

A Jamaican woman was there before Putin

CRIMEA...CRIMEAN...
CRIMEAN WAR. Why have these words been so persistent in my mind over recent days? Could it be the names of a new gang, considering that for years it has been the practice for certain of our communities, where the gorgons establish turf, to give them names synonymous with territorial wars? In inner-city communities you will find Russia, Angola, Zimbabwe... etc, but Crimea? Never heard of such a gangland. Then it dawned...

We do have a Crimea link, and it is Seacole... Mary Seacole. We're not talking about the women's hall of residence on the UWI, Mona Campus and a few other places named in her memory. We're talking of a woman who should be in the pantheon of Jamaican national heroes by now. Full time now that Nanny got some company; capable of courage and fearlessness in the face of great danger and who better than another really remarkable woman?

The Mary Seacole story has still not received the full measure of recognition, not enough by the wider world nor Jamaica where she was born in 1805. All our heroes cannot only be athletes, musicians and politicians. We have to show our children that, among our forebears, there were men and women of courage; people who believed in the value of service above self, and money was not everything — a hard lesson to understand now. Mary Seacole's courage could either be defined as foolishness or madness. Some saw it as both. What could have motivated her, a woman of colour, in a world at a time when the shade of skin marked out an individual for rejection and danger for life?

When a vicious war broke out in a very distant land, she left her homeland to travel abroad where it took a stubborn spirit of survival, day by day, to help others, for no other reason than because it was the right thing to do. She overcame prejudice in rough and brutal areas, first in this hemisphere and then in the arena

of war in Europe. She weathered social cold-shouldering in England, taking it all in her stride.

The question is asked, what drove her to make her way to Crimea, where one of the fiercest battles was raging during the bitter and bloody years of 1853 to 56? She sustained herself selling food and drink to army officers but gave back the profits to support her healing mission.

Some list her as a nurse, some as a 'doctress', but her healing skills for the living and compassion for the dead and dying were in no doubt.

Crimea was an area of savage conflict in which Russia lost to an alliance of France, Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia. Modern methods of warfare were being developed daily and brought into play on the battlefield. The death toll in the war still remains in history as one of the cruellest with the final tally representing every nation in the war zone, yet the Jamaican-born woman feared nothing. It is evident that she had a knowledge of herbs which she used as treatment along with an unending supply of compassion and courage. It is said that she treated anyone and everyone. Her business enterprise eventually failed because she didn't always get to collect what was due to her. Despite that, she continued being "nurse and doctress".

Regarded as a spy at one time, Mary Seacole just missed being shot. Luckily, some French soldiers she had helped in a previous encounter were able to have her death sentence commuted and Mary Seacole lived to heal another day. All this I discovered a few days ago in *Jamaican Nightingale*, a book



Mary Seacole

edited by George Cadogan, and published in Ontario, Canada, under the title *The Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole*. You can get a read at the parish library. More information can be found about Mary Seacole in various publications which should not be too hard to discover. It would be interesting to know how many Jamaican children know this story.

For years, she was a footnote in history, teamed with Florence Nightingale, as if they were associates. They weren't. The "brown-skinned doctress" was barely mentioned in the history of the Crimean War. It was the English lady who for a long, long time was hailed in the history of the Crimean War and became "the lady with the lamp", the great nurse heroine. It took the persistence of many persons in later years, especially non-Caucasian nurses, who campaigned relentlessly and finally succeeded in getting the name of Florence Nightingale and her memorable accomplishments brought into the spotlight.

It took no little effort for our determined Jamaican and other Caribbean members of the nursing profession, in particular, to ensure the recognition of Mary Seacole for what she was — a real heroine who was also in the trenches doing far more than Nightingale. When you tune into the current cass-cass going on with Russia vs Ukraine, remember Mrs Seacole engaged in her fearless mission. A new arena of conflict looms in Crimea today, but Putin needs to know that Mary Seacole saw it all, long, long before. Here's to her, an exceptional woman on the eve of International Women's Day.

The views expressed on this page are not necessarily those of the Jamaica Observer

The Daily Observer, Friday March 7, 2014 (1)



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If you really want to know the global significance of the reason for the reaction to Vladimir Putin's move to annex the Ukraine, it would be great if someone like Prof Brian Meeks at UWI, Mona could be persuaded to give a public lecture. To hear him explain it is to be reminded of what true scholarship means.

What's with Jamaica Day?

It seems just one of the many "dress-up" days in our basic and primary schools, celebrated last week? Why? We have Emancipation Day – Firs' a Augus, then, soon after comes Independence Day, August 6, and on to National Heroes' Day in October. What does it signify that the other observances don't? Someone sent me mail seeking answers to the same question. She said she had heard even a teacher questioning the rationale for yet another day when parents have to pay for costumes, outings, etc. Somebody, please explain it to us, nuh?

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT: How many Commissions of Enquiry

involving West Kingston have been held in living memory? Which one, if any, did not involve dissension and 'tracing', even before the enquirers sat down to enquire? Which one did not end with a sour note?

Being well aware of the consequences of saying a word which could be met with the usual hostility, I still venture to suggest that nothing will be achieved besides another dip into the already mawga public purse to reward the commissioners and secretariat etc, etc, etc. Is this the only way to find a solution? The West Kingston nightmare will remain a bad dream until the community is refashioned with a new agenda to create a wholesome environment in which the old mistakes will not be repeated again and again. There is too much baggage being carried around. Time to rise up, not in war, but in walking away from the same-old, same-old.

LOOK YAH NOW: What will be the end of the Battle of the Environmentalists vs the Government? Will this one end up in the usual draw — nil all? Both sides have a case, but so far, no compromise is in sight. It seems headed for a raw, political mess.

SCOREBOARD OF THE WEEK: Tessanne goes to the White House. You go, girl! You are our sunshine. Please tell the Obamas howdy fi mi. At the other end of the scoreboard: Reggae Boyz. Listen up. We're tired of excuses.

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