

B/W Seacole, Mary

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She did it her way

By John Gilmore

Mary Seacole: The Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea, by Jane Robinson (Constable, ISBN 1841-196-770, 288 pp)

Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands, by Mary Seacole, ed. Sara Salih, (Penguin Classics, ISBN 0140-439-021, 224 pp)

The title of a recent article in a British periodical (by Lynda Osborne in *Coin News*, July 2005) called Mary Seacole a "Forgotten Angel." This may once have been true, though even in the century or so after her death in 1881, it seems she was never entirely forgotten. Since the first modern republication of her autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, in 1984 (edited by Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee and published by Falling Wall Press, Bristol), Mrs Seacole has become a growth industry. Phrases like "unsung heroine" and "today remains largely forgotten" are still used about her, but there are at least four editions of the *Wonderful Adventures* currently available (the Alexander and Dewjee is still in print, and besides this and the Penguin Classics edition reviewed here, the book is also available in the Schomburg Library of 19th-Century Black Women Writers published in the United States by Oxford University Press, and from the black British publisher The X Press).

A recently rediscovered oil painting of her is now on display in Britain's National Portrait Gallery; in 2004, BBC viewers voted her the "Greatest Black Briton"; British children learn about her in primary school; and there is a campaign in Britain to raise money for a public statue in her honour. Numerous academic articles have been written about her, and a recent Internet search by this writer produced over 20,000 hits from UK sites alone. If this is being forgotten, it is a level of oblivion many living authors would be glad to share.

Mrs Seacole's fame depends on two things — her life and her book. The two are of course closely connected, for the *Wonderful Adventures* remains the major source for her life. She was born in Kingston,

Jamaica, in about 1805. Her mother was a black or mixed-race woman who kept a lodging house in Kingston, while her father was a British soldier. Her name at birth was Mary (or Mary Jane) Grant. It was a comparatively privileged background, and when Mary visited Britain as a young woman, she was surprised to encounter people who subjected her to racist abuse on the street. She also travelled to the Bahamas, to Cuba, and to Haiti, apparently with some success as an international higgler, but during her early life in Jamaica she also acquired her mother's skills as a doctress, or practitioner of traditional medicine. This was a foundation on which she built, through conversation with doctors formally trained in European medicine, and through observation and experiment. Hotel-keeping, trading, and medical practice remained intertwined throughout her active career.

In 1836, she married the resplendently named Edwin Horatio Hamilton Seacole in Kingston. Mr Seacole was a white Englishman with some claim to social status — many years later his widow referred to him as a godson of Admiral Nelson — and while many of his kind lived in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean with black or mixed-race women in less formal unions, an official marriage of a mixed couple was highly unusual. The Seacoles lived for a while in the Jamaican country town of Black River, where they kept a store, but Mr Seacole was never a well man, and the couple returned to Kingston, where he died in 1844.

Although she claimed she was not short of offers to change her status, Mary always remained Mr Seacole's widow. In the early 1850s, she spent two periods in the Isthmus of Panama, which seemed to be a land of opportunity, as a result of the crowds seeking to cross the narrowest part of Central America on their way to the California Gold Rush. Her brother kept a hotel there, and she soon set up an establishment to rival his, though hers was strictly a restaurant, and she did not normally offer accommodation. The venture does not seem to have been as commercially successful as she had hoped, but this did not check what she called her

“disposition to roam.” She left Panama for England, and not long after arriving in London in late 1854 had abandoned the idea of pursuing a gold-mining speculation in Central America in favour of travelling to the Crimean War.

Her stated intention was to be “useful” to the British troops who were fighting the Russians there, in often appalling conditions, and suffering from a lack of both medical attention and ordinary comforts. Mary had considerable experience of nursing British soldiers during the frequent outbreaks of disease among the garrison stationed in Jamaica, and she had also gained a reputation for medical skill during a cholera epidemic in Panama. But in spite of a collection of references, she was refused when she applied to join the group of nurses working in the Crimea under the superintendence of Florence Nightingale — partly because she was too old, and, almost certainly, because she was too black.

Nevertheless, she decided she was going anyway, and travelled out to the Crimea using her own money. In partnership with a relative of her late husband’s called Thomas Day, she set up a “British Hotel” close enough to where the British and their allies were besieging the city of Sevastopol to be within range of an occasional shot from the Russian guns. As she had expected, she met many British officers and men who had known her in Jamaica. She sold everything from an anchor to a needle, offered extraordinarily varied menus, and provided her own medicines to all who asked for them. She seems to have been particularly successful at curing the stomach and bowel complaints that were all too frequent as a result of the dreadful sanitary conditions among the army. While she accepted payment if it was offered, she willingly gave medicine free of charge to soldiers who had no money, and more than once ventured onto the battlefield to do whatever she could for the wounded. The combination of home remedies, good food, and Mrs Seacole’s resolute cheerfulness must have been of real benefit to many. Florence Nightingale’s hospital at Scutari, by contrast, was a long way from the scene of the action, on the other side of the Black Sea.

Not surprisingly, Mrs Seacole became extremely popular. But the comparatively sudden end of the war left her with an excess of stock which she was unable to dispose of except at a heavy loss, and she seems to have been over-generous in extending credit. Soon after her return to England in 1856, the firm of Seacole and Day went bankrupt. However, a group of high-ranking army officers and other prominent people (including W.H. Russell, the correspondent of



Mary Seacole

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the *Times* at the Crimean War) organised a number of fund-raising ventures to save Mrs Seacole from financial embarrassment. Eventually there was enough to ensure that she could live out her days in comfort, and at the time of her death in London at the age of 76 she was a comparatively wealthy woman.

Jane Robinson's new biography is the most thorough treatment of Mary Seacole's life to date. She identifies a plausible candidate for Mary's father (a Captain — later Major — James Grant of the 60th Regiment of Foot, who was stationed in Jamaica at the right period), and is able to give more detail on her marriage as a result of research in Jamaican and British archives. There is an intriguing possibility — though no more than that — that Mr Seacole may have been not just Nelson's godson but his son by Emma Hamilton. Particularly interesting is the wide range of accounts of the Crimean War which Robinson draws on to provide independent testimony of the striking impression which Mary made on visitors to the war and the extent of her popularity among the army.

Robinson's research has also enabled her to present a comparatively detailed account of Mary's later years so that, for the first time, the reader is able to get a reasonably complete picture of her life as a whole. Robinson has visited both Jamaica and the Crimea, and while her style may occasionally be a little popular for academic readers, her sources are thoroughly documented. One or two comments about

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the Caribbean may surprise readers from the region (for example, a passing remark about Haiti appears to confuse the assassination of Dessalines with the suicide of Henri Christophe), but the background of the Crimean War and of life in 19th-century London is brought out in an excellent and readable manner.

Sara Salih's new edition of the *Wonderful Adventures* offers a good introduction and extensive annotation (over 40 pages to a text of less than 180 pages). The notes are often useful (particularly when they concern the identification of individuals and details of the Crimean War), but they are occasionally redundant or even mistaken. Few potential readers are likely to need telling that "Hayti" is the same as Haiti, or what Haiti is. Mrs Seacole's reference to "the ingenuity in cruelty of his Majesty the King of Naples" is less likely to refer (as Salih suggests) to the mediaeval Charles of Anjou than to Mrs Seacole's contemporary, Ferdinand II (King of the Two Sicilies, 1830–59), who was a notorious tyrant. "Sugar of lead" is not a product of a Caribbean tree, but lead acetate, a common medicine of the period. A note on "Cuban and Nicaraguan soil" which states that "both were republics of Cuba" makes no sense, and there is other evidence of insufficient proof-reading: New Granada appears several times in the notes as "New Grenada", and in the glossary Mary's references to "caicques" (a kind of Turkish boat) have become "caciques".

Neither Salih nor Robinson (nor many other writers) really comes to grips with what is one of the central issues in any discussion of Mary Seacole — the exact nature of the *Wonderful Adventures*. Is it in fact an autobiography in the sense that it was actually written by her? It is indeed a first-person narrative, but there is that troubling phrase on the title-page of the first edition, "Edited by W.J.S.", perhaps a reference, Robinson suggests, to a W.J. Stewart, who had translated a German book which referred to the Crimean War for the same publisher. Even if Mary's chronology is sometimes vague or defective, many of the statements of fact in the book can be substantiated from other sources, though Robinson demonstrates that the meeting Mary claimed to have had with the celebrated adventuress Lola Montes could never have taken place. There are not that many black women writers from the 19th century, which means that many modern readers want to believe that Mary Seacole's story is her own.

Unfortunately, it is not like the famous example of the 18th-century writer Olaudah Equiano. The

authenticity of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (first published in 1789) was questioned at the time and since, but his modern editor, Vincent Carretta, has shown that there is enough other writing by Equiano to make a convincing case that he was indeed the actual author of his book (even if he may have rewritten the facts of his life to strengthen his argument against the slave trade). We do not have this sort of material for Mary Seacole. An impression of a strong and lively personality comes off the pages of the *Wonderful Adventures*, a personality who says, indeed, that "unless I am allowed to tell the story of my life in my own way, I cannot tell it at all," but this is not, of itself, proof of authorship. We do know that Mary Seacole was literate, but this does not necessarily mean that she was capable of writing an extended narrative. Robinson suggests that Stewart, or whoever W.J.S. was, basically took

dictation of the whole book from Mary, sympathetically advising her when a little extra information would help, and rearranging any impenetrable syntax, but otherwise keeping quiet.

In fact, the possibilities range from Mary having written the narrative virtually as we have it, with the editor doing no more than adjusting spelling and grammar to conform to "Standard English", to, at the other extreme, the narrative being in fact written entirely by the "editor" on the basis of interviews with its subject. When the *Wonderful Adventures* was originally published, Mary had spent the greater part of her fifty or so years in Jamaica, but apart from her use of the word "doctress", there is little if any trace of Jamaican speech in the text. Any Caribbean reader with a knowledge of the tea-meeting tradition will find nothing surprising in the extensive vocabulary of the *Wonderful Adventures*, but at least some will wonder if the narrative is not decidedly literary for someone who appears to have had no formal education, and whose life of adventure would have left her without much leisure for the cultivation of her prose style. There is also the fact that the *Wonderful Adventures* was written for the very specific purpose of loosening the purse-strings of Mary's admirers and potential admirers among the British reading public. The book's portrayal of her as a respectable and intensely patriotic British woman only a little darker than her readers would certainly have helped in this, but we have to ask to what extent this image of her was deliberately shaped for the purpose, by Mary herself

Different constituencies seek to claim Mary Seacole as their own — is she a black British heroine? A Jamaican heroine? A nursing pioneer? An early feminist? Black? Mixed race? Perhaps we should simply see her, as both Salih and Robinson suggest, as a remarkable individual who cannot be slotted easily into any particular category

or her editor. The same is true of the way in which the book emphasises the racism which Mary encountered from Americans in Panama, while suggesting that, by contrast, racism was not a significant problem in encounters with British people — does this reflect the facts of her life, or only a desire to please her intended readership?

When Salih, Robinson, and others debate just what the narrator of the *Wonderful Adventures* means when she describes herself as a "Creole" (in the 19th century, as now, a remarkably slippery term which meant different things to different people in different places), or just what is going on when she refers to other black people by racist epithets, it is surely important to consider whether the terms discussed are in fact Mary Seacole's own words. Unfortunately, we cannot be certain of this, and, unless someone discovers some new evidence, we never will be.

Different constituencies seek to claim Mary Seacole as their own — is she a black British heroine? A Jamaican heroine? A nursing pioneer? An early feminist? Black? Mixed race? Perhaps we should simply see her, as both Salih and Robinson suggest, as a remarkable individual who cannot be slotted easily into any particular category and who, whatever the exact details of how her story came to be told, certainly lived her life "in her own way." ■