

# Celebrate the work of a little-known nurse heroine

Mary Seacole, a Jamaican healer and entrepreneur, is a little-known contemporary of Florence Nightingale. Like Nightingale, Seacole served on the front lines of the Crimean War in the 1850s, helping injured soldiers. But unlike Nightingale, she had little support for her endeavors and received scant recognition for her contributions. This look at Seacole's amazing life is part of our National Nurses Week tribute.



Mary Seacole spent her life savings to help soldiers in the Crimean War. She met Florence Nightingale, who turned down her offer of help.

By Margaret Ecker, MS, RN

In the spring of 1854, as England's weather warmed, the disagreeable news of war with Russia began to grip the nation and its colonies.

Mary Seacole, Jamaican healer and entrepreneur, heard a clear call to action in the war news. Having just returned from a business venture in Panama, she sought the next venue for her enterprise, selling dry goods, food, and, most importantly, healing potions for the sickness and disease that plagued much of the colonial world. Soon, she determined, she would bring these services to the support of the British military.

Seacole tells her story with wit and wisdom in a long-forgotten autobiography, first published in 1857. Florence Nightingale and Seacole were contemporaries who shared a commitment to care and compassion. But they were born worlds apart socially, racially, and economically. The republication of *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Mary Seacole in Many Lands* (Oxford University Press, 1988) sheds a 20th century light on a remarkable woman.

Seacole called herself a Creole. Her father was a Scottish soldier stationed in Jamaica, and from him she acquired her feistiness and energy. Her mother was a black Jamaican healer. She nurtured the generous and caring aspects of her daughter's personality. "It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me," Seacole writes.

Seacole grew up happy and educated, and she married for love. The death of her husband months after their wedding was followed closely by the death of her mother. The young woman was left to fend for herself. However, the thought of another marriage as a solution to her poverty barely crossed her mind. She picked up the pieces of her life, not faltering even when

her business burned to the ground a few years later.

Many of her customers in Jamaica were British soldiers; some were military doctors. She charmed them into sharing their science with her even as she dispensed her Creole medicines. "I never failed to glean instruction, given, when they learned my love for their profession, with a readiness and kindness," Seacole writes.

And so, in 1854, when newspapers reported escalating disaster at the Crimean peninsula, site of the British-Russian skirmishes, Seacole knew she could help. The British public was responding to the war with a massive outpouring of aid for soldiers and a rising cry for nurses. Nightingale's response took shape in her financing and organizing of Britain's first corps of trained nurses, women recruited from among the wealthy and the working poor.

Seacole's response was no less impassioned: "I made up my mind that if the army wanted nurses, they would be glad of me, and with all the ardor of my nature, which ever carried me where inclination prompted, I decided that I would go to the Crimea." Her experience in the tropics with the management of cholera, diarrhea, and dysentery would surely render her an asset to the British cause.

Seacole spent months in London, however, trekking from one war office to another, failing to find acceptance. She began to lose heart. "Tears streamed down my foolish cheeks, as I stood in the fast thinning streets; tears of grief that any should doubt my motives—that Heaven should deny me the opportunity that I sought." At her wits' end, she finally determined to go on her own. She cashed in what meager assets remained and set out to build her own "hotel for invalids" in the Crimea.

Upon her arrival, she tried one last time to join the Nightingale nurses. She found Nightingale in a hospital, safely located some distance behind the trenches. Seacole walked down the sad and dreary aisles of hospital cots, finding Nightingale in an office, busy with the work of organizing nurses. Nightingale received Seacole, after a short delay. "Willingly, had they accepted me," Seacole writes, "I would have worked for the wounded, in return for bread and water." But Nightingale had no room for this offer. Her secretary made clear the situation: "Miss Nightingale," she said to Seacole, "has the entire management of our hospital staff, but I do not think that any vacancy ..." Seacole did not need to hear the end of the sentence.

"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."

Seacole spent the next year in the heat of the battlefield. She dispensed medicine, meals, and even occasional entertainment. She made "home visits" to the campsites. She procured supplies otherwise unavailable. She used up her savings to obtain necessities, and when her money was gone, she began selling medicine and meals to soldiers directly to keep her efforts afloat. Her clients were no richer than she, however, and in the end, her enterprise was a financial disaster.

She returned to London deeply in debt. Part of the goal of her autobiography was to apply the proceeds to her debts. "Perhaps it would be right if I were to express more shame and annoyance than I really feel at the pecuniarily disastrous issue of my Crimean adventures, but I cannot, I really cannot. When I try and feel ashamed of myself for being poor and helpless, I only experience a glow of pride

at the other and more pleasing events of my career," Seacole writes. She died in 1881, prosperous enough, and happy.

For those of us unfamiliar with Seacole's accomplishments, the discovery of this likable, resourceful working nurse offers an inspiring ideal. Seacole lived a good life, constructed valiantly from equal portions of good will and practical necessity. We select Nightingale's birthday to mark national appreciation for nurses, and thus we acknowledge Nightingale's authority and influence on nursing. We should also take the opportunity to celebrate the life of Mary Seacole and many nurses just like her, not only during National Nurses Week, but every week of the year.

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