

Jane Sullivan, "Bela Pratt's Angel of the Battlefield Good out of Evil" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 36, No. 2 (Summer 2008).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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**Bela Pratt's Angel of the Battlefield:  
Good Out of Evil**

**By**

**Leslie Jane Sullivan**

The Angel of the Battlefield is a bronze sculpture which has stood, or more accurately reclined, in the Massachusetts State House since its dedication to the women who served as nurses during the American Civil War, in 1915. Commissioned by the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1914, the statue was, and continues to be, the only public memorial to the accomplishments of women in the Commonwealth. The Angel of the Battlefield depicts events of more than fifty years before its conception. The bronze is larger-than-life-size and is placed atop a pediment of nearly five feet in height. For this reason, it is difficult for anyone to study its detail without climbing the stairs to the gallery of Nurses Hall. Looking down on it, one can see the high relief figures rising out of the bronze: a wounded soldier lies supine, eyes closed, his upper body cradled in the arms of a woman. The woman wears a simple dress, her hair in a neat bun at the nape of her neck. Regardless of the angle from which one views the statue, it is not possible to clearly discern the features of the woman's face. She is an archetype.

Bela Lyon Pratt was an American sculptor who was born in Norwich, Connecticut on December 11, 1867. His parents were an attorney and a gifted pianist. At age sixteen, Pratt went to Yale, his father's alma mater, where he studied at the school of Fine Arts. Pratt graduated from Yale in 1887 and went on to study under Augustus

Saint-Gaudens at the Art Students League of New York. Pratt was mentored by Saint-Gaudens, and worked at his private studio. Later, Pratt traveled to Paris, where he trained with sculptor Alexandre Falguiere at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

In 1892, Pratt returned to the United States to create two large sculptural groups representing *The Genius of Navigation* for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Moving to Boston, Pratt spent over twenty-five years as a teacher of modeling at the Museum of Fine Arts School. During this time period, he sculpted a series of busts of Boston's intellectual community and became an associate of the National Academy. Like Saint-Gaudens, Pratt also created coin designs for the US mint. His gold Indian head half-(\$5.00) and quarter-(\$2.50) eagles are known as the "Pratt coins" and feature an unusual intaglio Indian head, the U.S. mint's only recessed designs ever in circulation.

Pratt is the sculptor of many of the landmark bronze statues familiar to residents of the Commonwealth, including *Art and Science* at the Boston Public Library, *Edward Everet Hale* at the Boston Public Garden, and the Whaleman's monument in New Bedford. It is not surprising, then, that when the Massachusetts State Legislature voted to commission a memorial to Civil War nurses, Pratt was the artist of choice.

Responding to a call for help by armies of both North and South, approximately two thousand women volunteered to nurse soldiers in military hospitals during the American Civil War. This war marked the beginning of new weapons technology, which resulted in much more efficient injury inflicted on the enemy. The most common Civil War small arms ammunition was the dreadful minnie-ball, which tore an enormous wound on impact: it was so heavy that an abdominal or head wound was almost always fatal, and a hit to an extremity usually shattered any bone encountered. In addition, bullets carried dirt and germs into the wound that often caused infection.

Civil War nurses experienced at first hand the grim constants of war: amputated limbs, mutilated bodies, disease, and death. These scenes still provided life-saving aid to the sick and wounded soldiers. Few left any record of their wartime service. With the exception of a very few, they remain in large measure historically anonymous, except for the terse appearance of their names on hospital muster rolls and in their own obituaries.<sup>1</sup>

Dorothea Dix and Clara Barton were the leaders of a national effort to organize a nursing corps to care for the war's wounded and sick. Dix, a native of Massachusetts, was already recognized for her work in improving the treatment of the insane when she began to recruit women to serve as nurses in the Army Medical Bureau. Her major qualifications for this work were the fact that her mother had suffered from mental illness, and that she herself, had a "breakdown" following the death of a loved one. Clara Barton worked outside the official military system. A Massachusetts schoolteacher, Barton had gone to Washington in 1854 to work at the U.S. Patent Office. Determined to play a role in the war, she cared for wounded soldiers who had returned to Washington. Thanks to financial support garnered throughout New England, Barton had the means, along with the resolve, to overcome the military bureaucracy and travel to the front lines. "I went in while the battle raged," she recalled with pride. After the war, she was instrumental in the creation of an American branch of the International Red Cross and is generally acknowledged as its founder. What training did Ms Barton have when she became a nurse? She cared for her sickly brother for about two years' time. These women provided care to the sick and wounded under the most terrible circumstances imaginable. Yet, they were able to sustain the Victorian image of "true womanhood" and were referred to as "angels of the battlefield." Perhaps this early perception has persisted over time and

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<sup>1</sup> Alice P. Stein, "Volunteer Nurses of America's Civil War," [www.thehistorynet.com](http://www.thehistorynet.com). Retrieved March 23, 2007.

resulted in the distance separating the profession of nursing from the philosophy of feminism.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that a similar set of circumstances surrounding the Crimean War (1854-1854) resulted in formal education for British nurses.<sup>3</sup> Florence Nightingale organized a group of untrained women volunteers to provide care for the wounded in Turkey, under very similar adverse circumstances. Nightingale's classic, *Notes on Nursing*, originally published in 1858, has never gone out of print and remains relevant to the present day.<sup>4</sup>

After the end of the American Civil War, at the 1868 meeting of the American Medical Association (AMA), its president, Dr. Samuel D. Gross spoke in favor of formal education for nurses:

I am not aware that the education of nurses has received any attention from this body; a circumstance the more surprising when we consider the great importance of the subject. It seems to me to be just as necessary to have well trained, well instructed nurses as to have intelligent and skillful physicians. I have long been of the opinion that there ought to be in all the principal towns and cities of the Union institutions for the education of men and women whose duty is to take care of the sick and to carry out the injunctions of the medical attendant. There is hardly one nurse, of either sex, in twenty who has a perfect appreciation of the requirements of the sick room, or who is capable of affording the aid and comfort so necessary to a patient when oppressed by disease or injury. It does not matter the skill of the medical practitioner, how assiduous or

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<sup>2</sup> Philip A. and Beatrice J. Kalisch, *American Nursing: A History*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams, & Wilkins, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Isabel M. Stewart, "Trends in Nursing Education," *American Journal of Nursing*, vol. 31 (May, 1931), 601-611.

<sup>4</sup> Trevor Royle, *Crimea: The Great Crimean War, 1854-1856* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

faithful he may be in the discharge of his functions as guardian of health and life, his efforts can be of comparatively little avail unless they are seconded by an intelligent and devoted nurse. Myriads of human beings perish annually in the so called civilized world for the want of good nursing.<sup>5</sup>

This report is significant in that a physician, speaking for a committee of the highest status group of physicians, in public, recognized the importance of competent nurses as being equal to that of the physician. It could not have been written without the devastation wrought by the American Civil War, when so many people died as a result of violence and deprivation of the most basic human needs. Formal education of women in "all the principle towns and cities of the union" was his goal. The concept was revolutionary.

The general public also saw the need for and benefits of trained nurses. Clearly this was a result of reports of surviving soldiers. Popular periodicals, such as *Godey's Lady Book* and *Fraser's Magazine* called for hospital based training schools and homes for nurses, a recent innovation in Britain.

The New England Hospital for Women and Children School of Nursing was the first formal school for nurses in the United States, established in 1870. It was organized around modern, practical lines and employed a staff of physician instructors in all medical branches. It offered a hospital service program that included medicine, surgery, and obstetrics. The first American trained nurse, Linda Richards, graduated in 1871 and the first trained African American nurse, Mary Eliza Mahoney, two years later.<sup>6</sup> The annual report of the first American nursing school for the year 1871-1872 states that:

In order more fully to carry out our purpose of fitting women thoroughly for the profession-of nursing, we

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<sup>5</sup> "Report of the Committee on the Training of Nurses," Transactions of the American Medical Association, v. 20, (1869), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart.

have made the following arrangements. Young women of suitable acquirements and character will be admitted to the hospital as school nurses for one year. This year will be divided into four periods: three months will be given respectively to the practical study of nursing in the medical, surgical, and maternity wards, and of night nursing. Here the pupil will aid the head nurse in all the care and work of the ward under the direction of the attending and resident physician and medical students. In order to enable women entirely dependent upon their work for support to obtain a thorough training, the nurses will be paid for their work from one to four dollars per week after the first fortnight, according to the actual value of their services to the hospital. Physicians connected with the institutions, beginning January 21 will give a course of lectures to nurses at the hospital. Other nurses desirous of attending these lectures may obtain permits from our physicians. Certificates will be given to such nurses as have satisfactorily passed a year in practical training in the hospital...As long as we were in the old hospital, with space so inadequate to our needs, we were able to only partially carry out our plans for training nurses, but finding the demand so constant for those we have already trained and the need of good nurses so great in the community, we have now determined to use our increased facilities to the utmost, in each year to send out a small band of trained nurses.<sup>7</sup>

And so, a profession of caring whose members today number over 100,000 was born. Bela Pratt's Angel of the Battlefield stands as testimony to the goodness of caring born out of the evils of war.

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<sup>7</sup> New England Hospital for Women and Children, *Annual Report of the Officers to the Society and Friends, 1871-1872* (Boston: The Hospital, 1872), 5.