

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Cecil Woodham-Smith

It was something new to call a girl Florence. Within fifty years there would be thousands of girls all over the world christened Florence in honour of this baby, but in the summer of 1820, when Fanny Nightingale fixed on the name for her daughter, it was new.

Novelty was the fashion in 1820. Europe was still rejoicing in the liberty which followed the end of the Napoleonic wars. Years of restriction had bred a longing for change, and now that freedom to travel had returned the roads and cities of Europe were thronged with travellers. Fanny and William Nightingale had been travelling in Europe since their marriage in 1818. They already had one daughter, born in Naples in 1819 and christened by the Greek name for her birthplace, Parthenope. For her second confinement Fanny chose Florence. She loved gaiety, and Florence had the reputation of being the gayest city in Europe. The Nightingales took a large furnished villa, the Villa Colombaia near the Porta Romana, where a second girl was born on May 12, 1820. Fanny decided she too should be named after her birthplace, and on July 4, 1820, she was christened Florence in the drawing-room of the villa.

It would have been better if Florence had been a boy. Though William Edward Nightingale, or as he was always called W.E.N., was rich, there were complications attached to his property. He had inherited from an uncle, and, under his uncle's will, if W.E.N. should have no son, the property passed on his death to his sister and next to her eldest son. However, the Nightingales felt no anxiety. Not all W.E.N.'s fortune was involved. He had inherited when a minor; a lead mine discovered on the property had greatly increased its value, and during his minority a large sum had been invested on his behalf which was absolutely his. The Nightingales had been married for two years, and Fanny had already had two healthy children. The next baby would be a boy.

Though they were both handsome, agreeable, and intelligent, they were not a well-matched couple.