

PREACHER CARRIED A TORCH FOR FLORENCE - by Vivienne Smith

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When Florence Nightingale left England for the Crimea with her band of nurses in October 1854, she sailed into the history books. Not only did she become a heroine to the British troops but also to people around the world.

In a little place called Elora, west of Toronto in Canada, one man followed her career with particular interest. He was John Smithurst, the parish priest. And according to local legend, he had once been engaged to the Lady with the Lamp. The claim was not as incredible as it might first seem. For the clergyman originally hailed from the village of Lea, not far from the Nightingale family home of Lea Hurst. He was also one of Florence's many cousins, and had visited her in his youth. The son of William and Christiana Smithurst, John was born in Lea on September 9, 1807. He was baptised at nearby Dethick Church a month later.

As a young man, he worked for the company founded by Sir Richard Arkwright, founder of Cromford's famous cotton mill. Then, at the age of 28, so the story goes, John fell in love with his 16-year-old cousin Florence. Unfortunately, his hopes of marriage were quickly dashed when her parents voiced their disapproval of the match. Unable to be together, the cousins are said to have made a solemn promise to devote their lives to the service of others.

It is certainly what they both did.

Abandoning his career in business, John Smithurst decided to be a missionary in Canada instead. Florence may have influenced him in his choice of vocation. In September 1836, having been accepted by the Church Missionary Society of England, the young man went to train at their college in Islington.

The following February, while he was still a student, Florence received her own "call from God". However, as the privileged daughter of wealthy parents, she was not free to follow her heart. Instead her family whisked her abroad for an 18-month tour of Europe. By the time she returned to England in 1839, Smithurst had completed his training and was about to be ordained as a priest.

Soon afterwards he sailed for Canada. He was to take up the post of chaplain with the Hudson's Bay Company on a salary of £100 a year. The young man was to be based at Upper Fort Garry, the company's outpost and centre for the fur trade on the Red River. Today the city of Winnipeg stands on the site. But 160 years ago, this part of Canada was still an uncharted wilderness where the white man was often in conflict with the native people. Smithurst finally arrived at the Red River settlement in September 1839. But he soon decided it was with the Indians that his real work lay. After just a few months, he applied to the fort's governor for release from his chaplain's duties. As he recorded in his diary: "Ambition might have been gratified by the title of chaplain, worldly interest served by the salary attached to the office with a residence at the fort, but conscience would not have been satisfied."

In February 1840, the missionary took up residence alongside the Indian settlement on Netley Creek, a branch of the Red River near Lake Winnipeg. For the next 12 years, he devoted his life to the native people. He performed more than 300 baptisms, and established a number of schools. His work was not simply spiritual, for he was also a man of considerable practical ability. In fact, John Smithurst's mission was said to have the "best arranged house and garden in the Red River settlement". He not only used his knowledge of farming to improve on native methods, but apparently introduced kidney beans and cucumbers to the region.

The man from Lea was also the first Anglican missionary in the Hudson Bay area to learn an Indian language. He even applied this knowledge to produce his own Cree-English dictionary. In his very first year at Netley Creek, Smithurst conducted the wedding of an important Saulteaux chief. Peguis was also known as the Cut-nose Chief, because part of his nose had been bitten off during a tribal dispute in his youth. Now in his 60s, he had maintained an amicable relationship with the white settlers ever since they first arrived in the area. On October 7, 1840, Chief Peguis officially gave up three of his four wives in order to be baptised by Reverend John Smithurst. The Indian and his remaining spouse then took marriage vows using the names William and Victoria King.

Such diversions aside, life in the frontier country could be hard, as the clergyman soon discovered. After a summer of being plagued by mosquitoes, he noted in his diary: How truly thankful I shall be when winter returns again."

Yet wintertime in the wilds of Canada could even be more trying. Smithurst recorded how, on one occasion, he had ridden "through storm and snow, my shoes freezing to the stirrups, my horse white with hoar frost and icicles of frozen breath hanging around his mouth".

His sterling work did not go unnoticed by the authorities. In 1849, the missionary was made a member of the council of Assiniboia, the governing body of the Red River district. Unfortunately, that same year he also became involved in a dispute concerning the fur trade. The Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly of the trade caused considerable resentment, especially among the Métis. Of mixed race, they were the offspring of local Indians and white trappers. By siding with the company, Smithurst upset the half-breed natives. The Métis went out of their way to alienate his existing Indian flock, and the clergyman's last two years at Red River were not happy ones. Suffering from acute rheumatism, he resigned his post early in 1851 and returned to England. It was rumoured that he secretly cherished hopes of finally making Florence Nightingale his wife.

If so, he was to be disappointed.

Determined to be a career woman, his cousin had at last begun to assert her independence. That summer, she departed for Kaiserwerth in Germany to spend three months studying nursing. At the end of the year, John Smithurst travelled back to Canada alone, never to return. On January 1, 1852, he took up the appointment as rector of St. John's Church in Elora. Not long afterwards, parishioners were surprised to hear that a present had arrived for their new minister. It was a set of communion vessels bearing a cryptic inscription in Latin. Translated, it read: "Acting as agent for someone Ebenezer Hall gave, as a gift, this set of Communion silver to Reverend John Smithurst, a very dear friend, in grateful recognition of his many kindnesses. AD 1852." The clergyman gave the set to St. John's Church, and today it remains one of Elora's most treasured possessions. Local people were convinced, right from the start, that the gift came from Florence Nightingale herself.

After almost six years as rector, Smithurst moved to nearby Minto and bought a 400-acre plot of land. On it he established a bush farm which he named Lea Hurst. Towards the end of his life, as his health began to fail, the preacher returned to Elora. There he died on September 2, 1867, a week before his 60th birthday.

The small town in Ontario thus became the final resting place of the pioneering missionary from Lea. But his link with Florence Nightingale was not forgotten. During his last illness, Smithurst had been attended by a local physician, Dr. A. H. Paget. When Florence herself died more than 40 years later, in August 1910, the then elderly GP made an intriguing statement. He is quoted as writing in a letter: "I had the pleasure of knowing the late Reverend John Smithurst of Lea Hurst, Minto: a fine educated gentleman. He was engaged to the late Florence Nightingale."

But did the man from Lea truly find a place in the heart of the Lady with the Lamp? We may never know for sure. Certainly Elora's rector never married. And despite being proposed to on several occasions, neither did his more famous cousin. Whatever the truth is, in a little church far across the Atlantic the memories of both these Derbyshire people are perpetuated to this day. Two stained glass windows stand side by side on the south all, one dedicated to each of them.