

Watercolour of Florence Nightingale sitting in a window, at Lea Hurst, c. 1830's–1840's. Claydon House Trust, Verney/Claydon Estate Papers, From Verney 13/47.



Leaving Home

Nightingale's upbringing was designed to prepare her for life as a society hostess and gentleman's wife. But she soon came to feel imprisoned in this world of social conventions and obligations.

The family, she wrote in 1851, 'is too narrow a field for the development of an immortal spirit'. It wasted women's creative potential: 'Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity and a place in society where no one of these can be exercised?'

Her independent streak had already been noted by her governess, who attempted to instill in her a 'spirit of obedience'. After 1831, Nightingale's father took over her education, and taught her a range of languages, humanities and sciences.

As Nightingale's intellect developed, so did her desire to engage with the wider world. In 1837, while nursing family members during an influenza outbreak, she experienced a command from God: a 'call to service'. Nightingale felt this 'call' to be incompatible with marriage. In 1849, she refused a serious and tempting offer: Richard Monckton Milnes,

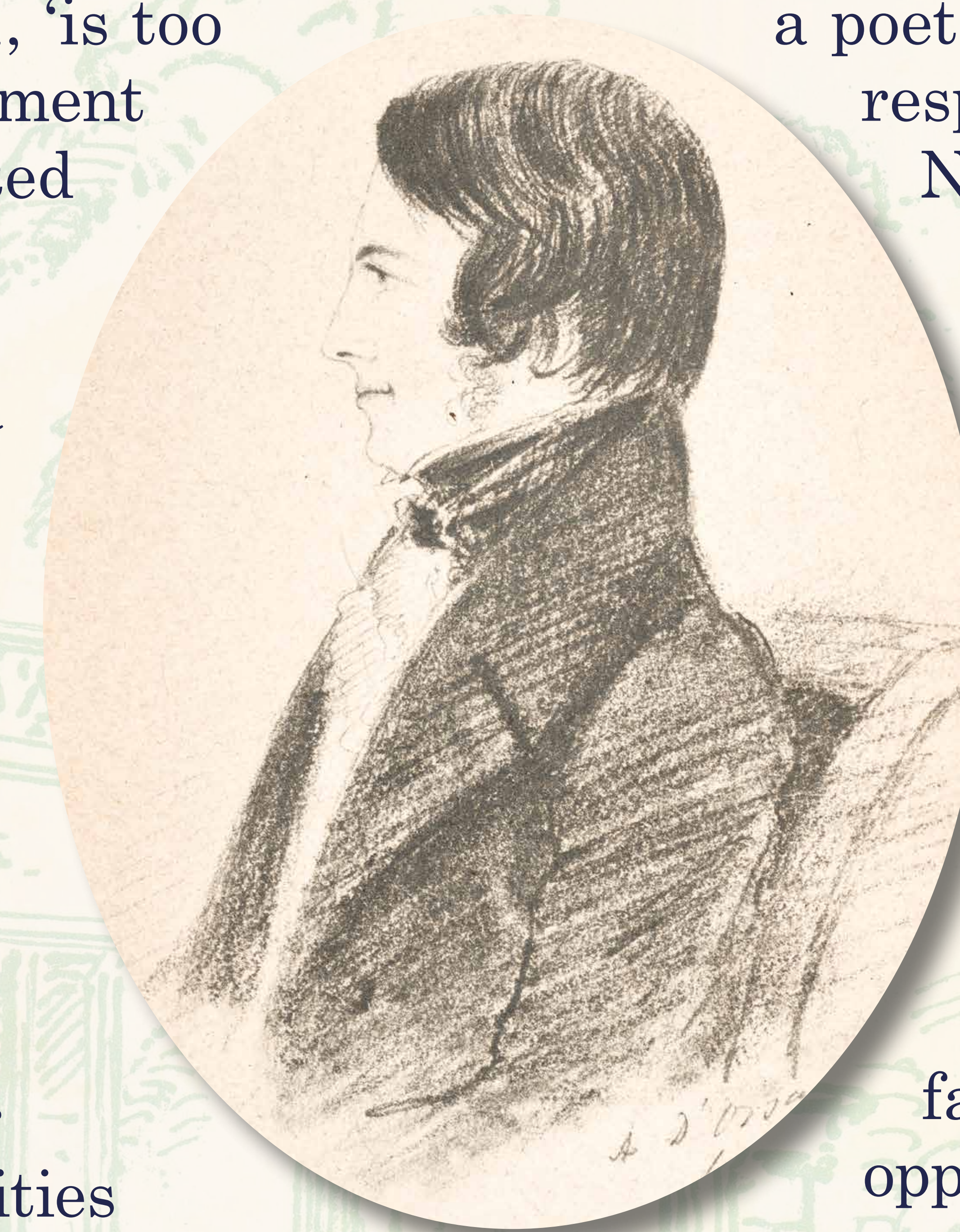


Image of Richard Monckton Milnes from *The Life, Letters and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes, First Lord Houghton* by T Wemyss Reid, Volume 1, (1891). Hallward Library General Stock, PR4808.R4

a poet and Liberal MP, was in many respects her ideal companion. But Nightingale feared that marriage, even to Milnes, would represent merely 'a continuation and exaggeration of my present life, without hope of another'. She wanted instead to do 'real work' in the world, but her family would not allow her to leave except to marry. In 1849-50 Florence made some temporary escapes, touring Egypt, Greece and Germany with family friends, and taking the opportunity to visit hospitals and nursing institutions. Back home in 1851-2, she wrote *Cassandra*, a feminist text borne

of frustration at the restrictions of upper-class home life. Eventually, in 1853, aged 33, her family allowed her to leave definitively. She took charge of the Establishment for Gentlewomen During Illness in London for a year before the Crimean War intervened.

"Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity and a place in society where no one of these can be exercised?"