

# The First RN: Mary Seacole

National Library of Jamaica



1805-1881

She was born 'Mary Jane Grant' in Kingston, Jamaica in 1805 during the period of British Colonial rule. Her father was a Scottish army officer and her mother a free Jamaican mulatto. Her mother ran a boarding house and was according to Mary, a 'proficient nurse', highly regarded by soldiers who were from time to time stationed at Kingston.

Mary was a strong and determined woman. Although she admits that 'it was no easy thing for a widow to make ends meet', she did not waste time feeling sorry for herself. She had a determined and independent spirit that enabled her to overcome adversity, such as the death of her husband and mother and the loss of her home in the great fire of 1843 which decimated much of Kingston. Mary thrived on her freedom and guarded it carefully.

She states that 'one of the hardest struggles of my life in Kingston was to resist the pressing candidates for the late Mr. Seacole's shoes.' Alone, Mary took over the running of her mother's boarding house and endeavored to follow in her footsteps, nursing officers and their wives. The cholera epidemic which swept across Jamaica in 1850 was invaluable experience for Mary and she learnt a great deal from a doctor who was one of her lodgers at that time.

It was not until seventy (70) years following her passing that recognition of Mary began to emerge. In Jamaica, the Jamaican Nurses Association named their Kingston headquarters Mary Seacole House. Both a hall of residence at the University of West Indies and a ward in Kingston hospital were named after Mary. On 14th May 1981, 100 years after her death, a memorial service was held by the Mary Seacole Foundation. It has since become an annual event. Considerable efforts have been made in recent years by the African Caribbean community in Britain to bring about the recognition within the mainstream that Mary Seacole so richly deserves.

A new addition of her popular book was published in 1984, prefaced by Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee. In 2003 MP Clive Sloley mounted a campaign to get a statue of Mary erected in Central London. In 2004 Mary Seacole was voted the most important person in Black British history in the **100 Great Black Britons Award**.

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Bh Mary Seacole

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