



Nursing and Women's Labour in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for Independence

Sue Hawkins

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This book presents a new examination of Victorian nurses which challenges commonly-held assumptions about their character and motivation. Nineteenth century nursing history has, until now, concentrated almost exclusively on nurse leaders, on the development of nursing as a profession and the politics surrounding registration. This emphasis on big themes, and reliance on the writings of nursing's upper stratum, has resulted in nursing history being littered with stereotypes. This book is one of the first attempts to understand, in detail, the true nature of Victorian nursing at ground level.

Uniquely, the study views nursing through an economic lens, as opposed to the more usual vocational focus. Nursing is placed in the wider context of women's role in British society, and the changing prospects for female employment in the high Victorian period. Using St George's Hospital, London as a case study, the book explores the evolution of nurse recruitment, training, conditions of employment and career development in the second half of the nineteenth century. Pioneering prosopographical techniques, which combined archival material with census data to create a database of named nurses, have enabled the generation – for the first time – of biographies of ordinary nurses.

Sue Hawkins' findings belie the picture of nursing as a profession dominated by middle class women. Nursing was a melting pot of social classes, with promotion and opportunity extended to all women on the basis of merit alone. This pioneering work will interest students and researchers in nursing history, the social and cultural history of Victorian England and women's studies.

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