

B/N SEACOLE, Mary

# Mary Seacole: Mother of military men

B/N



■ Mary Seacole, a woman who went where many men feared to tread.

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**M**ARY SEACOLE was born Mary Joan Grant, in Kingston, in 1805. Her father was a Scottish soldier serving in Jamaica, and her mother was black. She believed that she got the love of camp life from her father and her love for nursing from her mother.

Her mother, nicknamed 'The Doctress', kept a lodging house at East Street in Kingston, where she ran a nursing-home for soldiers and their families. Mary 'lived what she saw' and started at an early age to practise on her dolls. She became so good that, at 12, she was allowed to help her mother.

Later in life she married Edwin Seacole and it was then that her battle with death commenced, for he died soon after

their marriage. Her mother died not long after, and Mary was forced to take over the management of the nursing-home.

Cholera broke out in Jamaica in 1850 and she became a victim of it. However, she developed a 'medicine' which was used quite successfully against the disease.

### Panama

Shortly after the cholera outbreak, she went to Panama to help her brother set up a hotel. While there, she was able to identify what might have been the first case of cholera in that region. She soon made a name for herself.

It was while she was in Panama that she became the heroine of the city and was introduced to her second life-long battle - that of racism.

At a Fourth of July banquet given by the Americans, she was the guest of honour. One

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of them, in toasting her, regretted that she had not been born white and laughingly suggested that she should be bleached to make her so.

Mrs. Seacole replied: "I must say that I don't altogether appreciate your friendly and kind wishes with regard to my complexion... As to the offer of bleaching me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. Regarding the society which the process might gain me admission into, all I can say is, that judging from the specimen I have met here and elsewhere. I don't think I shall lose much in being excluded from it. So, gentlemen, I drink to you and the general information of American manners."

When she returned to Jamaica, she was again of great service because of the outbreak of yellow fever in 1853. By 1854, war broke out in the Crimea, with England, France and Turkey against the Russians. Many of the soldiers Mary knew were sent to the Crimea, so she felt compelled to go there and offer her services. More soldiers were dying from cholera and dysentery than from bullets.

In England, she offered her services to the War Office but she was rebuffed. Florence Nightingale was rebuffed too, but she was later allowed to go. Mrs. Seacole tried the War Office again and Miss Nightingale's organisation, but she was turned down each time.

She had a brilliant idea to enlist as a sutler - one who followed the army selling liquor and provisions to the men. Her mother had kept a boarding-house for officers. She would go to the front and do the same.

She invested her entire sav-

ings and left England and, after many difficulties, she reached the Port of Scutari in Turkey, where she met Florence Nightingale and then pushed on to the front, where the most terrible conditions welcomed them.

After great difficulties from over-charging and from thieves, Mrs. Seacole finally got her supplies ashore and set up her canteen/hotel/hospital, which was welcomed as a godsend by officers of all ranks. She prepared wholesome meals for them and nursed the sick and wounded, one of whom was Queen Victoria's nephew.

When Sebastopol fell after a long siege, she was not only the first woman to enter it, but the first to do so by giving aid to the besieged. She remained in the Crimea for some time after the war, having withstood the hardships better than Florence Nightingale, who had been ordered home because of illness. In 1857, Mary Seacole returned to England, penniless, wounded and sick. When it was known that she had no money, a public subscription was started to assist her.

She died in 1881 and was buried in England. However, few women had faced death in more forms than she: from cholera, yellow fever, shipwreck, and on the battle field. In Panama, she narrowly escaped being stabbed by a thief; in the Crimea, a flood swept away a portion of her supplies and herself but, fortunately, she was a good swimmer. Her entire life was one long battle against death and racism.

□ **References:** Mary Seacole: Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole in Many Lands Joel A. Rogers: World's Great Men of Colour.