from Ireland in 1838 and established a hospital (with patronage from a non-Catholic) in 1857. Nightingale nurses arrived in 1868 to "establish professional nursing in Australia" (p. 90). Both groups of women encountered opposition from men in either the church hierarchy or the political hierarchy. These powerful men were challenged and threatened by middle-class women who asserted any authority over their own lives.

Nursing in the frontier environment provided different challenges to the Irish, French and Quebecois women who went into the mining towns of western Canada and the United States. Adapting to the almost exclusively male culture, the nurses adapted and in turn established their professionalism, their hospitals, and often times, their Catholic faith all at the same time. In the Midwest United States there were groups of German nursing sisters whose connection was cultural and linguistic but whose religions differed. The German immigrants to the United States in the 1800s were both Catholic and Protestant, whereas most immigrant populations were more homogenous. Nelson examines some of these communities of German nursing nuns and deaconesses to show why and how these immigrant women came to the United States and assimilated, at the same time establishing an entire movement.

The last chapter is entitled "The Twentieth Century" which seems oddly in conflict with the title of the book itself. This final chapter is actually a summary showing how these case studies, when considered together, illustrate the importance of these communities of religious women to the development of twentieth-century professional nursing and the need for the inclusion of gender and religion as issues when trying to understand the history of nursing. Nelson raises some interesting questions in stating that issues other than gender must be considered when examining the history of nursing, that women who have given up their identity to a group somehow fade in our historical perspective, and that more research needs to be done on the groundbreaking work of communities of religious women.

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