

“Dear Mrs. Seacole”: Groundings with Mary Seacole on Slavery, Gender and Citizenship

(Speech Delivered by Professor Verene A. Shepherd
Institute of Jamaica Function to Honour Mary Seacole, Novemebr 21, 2005)

Thank you Chair, and good afternoon to all distinguished guests. I am pleased to have been asked to share in this important function convened to honour a phenomenal woman - Mary Seacole, born Mary Jane Grant in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica, but self-identifying as Mrs. Seacole after her marriage to Edwin Horatio Nelson Seacole, godson of the British Naval Hero Lord Nelson of the Battle of Trafalgar fame, who ironically died the year she was born. With your permission, I will read a letter to her. As many of you know, since 2001, and following in the footsteps of my colleague Prof. Rupert Lewis who wrote a letter to Garvey a few years back, I have developed this habit of writing and reading aloud, letters to dead ancestors, (sometimes in English, sometimes in creole to remind them of their roots), starting with Nanny in 2001 and continuing with Walter Rodney (2004) and Tacky in April this year. For your sake, I hope that this will not be the afternoon that one chooses to answer back. Before I begin let me say that the tone and content of my letter were informed by the sassiness and independent-mindedness of this Aries woman, as reflected in her bestselling autobiography. So, here goes:

Dear Mrs. Seacole:

Please accept best wishes from all Jamaicans on the occasion of the bicentenary of your birth. We realize that others have tried to ‘re-nationalize’ you, but more on that later. Thank you for leaving us with your bestselling autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* and allowing us to understand your world through your own eyes, rather than having to rely on the sometimes ventriloquized, sometimes empowered bad words of people like Edward Long, who had such negative words to cast on Black women in the 18th century. Of course, with all your traipsing around the world and battling with wars and diseases, I doubt that you ever found time to read Edward Long – which is just as well.

You certainly picked a momentous and turbulent year in which to be born, judging by events that occurred in 1805: New Jersey’s policy of gradual emancipation; the issuing of the first Order-in-Council announcing the phased abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; the drawing up of Haiti’s emancipatory constitution; Britain’s victory at the Battle of Trafalgar; Nelson’s death; Thomas Jefferson’s 2nd term as President of the USA and Lady Nugent’s departure from Jamaica, so terrified was she that a Haitian-style revolution would erupt in the island.

On the local scene, the war of slavery raged – both the war to maintain it and the wars to end it. The tyranny of the pigmentocracy created the ranking game and led to the process of ‘desmadification’ and ethnic upgrading from free coloureds to honorary white. Restrictions on free-coloured occupations such as law and medicine forced you to become an informal commercial herbalist! No wonder you traveled ‘very regular’. Who would not wish to escape from that 19th century environment, which, even after

emancipation, was organized along a neo-slavery trajectory. So, even though you practiced your trade in Jamaica, following in the footsteps of your mother, your most able teacher, alien lands would become your stage, especially after the death of those you held dear: your husband, mother and patroness.

I was surprised that you had only your little maid for a traveling companion; but admired you for defying the gender conventions of the time. Still, you were lucky it was then: now a single black woman roaming all over the world like Digicel and Cable & Wireless and carrying herbs would have attracted attention including body scan! As an attractive Jamaican woman, brown or not, you would have been mistaken for a drug mule, sniffed by colour-prejudiced dogs and have your ample body feel, feel up by strange men and women.

Like the ICIs of the modern age, you did not allow language to be a barrier to the places you visited. So what if you could not “habla espanol” at first? That did not stop you from charging into Panama and other parts of Central America; and when your little maid shouted out Hombro- landro! on one occasion, you recognized that as “A man thief in the house!” and took appropriate defensive action.

Even though you were a browning and free, you did not ‘diss’ your black ancestors. This has earned you respect. You loved your mother and verbally terrorized all who would seek to cast aspersions on blackness or would suggest that you were less a person because you were not white; and the American in Panama who offered to bleach you got the full verbal treatment. His offer was entangled in a tortuous toast he invited his fellow Americans to drink to you at your brother’s hotel in Cruces at a party to celebrate the anniversary of American independence. I can imagine how annoyed he made you with his:

“....So, I say, God bless the best yellar woman he ever made --, from Jamaica, gentlemen. Well, gentlemen, I expect there are only 2 things we are vexed for – and the first is that she ain’t one of us – a citizen of the great United Sttaes; and the other gentlemen – that Providence made her a yaller woman. I calculate gentlemen you are all as vexed as I am that she is not wholly white – but I do reckon on your rejoicing with me that she is so many shades removed from being entirely black – and I guess if we could bleach her by any means we would...”

I was not surprised at these words in your autobiography: “It may be supposed that I did not need much persuasion to return thanks, burning as I was to tell them my mind on the subject of colour. Indeed, if my brother had not checked me, I should have given them my thoughts somewhat too freely. As it was I said [and here I quote a few lines]

“But I must say that I don’t altogether appreciate your friend’s kind wishes with respect to my complexion. If it had been as dark as any nigger’s, I should have been just as happy and as useful...; and as to his offer of bleaching me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As to the society into which this process might

gain me admission, all I can say is that judging by the specimens I have met here and elsewhere, I don't think that I shall lose much by being excluded from it".

You adjusted to so many different situations and your resilience is now legendary; nothing phased you. Your self-confidence was amazing! And you outwitted those who thought they could outwit you! I was struck by the fact that you hardly had space or time for despair; ever the eternal optimist.

You were a snob though. You turned your British nose down at the US gold prospectors and their ladies and did not mince words when describing them; though I am sure your mother and your patroness taught you better manners. How do you mean that it was no use giving some of the American travellers carving knives and forks? That 'expectoration' was a great American national habit?

Anyway, your activities in Central America brought you fame and respect; just as your helping hand with the cholera and yellow fever epidemics in Jamaica in the 1850s has done. I see you could not keep still after returning to Jamaica from Panama. You had to seek out another war front. But why the Crimea? Was it really because you had heard that soldiers you knew in Jamaica were serving there and you were concerned about them? Of course, you know that some said that you had a nose for hustling at the battlefield and saw the possibility of making a buck in the Crimea. But did you really think that the people at the War Office in England would embrace you wholeheartedly and send you to help Florence Nightingale? Or were you fooled by your acceptance as a nurse in Jamaica and Central America?

Anyway, no-one who followed your life up to 1854 would have been surprised at the fact that even though on account of your colour and ethnicity, you were not granted an interview with the War Office; were in fact refused an interview 4 times, you used your own meager resources and funds raised with the help of others and funded the trip and found yourself in the Crimea. Not only did you go there, you established the British Hotel near Balaclava [must have reminded you of St. Elizabeth] to provide a mess-table and quarters for the sick and convalescent officers. On the battlefield, and known as 'Mother Seacole' [here the men would call you Mummy'] you attended to the wounded. You saw 'mother' as a term of endearment and one that reminded you of the warmth of home – not for you some Jamaican women's response, especially to some of the hardback man dem a call dem mummy: "“go whey! Mi couldn be your mumma]

Your exemplary life indicates that women are not necessarily ambivalent to warfare. Not for you any female squeamishness about disease, illness and death. You experienced first hand the death, disease and grueling work of being in the battlefield. Your testimony constitutes a challenge to the gender inequalities inextricably linked with war and militarism. You used your maternal narrator to challenge the conventional dichotomies associated with respectable Victorian womanhood and with war. When you

insisted that the battlefield is your rightful place, you demolished the boundaries between the home front and the battlefield.¹

I notice that you did not return to Jamaica to live after returning from war but stayed in England. I guess you did not see much prospect in 19th century Jamaica, a society emerging out of a slavery past and trying to come to grips with freedom; an island that did not immediately recognize your importance; an island where women did not have many rights. Well, in any case you were broke so broke that in 1856 you were declared bankrupt officially in a London court, an order rescinded by the court in 1857. When I read this I could not help thinking: poor thing! Anyway, people in England, including British royalty rallied around you and hosted fund-raising activities to help you out. I doubt that anyone in Jamaica would have held a fund-raising bashment for you; so it is just as well you did not return. I read some of the lyrics the soldiers drop on you at the bashment in 1856:

And now the good soul is 'in the hole,'
What red-coat in all the land,
But to set her upon her legs again
Will not lend a willing hand?

(From "A Stir for Seacole" – Punch Magazine, 6/12/1856)

At the time you died at age 76 on 14th May 1881, Jamaica was a more hopeful place for melanin abundant people. The Morant Bay Rebellion had led to the introduction of direct Crown rule, taking away Black people's hope of representative government. The 1880s however ushered in a period of agitation for the return of democratic government. But the 1880s also saw the intensification of the emigration movement, as Jamaicans sought a way out of economic hardships. You were thus not alone in your trek away from the island to seek a better life. You must have felt so happy when you were recognized for your life of work: the Crimean Medal, the French Legion of Honour and a Turkish Medal – even if Sister Florence was not thrilled by your celebrity status and wrote that you were not deserving of the praise because you kept a house of ill repute in the Crimea (hinting that it was little more than a brothel) and you were primarily a business woman rather than a nurse. She never heard about multi-tasking?

The land of your birth also honoured you – naturally after you died. By the way, the **Daily Gleaner** carried your death notice almost a month after the event - on 9th June 1881. Only in 1954 did Jamaica decide officially to find various ways to honour you. At the initiative of the nurses, a ward at KPH was named after you in 1956. In 1957, a Hall of residence at UWI was named after you and the first warden was Lucille Mair, herself a phenomenal woman who pioneered the field of Caribbean women's history. Mary Seacole House was opened in 1960. A plaque to honour you now has pride of place at the entrance of the place you once lived but which is now the Institute of Jamaica. This should please you. The place still nourishes people; but their mind rather than their body. In 1990, Jamaica awarded you the Order of Merit.

¹ Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography*, p. 60.

But I wonder how you would have reacted to the news that people in England call you British? In 2004, you came first in an on-line poll to name the top 100 Greatest Black Britons. This matter of citizenship is really interesting. Were you not born in Jamaica? So, if you were born in Jamaica and if in your days children took the status of their mother and your mother was Jamaican, how you come to be a Black British? William Andrews calls you an Afro-American woman in one of the many introductions to your fantastic autobiography. Indeed, what are Mary Prince, Henry Sylvester Williams, Olaudah Equiano, Claudia Jones and Robert Wedderburn doing on the list? If all who were born in the British Empire before independence are entitled to be called British, then would Tacky and Sam Sharpe qualify? Or would they have had to live in Britain for a little while? I wonder if those rebels deported to England after major rebellions were regarded as British? As to Black: I wonder if you would have objected, preferring to project your status as a browning? But being named the greatest Black British has still not given you as much honor as Florence Nightingale. Indeed, while a statue of Florence Nightingale was erected as part of the Crimean war memorial in 1915, you were left out. You would be pleased to know that since November 24, 2003, there has been a statue appeal campaign in Britain to right this wrong. Also, recently your lost portrait was found and it now hangs in the National Portrait gallery facing Florence Nightingale. You should get a kick out of that.

Anyway, I want to tell you that being called a Black British is not necessarily a permanent state. Other countries only claim Jamaicans who are very good and squeaky clean. When Ben Johnson won the 100 metres in Seoul in 1988, he was hailed as a Canadian. A few minutes later, when his drug test came back positive, he had reverted to being Jamaican-born Ben Johnson; and worst after his life ban in 1993. I hope that you revealed everything in your autobiography because woe be unto you and your canonization by the British if any scandal should come to light – even 200 years after!! I hope you did not lie, cheat, or murder anyone. I hope you did not practice any mercy killing in your herbal life. If anything negative about you ever comes to light, they would deport your memory back to Jamaica faster than you could say Crimea! You might even then begin to hear appeals for the Government of Jamaica to dig up your carcass from St Mary's Catholic Cemetery at 679-681 Harrow Rd, in Kensal Green in NW London and haul it back to Jamaica.

Anyway, so far, so good. Everyone making a fuss about you this year, with your recovered painting displayed and documentaries about you made. Students in Britain now must and bound to study your life as a part of a new curriculum. I do not know if that reach Jamaican children yet. But dem not even studying Garvey to dat, much less you. In closing, like others have done, I salute your courage and indomitable spirit; your urbanity and cosmopolitan wit; your acceptance of your foibles, but also your pride in yourself and your race.

Until next year.

Your admirer and fellow Arian
Verene Shepherd