

ADVANCED READING

PASSAGE 1

Two recent publications offer different assessment of the career of the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale. A book by Anne Summers seeks to debunk the idealizations and present a reality at odds with Nightingale's heroic reputation. According to Summers, Nightingale's importance during the Crimean War has been exaggerated: not until near the war's end did she become supervisor of the female nurses. Additionally, Summers writes that the contribution of the nurses to the relief of the wounded was at best marginal. The prevailing problems of military medicine were caused by army organizational practices, and the addition of a few nurses to the medical staff could be no more than symbolic. Nightingale's place in the national pantheon, Summers asserts, is largely due to the propagandistic efforts of contemporary newspaper reporters.

By contrast, the editors of a new volume of Nightingale's letters view Nightingale as a person who significantly influenced not only her own age but also subsequent generations. They highlight her ongoing efforts to reform sanitary conditions after the war. For example, when she learned that peacetime living conditions in British barracks were so horrible that the death rate of enlisted men far exceeded that of neighboring civilian populations, she succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. She used sums raised through public contributions to found a nurses' training hospital in London. Even in administrative matters, the editors assert, her practical intelligence was formidable: as recently as 1947 the British Army's medical services were still using the cost-accounting system she had devised in the 1860's.

I believe that the evidence of her letters supports continued respect for Nightingale's brilliance and creativity. When counseling a village schoolmaster to encourage children to use their faculties of observation, she sounds like a modern educator. Her insistence on classifying the problems of the needy in order to devise appropriate treatments is similar to the approach of modern social workers. In sum, although Nightingale may not have achieved all of her goals during the Crimean War, her breadth of vision and ability to realize ambitious projects have earned her an eminent place among the ranks of social pioneers.

PASSAGE 2

A meteor stream is composed of dust particles that have been ejected from a parent comet at a variety of velocities. These particles follow the same orbit as the parent comet, but due to their differing velocities they slowly gain on or fall behind the disintegrating comet until a shroud of dust surrounds the entire cometary orbit. Astronomers have hypothesized that a meteor stream should broaden with time as the dust particles' individual orbits are perturbed by planetary gravitational fields. A recent computer-modeling experiment tested this hypothesis by tracking the influence of planetary gravitation over a projected 5,000-year period on the positions of a group of hypothetical dust particles. In the model, the particles were randomly distributed throughout a computer simulation of the orbit of an actual meteor stream, the Geminid. The researcher found, as expected, that the computer-model stream broadened with time. Conventional theories, however, predicted that the distribution of particles would be increasingly dense toward the center of a meteor stream. Surprisingly, the computer-model meteor stream gradually came to resemble a thick-walled, hollow pipe.

Whenever the Earth passes through a meteor stream, a meteor shower occurs. Moving at a little over 1,500,000 miles per day around its orbit, the Earth would take, on average, just over a day to cross the hollow, computer-model Geminid stream if the stream were 5,000 years old. Two brief periods of peak meteor activity during the shower would be observed, one as the Earth entered the thick-walled "pipe" and one as it exited. There is no reason why the Earth should always pass through the stream's exact center, so the time interval between the two bursts of activity would vary from one year to the next.

Has the predicted twin-peaked activity been observed for the actual yearly Geminid meteor shower? The Geminid data between 1970 and 1979 show just such a bifurcation, a secondary burst of meteor activity being clearly visible at an average of 19 hours (1,200,000 miles) after the first burst. The time intervals between the bursts suggest the actual Geminid stream is about 3,000 years old.

PASSAGE 3

The new school of political history that emerged in the 1960's and 1970's sought to go beyond the traditional focus of political historians on leaders and government institutions by examining directly the political practices of ordinary citizens. Like the old approach, however, this new approach excluded women. The very techniques these historians used to uncover mass political behavior in the nineteenth-century United States—quantitative analyses of election returns, for example—were useless in analyzing the political activities of women, who were denied the vote until 1920.

By redefining "political activity," historian Paula Baker has developed a political history that includes women. She concludes that among ordinary citizens, political activism by women in the nineteenth century prefigured trends in twentieth-century politics. Defining "politics" as "any action taken to affect the course of behavior of government or of the community," Baker concludes that, while voting and holding office were restricted to men, women in the nineteenth century organized themselves into societies committed to social issues such as temperance and poverty. In other words, Baker contends, women activists were early practitioners of nonpartisan, issue-oriented politics and thus were more interested in enlisting lawmakers, regardless of their party affiliation, on behalf of certain issues than in ensuring that one party or another won an election. In the twentieth century, more men drew closer to women's ideas about politics and took up modes of issue-oriented politics that Baker sees women as having pioneered.

PASSAGE 4

New observations about the age of some globular clusters in our Milky Way galaxy have cast doubt on a long-held theory about how the galaxy was formed. The Milky Way contains about 125 globular clusters (compact groups of anywhere from several tens of thousands to perhaps a million stars) distributed in a roughly spherical halo around the galactic nucleus. The stars in these clusters are believed to have been born during the formation of the galaxy, and so may be considered relics of the original galactic nebula, holding vital clues to the way the formation took place.

The conventional theory of the formation of the galaxy contends that roughly 12 to 13 billion years ago the Milky Way formed over a relatively short time (about 200 million years) when a spherical cloud of gas collapsed under the pressure of its own gravity into a disc surrounded by a halo. Such a rapid formation of the galaxy would mean that all stars in the halo should be very nearly the same age.

However, the astronomer Michael Bolte has found considerable variation in the ages of globular clusters. One of the clusters studied by Bolte is 2 billions years older than most other clusters in the galaxy, while another is 2 billion years younger. A colleague of Bolte contends that the cluster called Palomar 12 is 5 billion years younger than most other globular clusters.

To explain the age differences among the globular clusters, astronomers are taking a second look at "renegade" theories. One such newly fashionable theory, first put forward by Richard Larson in the early 1970's, argues that the halo of the Milky Way formed over a period of a billion or more years as hundreds of small gas clouds drifted about, collided, lost orbital energy, and finally collapsed into a centrally condensed elliptical system. Larson's conception of a "lumpy and turbulent" protogalaxy is complemented by computer modeling done in the 1970's by mathematician Alan Toomre, which suggests that closely interacting spiral galaxies could lose enough orbital energy to merge into a single galaxy.