

Jamaican healer and war heroine

THE GLEANER MONDAY, APRIL 8, 2002

Mary Seacole

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NOW I am not going to blame the authorities who would not listen to the offer of a motherly yellow woman to go to the Crimea and nurse her 'sons' there, suffering from cholera, diarrhoea, and a host of lesser ills. In my country, people know our use, it would have been different; but here (in England) it was natural enough – although I had references, and other voices spoke for me – that they should laugh, good-naturedly enough at my offer.

Undaunted and proud of her Creole status, Mary tried all routes open to her, including the Crimean War Fund to try and secure her transport. She was turned down. Dismayed, but not discouraged, Mary determined to go to the Crimea on her own. She cashed in her assets and set out to the heat of the battle to build her own 'hotel for invalids.' "I made up my mind," she stated, "that if [the] my wanted nurses, they would be glad of me, and with all the ardour of my nature, which ever carried me where inclination prompted, I decided that I would go to the Crimea." Once there, Mary attempted to join Florence Nightingale's crew of nurses – the first such group allowed to go to a battlefield. Once again, she was refused. "Had they accepted me," Seacole recalled, "I would have worked for the wounded, in return for bread and water." But Nightingale had no room for this offer. Resolute and never one to give in to any form of racial prejudice, having noticed how crowded Nightingale's treatment centre was, Mary decided that a similar one closer to the front was badly needed:

"One thought never left my mind as I walked through the fearful miles of suffering in that great hospital. If it is so here, what must it not be at the scene of war – on the spot where the poor fellows are stricken down by pestilence or Russian bullets, and days and nights of agony must be passed before a woman's hand can dress their wounds. And I felt happy in the conviction

that I must be useful three or four days nearer to their pressing wants than this."

Mary created what she called her 'hotel for invalids' in the winter of 1855, close to the Balaclava front. (Balaclava is a town in the Ukraine and it may be the inspiration for the Jamaican town of the same name). She called it The British Hotel and spent the next year dispensing medicine, meals, and entertainment. She divided her time between the hotel and the battlefield. She could often be seen helping doctors transport the wounded to hospital and visited with soldiers at their campsites. She quickly became known as Mother Seacole. When her savings ran out, Mary began selling medicine and meals to soldiers but she could never deny any in need who were unable to pay. Since few of her clients' were rich, in the end, this effort, although a tremendous humanitarian success, was a financial disaster.

When the war ended in 1856 with Britain and its French allies victorious, Mary left the British Hotel behind never realising all the grand ideas she had for it. She decided to travel for a time before returning to England. Later that same year Mary arrived on England's shores, destitute and in poor health. William Howard Russell, an influential journalist and special correspondent for the *London Times* brought Mary's situation to public attention: "I have witnessed her devotion and her courage...and I trust that England will never forget one who has nursed her sick, who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them and who performed the last offices for

some of her illustrious dead". Letters began to pour in asking: While the benevolent deeds of Florence Nightingale are being handed down for posterity ...are the humble actions of Mrs. Seacole to be entirely forgotten?

Soon, supporters appeared, including influential Dukes and Lords who had been Commanders in the Crimea. A benefit in the Royal Surrey

Gardens in Kensington was organised. It lasted for four days, and over 1000 artistes performed. Mary was hailed as a national heroine and received a commendation from Queen Victoria. She was also decorated by the governments of France and Turkey.

Never one to laze about, Mary set to the task of writing her autobiography, 'The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands' in her flat in London's West End. Published in 1857, the book was an immediate best-seller and it went into its second printing within a year. In addition to giving insight into Mary's fascinating life, the autobiography speaks to aspects of racism and feminism in Victorian society.

Following the publication of her life's story, Mary turned her attention to war widows and orphans and lived out the remainder of her life in comfort, with regular visits from many of the men she had treated in the Crimea. She died on May 14, 1881 at the age of 76. She is buried in London's St. Mary's catholic cemetery, Harrow Road, Kensal Green. Her headstone reads:

"Here lies a notable nurse who cared for the sick and wounded in the West Indies, in Panama and on the battle field of the Crimea".

It is important to remember that unlike that other nursing pioneer, Florence Nightingale, Seacole had no formal training and did not come from a wealthy middle class background. She had an overwhelming desire to help and use the knowledge she had acquired through experience. Her strong will, conviction, and independent spirit enabled her to overcome the many restrictions placed on women and on people of colour during her lifetime. Today, Mary Seacole is slowly gaining the recognition she deserves as a leading female figure and person of colour in history. Numerous foundations, research centres and associations are named in her honour, as is a hall at the University of the West Indies.

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A CONTEMPORARY of Florence Nightingale, although the two famous nurses never worked together, Seacole is best known for her work treating Britain's wounded during the Crimean War in the mid-1850s. Born Mary Grant in Jamaica in 1805, the daughter of a free black woman and a Scottish soldier, Seacole was primarily self-taught. Much of her childhood was spent helping her mother in her Kingston boarding house located close to where the National Library now stands on East St. A well-known doctress, Mary's mother often treated soldiers stationed close by at Up Park Camp and Newcastle. In her 1857 autobiography, Seacole recalls watching her mother closely and practising medical techniques on her doll. Whatever disease was prominent in Kingston at any time, young Mary's doll was sure to have it. So voracious was Mary in her desire to improve her knowledge that she later began to practise on dogs and cats and even

herself, trying numerous remedies, poultices and tonics.

Next to medicine, Mary's other passion was travel and during the course of her life she visited Haiti, Cuba, Nassau (then known as New Providence), the Southern US, Panama, England, and, of course, the Crimea. In 1836, when she was in her early twenties, Mary met and married

Edward Horatio Seacole, godson of naval hero Lord Horatio Nelson. The couple moved to Black River where they opened a store. Unlike Mary, however, Mr. Seacole had a weak constitution and Mary spent a great deal of time trying to nurse him into good health. Although she managed to keep him alive longer than many doctors felt possible, eventually Mr. Seacole succumbed leaving Mary became a widow at a very young age. She would never remarry. Soon afterwards, Mary suffered another great loss – the death of her mother. Mary assumed her mother's duties as doctress and began treating soldiers and others in need. In 1850, cholera (a disease that affects the digestive and intestinal tracts) swept over the island and Mary worked closely with doctors who were treating those afflicted. She was fond of saying that the simplest remedies were perhaps the best. Mustard plasters and emetics, mercury applied externally where veins were nearest the surface, and boiled water with a touch of cinnamon to quench the thirst, were her best allies. She had no liking for opium saying it tended to incapacitate a person's entire system. This knowledge of one of the most dreaded diseases of Mary's time would prove invaluable later in her life.



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TRAVELLING

Soon after that cholera outbreak subsided, Mary decided to visit her brother who had opened a hotel in Panama. She remained in Central America for a few years. While there she came face to face with cholera again, tirelessly serving the community in which she lived by applying all her medical skills. Not long after treating more people than she could count, Mary came down with cholera and the people she had helped set about helping her.

Upon her recovery Mary opened what she called a 'etable d'hote' across from her brother's hotel. It was a place where weary travellers could find a decent meal. Later she opened a hotel to cater to the entertainment of female travellers in another location. Yet, ever restless, Mary soon grew tired of life on the Isthmus, turned her business over to her brother and returned to Kingston. The year was 1853.

Mary arrived home in time to encounter a full scale outbreak of yellow fever (a contagious disease that causes yellowing of the skin and a black vomit). She set to work immediately, trying to save and/or comfort as many as she could. Not long after, in 1854, England declared war on Russia, allying with France who was engaged in a territorial dispute with Russia over holy sites in Jerusalem and Nazareth. Mary learned that many of the officers she had treated over the years had been sent to the Crimean front to serve. The Crimea is a peninsula that includes the extreme Southeastern Ukraine and is bounded on the south and west by the Black Sea. Mary's greatest wish, she said, was to work where the sword of bullet had been busiest, and pestilence most strife. So at fifty years old she decided to go to England, committed to finding her way to the Crimea no matter what.

– *Rebecca Tortello*

SOURCES: Seacole, M. (1988) *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*. London: Oxford University Press.
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*Drawing courtesy
of Mary Seacole
Hall, University
of the West
Indies, Jamaica*

*She was a wonderful woman...
all the men swore by her, and in case of
any malady , would seek her advice and
use her herbal medicines, in preference to
reporting themselves to their own doctors.
That she did effect some cure is beyond
doubt, and her never-failing presence
amongst the wounded after a battle and
assisting them made her beloved by the
rank and file of the whole army'*

- Excerpt from a soldier's memoir

Mary explains...

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