

B/N - Seacole, Mary

The Story of Mary Seacole

The Florence Nightingale of Jamaica

by Cynthia Vernon

"I love to be of service to those who need a woman's help whenever the need arises - on whatever distant shore." These words of Mary Seacole are taken from her autobiography. If translated into our modern Jamaican idiom, might they not have been said by any of the hundreds of Jamaican girls who have set out for England and other countries?

Mary Seacole's early environment coupled with her inherent love of adventure and desire to travel, determined the course of her life.

Nurses in England and throughout the world have Florence Nightingale as their inspiration. Jamaican nurses are not without their century old tradition of service to the sick, by a pioneer of outstanding ability and great courage. By a curious coincidence, Mary Seacole lived at the same time, was activated by the same motives and found expression for her burning desire to serve in the same sphere of activity as Florence Nightingale.

Her mother, nicknamed "the doctress" kept a lodging house in East Street here in Kingston, where she nursed many of the army officers and their families from Up Park Camp. Mary herself, from the age of twelve, learned to nurse the sick and acquired skill in the use of remedies. She was of great service in the cholera epidemic and herself fell a victim to the disease. Later, she travelled to Panama on a visit to her brother. While there, she was able to diagnose what was apparently one of the first cases of cholera to occur in that region. When the epidemic was in full sway she worked very hard and answered the many calls made on her skill and devotion.

Among the many who sought assistance from Mary Seacole was a Spanish grandee who wanted her to save the life of a valuable slave. On visiting the estate she took note of the appalling state of insanitation of the barracks. She remarks that cattle and men, sick and dying, were huddled together in indescribable filth and squalor. She set to work to create some kind of order by separating the dying from the sick and arranging for their care. Mary had no formal training in nursing since none existed, but she obtained the best available. She was of an enquiring mind and learnt by observation and by asking questions of the skilled physicians whom she met in the course of her ministrations to the sick. She describes on one occasion in Panama, how she performed a post mortem on an infant who had died of cholera, so that she might learn more of the effects of the disease.

When the Crimean war broke out and Mary Seacole learned that many of the regiments she had known in Jamaica



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were being sent to this area, she determined to journey there and give what assistance she was able. She sailed for England. In London, although she had a letter of introduction to Miss Nightingale, her many attempts to join the group of nurses who were recruited for the Crimea, were blocked. "Each successive day gave birth to a fresh set of rebuffs and disappointments", we are told. But, as she once wrote, "I do not think I have ever known what it is to despair."

Nothing daunted, she decided to purchase stores and open a hotel for the comfort of the troops and was granted permission to sail. Arrived in the Crimea, she built and opened a lodging house which she named "The British Hotel". The lower floor of this house was a restaurant and bar, but the upper floor was arranged like a hospital ward, and here she had her supply of medicines and all she needed to nurse the sick from amongst the officers. Although the profession of "sutler" or camp follower, which she was forced to assume, was one of little repute, the value of her services was well recognised. While in the Crimea, she records many meetings with Miss Nightingale. Appreciation of her work has been expressed by the contemporary Times correspondent who saw her in action. "I have witnessed her devotion and her courage. I have already borne testament to her services to all who needed them. She is the first who has redeemed the name of "sutler" from suspicion and worthlessness, mercenary looseness and plunder, and I trust that

England will not 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."

One wonders why so little is known by the average Jamaican nurse about the story of Mary Seacole. Besides Mr. Clinton Black's delightful biographical sketch in the pamphlet "Living names in Jamaica's History", published by the Caribbean Home Library, there is in the Institute, her own Autobiography which gives graphic accounts of her adventures and vivid impressions of the interesting people she met, including Miss Nightingale. There is preserved in the Institute, a terra cotta bust of this remarkable Jamaican woman which was modelled by a nephew of Queen Victoria. To quote Mr. Black, "Jamaicans may well be proud of this woman whose courage in the face of trials and dangers on her errand of mercy, has raised a lasting monument to her memory."

The memory of Mary Seacole was first honoured by the nurses of Jamaica when in 1954 they took the decision to name their projected headquarters "Mary Seacole House". The building at 72 Arnold Road was opened in 1960. Nine years have elapsed and now the Association is proud to have acquired a life-sized bust of Mary Seacole which stands for all to see in the foyer of Mary Seacole House. This bust was reproduced by a Jamaican sculptor, Mr. Curtis Johnston, from the original one which is in the Institute of Jamaica.

We have pleasure in publishing below an extract from "The Daily Gleaner", of November 1934, recording a paper read by Mr. P. N. Blake, 1st Vice-President of the Merl Grove Literary Society, at their fortnightly meeting held on 14th November, 1934. This paper was one of a series of "Evenings with great Jamaicans at home and abroad, both past and present . . ." - Ed.

MARY SEACOLE'S LIFE

Mr. Blake read the paper on the life and work of 'Dame' Seacole in which he pointed out the three important qualities with which Mrs. Seacole was possessed, namely heroism, love for humanity which knew no bounds and intense patriotism. These qualities, he said, stood out most conspicuously. He then outlined Mrs. Seacole's life from the time of her birth in Kingston, her childhood, her enterprise in helping her mother who had kept an hotel in Kingston and how she grew up to become just as good a nurse as her mother, if not better, and how she assisted the
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MARY SEACOLE, — THE FLORENCE

Buttons and Book

- gift to N.A.J.

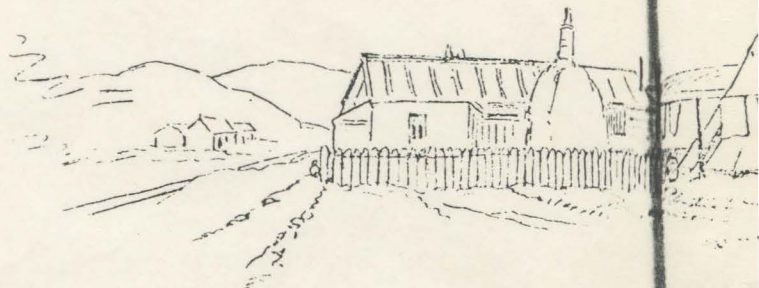
Some years ago Mrs. Ansell Hart gave the Association three buttons which had belonged to Mary Seacole and were said to have come from a dress which she had worn during her experiences in the Crimea. She also gave a book of Memoirs written by Lady Alicia Blackwood, who had accompanied her husband, Dr. Blackwood, to the Crimea where he was appointed a Military Chaplain. Lady Alicia offered her services to Florence Nightingale and was given the difficult task of sorting out and caring for about 260 women and their infants who were living in the dark cellars beneath the Barracks Hospital. The book is a mine of information about conditions prevailing in Scutari at that time and is illustrated by sketches done by the author.

On this page is reproduced one of the sketches showing the position of Mary Seacole's "British Military Hotel", together with an extract from the book referred to our heroine.

The Zebra Vicarage was the temporary residence of the Blackwoods.



MARY SEACOLE.



M. Seacole's hut

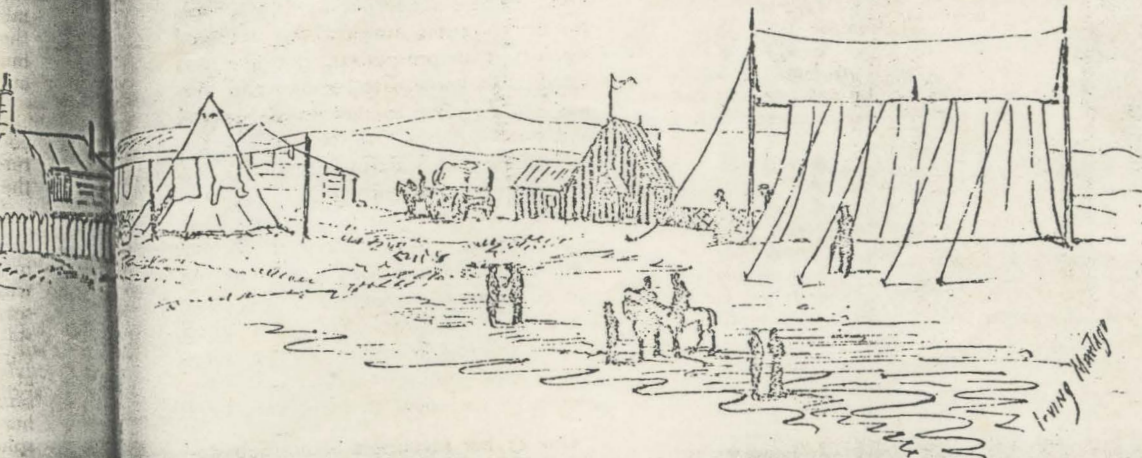
Major Cox's hut

Extracts from the book of Memoirs entitled Narrative of Personal Experiences and Impressions During a Residence on the Bosphorus Throughout the Crimean War, by Lady Alicia Blackwood, published 1881.

"... mention must be made of the far-famed Mrs. Seacole, whose dwelling was quite in the vicinity of "Zebra Vicarage". As the railway from Balaklava to headquarters was only a stone's thrown from us on one side, she had wisely pitched her tent equally close to it on the opposite side; for the line being used for the transport of goods and war material, from the port to the front, doubtless she had a view to facilitating the transport of her stores also to her warehouse. Mrs. Seacole kept a perfect Omnibus Shop, which was greatly frequented; and one must appreciate the wisdom exhibited by the good old lady not only in providing every variety of article, both edible and otherwise, but likewise the tact and never-varying good-nature she exhibited to all her customers; and notwithstanding the heavy prices at which her goods were sold, no one grumbled. No doubt she paid heavy prices herself to provide for the demand; but if these were slightly usurious added to on her behalf towards others, it was always remembered that she had, during the battle, and in the time of fearful distress, personally spared no

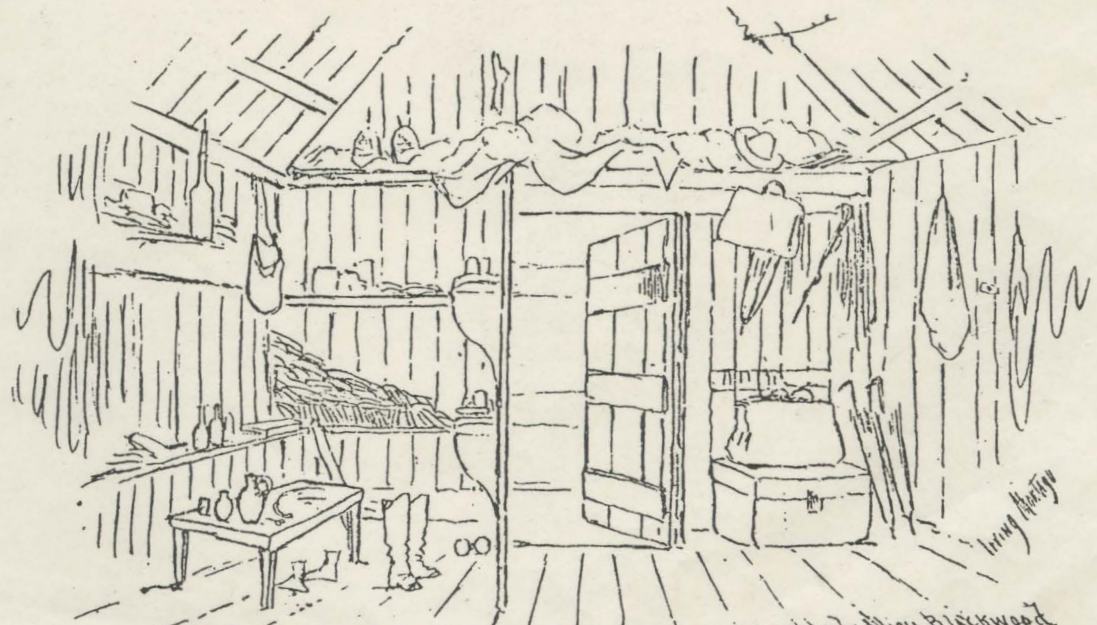
pains and no exertion to visit the field of woe, and minister with her own hands such things as could comfort, or alleviate the sufferings of those around her; freely giving to such as could not pay, and to many whose eyes were closing in death, from whom payment could never be expected. That she did not make her fortune by her merchandise was proved subsequently by her bankruptcy; this was no doubt in consequence of the termination of the war being far sooner and more sudden than was expected.

ORICE NIGHTINGALE OF JAMAICA



Zebra Vicarage

From Sketches by
Lady Alicia Blackwood



INTERIOR OF ZEBRA VICARAGE

From a Sketch by Lady Alicia Blackwood

CLEMENT SMITH & COMPANY LITH. LONDON.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA



MARY SEACOLE BUST: Mr. Curtis Johnston, sculptor and general artist of the Institute of Jamaica, pictured with the bust of Mary Seacole which was unveiled recently at a tea party put on by the Nurses' Association of Jamaica at Mary Seacole House, 72 Arnold Road. Mr. Johnston who is a past student of the Kingston Technical High School and the Jamaica School of Art, made the bust sometime this year. His first major sculpturing assignment was a model of Sir Arlington Curphy. This piece of work was well admired and subsequently bought by the Jamaica Legion. He also produced busts of Mr. Adolphe Roberts, Lady Bustamante and the late Mr. Norman Washington Manley.

Mary Seacole's Life

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Army Officers and men in this island when they were ill. He also narrated her wonderful adventures in many lands especially in Central and South America, and how she helped the natives as well as several Americans in recovering from serious attacks of cholera and yellow fever. And lastly, he dealt with how she fought her way to the Crimea to help in nursing the sick and wounded British soldiers, as well as to keep a hostel, and the great difficulties she had to overcome before she got there. Her experiences at Balaclava and Sebastopol, could fill a volume. She escaped death on more than one occasion when going to the trenches to look for her friends whom she called her sons.

Before her departure from the Crimea at the end of the war, she faced great difficulties in finding lilac plants which

she planted on the graves of her large circle of friends who had crossed the bar before her. She returned to England shaken in health, wounded, poor and beggared. This latter condition was due to the fact that she had over-stocked her store, not realising that the war would have come to a close so soon, and she had to give away all her goods, and became bankrupt. Other people in her position would have returned wealthy and prosperous, but she was satisfied to know that her aim and purpose in fighting to get to Sebastopol had been accomplished because she administered to suffering humanity. A benefit entertainment to aid her was got up by the Surrey Zoological Gardens after an appeal to reward her for her services was turned down by the Queen and until today, many who knew her history are asking why? She returned to Jamaica and resumed her hotel proprietorship. She visited England subsequently, and died there in 1881.

One of her favourites before Sebastopol, Count Gleichen, a cousin of Queen Victoria and an amateur sculptor, made a little bust of her. The bust was given to Mrs. Seacole's sister, who in turn gave it to Dr. Arthur Saunders, then head of the Kingston Public Hospital. Dr. Saunders gave the bust to the Institute of Jamaica. Mr. Blake concluded his paper by asking the gathering to emulate Mrs. Seacole's life



MISS ELIZABETH McFAYDEN, a retired Sister of the Kingston Public Hospital, unveiling the bust of Mary Seacole at the Nurses' Association headquarters at a special tea party recently. The bust is a copy of the smaller one on the front cover of this magazine belonging to the Institute of Jamaica and done in 1887 by a German prince, Count Gleichen. The local artist is Mr. Curtis Johnston.

Unveiling of New Bust of MARY SEACOLE at Mary Seacole House

Saturday, the 29th November, 1969, was a historic day for the Nurses' Association of Jamaica. In a setting of dignity and beauty, the newly acquired bust of the famous Jamaican nurse, Mary Seacole, was unveiled, and now graces the foyer of the headquarters house, named in her honour.

In spite of heavy rain, a representative number of nurses and others gathered to take part in this important little ceremony. After tea and a pleasant opportunity for a chat and relaxation, the Chairman, Mrs. Carmen Brooks, 1st Vice-President of NAJ, welcomed all present and introduced the speakers, Dr. Kenneth McNeill, M.P., and Mr. Bernard Lewis, Director of the Institute of Jamaica. Apologies for absence were reported from Mrs. Lola Bragg, NAJ's Acting President, who was ill, and for others who had sent messages of apology and goodwill.

Dr. McNeill gave a short address in which he reviewed briefly some of the outstanding points in the life and work of Mary Seacole, about whom so little was known until fairly recently. Research has revealed much about her that is proving of great interest and importance to the history of nursing in Jamaica and indeed to Jamaica's record of national heroes and heroines.

Mr. Lewis then spoke on "How we acquired the bust of Mary Seacole", and of the facts surrounding the little terra cotta bust owned by the Institute of Jamaica, said to have been made by the Count Gleichen, known as Prince Victor a midshipman and relative of Queen Victoria, who had observed Mary Seacole in action during the Crimean war. How this exquisite carving came to Jamaica is not fully known, but it is a prized possession and was lately repaired by a young Jamaican sculptor, Curtis Johnston, who later made the enlarged replica now owned by the Nurses' Association of Jamaica.

Below is a summary of the address given by Mr. Lewis:

The enlarged replica in plaster of the bust of Mary Seacole which has been completed by Mr. Curtis Johnston, is after the *terra cotta* bust in the collection of the Institute of Jamaica. Count Gleichen, the artist, was born in Wurtemberg in Germany in 1833 as Prince Victor Ferdinand Franz Gustaf Adolf Constantine Friedrich of Hohenlohe-Langenburg. For many years he was known as Count Gleichen (1833-1891), naval officer and sculptor, and was third and youngest son of Prince Ernest of

Hohenlohe-Langenburg and of Princess Feodore, only daughter of Emich Charles, reigning Prince of Leningen, by Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, afterwards Duchess of Kent. His mother was therefore half-sister to Queen Victoria. Prince Victor was sent to school in Dresden. He seemed to have been a somewhat difficult lad and ran away. Through the interests of Queen Victoria he was put into the (British) Royal Navy as a midshipman in 1848. It was in 1854 that he was serving on the H.M.S. "Jean d'Arc" off Sevastopol. It was at that time that he came in contact with Mary Seacole. The friendship which was established was pursued in subsequent years, presumably in England, which Mary Seacole visited a number of times after her experience in the Crimea. In 1861 Prince Victor married Laura Willamina, daughter of British Admiral Sir George Seymour. By German Law reigning families whose wives were of lower rank were disqualified from using their husband's title. In consequence, Prince Victor assumed the title of Count Gleichen, the second title in his family, by which he was known for many years. After retiring from the Navy Count Gleichen devoted himself to an artistic career for which he had considerable talent. He executed a number of busts of notable people. His most important work was a colossal statue of Alfred The Great. The *terra cotta* bust of Mary Seacole is dated 1871 and bears the initial "G" which Count Gleichen used to mark his work. If he did a bust of Mary Seacole in wood it seems unlikely that this is a replica of that bust and is probably quite a separate work. Its delicate execution is believed to be a very good likeness. We also believe that the

enlarged replica which Mr. Johnston has completed is a most faithful piece of work.

Mr. Lewis kindly brought the original terra cotta bust with him and displayed it with the bust to be unveiled, as, he said, it could ably stand comparison. It was fortunate that Mr. Johnston was present at this function, and said a few words before the unveiling took place. The gathering warmly applauded him and then Miss Elizabeth McFayden, known to the nurses of Jamaica as "Sister Betty", after a few words, proceeded to the foyer for the unveiling, followed by the company gathered.

As the bust was unveiled, and the strong, compassionate face of Mary Seacole was displayed, there was a hushed silence, as the crowd pressed forward to look. Cameras clicked, and some put out a finger to touch and feel this life-like reproduction. Some volunteered comparisons with the small terra cotta bust standing nearby. Someone remarked that the large bust gave "more character" to her face, while others commented on the more delicate delineations of the terra cotta features.

The Association is justly proud of this fine new acquisition to the building, and is grateful to all who helped and contributed in any way towards the creation of this bust and the fulfillment of one of NAJ's dreams.

We hope that the presence of this bust in our headquarters house will serve as an inspiration to us all, and as an encouragement to emulate the qualities which helped to make Mary Seacole great.



DR. KENNETH MCNEILL, M.P., addresses the gathering at the tea-party and unveiling of the bust of Mary Seacole, on Saturday, 29th November. Seated (left to right) are: Mr. Curtis Johnston, sculptor, Miss E. McFayden, Rev. W. Gordon, Mr. Bernard Lewis, Mrs. Carmen Brooks, chairman, and Dr. McNeill (standing).