

B/N - Seacole, MARY

□ Mary Seacole, the 'yellow woman' from Jamaica

The 'forgotten heroine'

remembered

THE AMERICANS called her "the angel of mercy". The Cubans referred to her as "the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine". And the Crimean soldiers hailed her as the "Florence Nightingale of Jamaica".

Yet, more than 100 years after her death, those who pay tribute to Mary Seacole, the distinguished Jamaican nurse best known for her contribution to the Crimean war, still believe her name slipped from the authorised version of nursing history,



because in Britain she was an outsider and was black.

History pays tribute to the "Lady with the Lamp", Britain's Florence Nightingale, but "Mother Seacole" as she was affectionately called, had become the forgotten heroine of that period.

But Mary Seacole lived in 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.

Mary Seacole was born Mary Joan Grant in Kingston in 1805, according to her own statement. Her father was a Scottish soldier serving in Jamaica, and her mother a creole. She ascribed to her father her love of camp life, energy and activity. From her mother she undoubtedly inherited her love of nursing.

Mary's mother, nicknamed "the doctress", kept a lodging house at East Street, Kingston, where she nursed many army officers and their families from Up Park Camp.

Determined to follow her mother's footsteps, Mary practiced nursing on her dolls and pets, becoming so proficient that at age 12, she was allowed to help her mother with real patients.

She acquired skills in the use of remedies, and although she had no formal training in nursing - because none existed - she obtained the best knowledge available. She was of an enquiring mind and learned by observation and asking questions of skilled physicians whom she met during the course of her administration to the sick.

It was not clear when she married Edwin Horatio Seacole, but her first great sorrow came when he died within a few months after the union. Her mother later died, and she took over the run-

ning of the nursing home in Kingston.

Her commitment to nursing was combined with a shrewd business sense. Although she was herself a victim of the cholera epidemic which swept Jamaica in 1850, Mary Seacole developed a medicine which was used with success to control it.

The following year, she travelled to Panama to join with her brother to set up a hotel. While in Panama, she was able to diagnose what might have been the first case of cholera to occur in that region. She described how on one occasion in Panama, she performed a post-mortem on an infant who had died of cholera, so she could learn more about the effects of the disease. In 1853 when yellow fever raged all over Jamaica, Mrs. Seacole's skills were again brought to the fore.

In 1853, when England, France, and Turkey declared war on Russia, and bitter fighting took place at the Crimean peninsula, Mary Seacole felt compelled to offer her services as a nurse, because many of the regiments she had known in Jamaica were sent to that area. Many soldiers were dying, most from illness such as cholera and dysentery rather than from battle wounds, and she felt her experience of those diseases would be of value.

Mary Seacole set sail for England, but while there, although she had a letter of introduction to Florence Nightingale, her many attempts to join the group of nurses recruited for the Crimea were blocked.

In her autobiography, first published in 1857, Mary Seacole recalled how she felt at the time: "Was it possible that American prejudices against colour had some root over here? Did those ladies shrink from accepting my aid because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat dusker skin than theirs? Tears streamed down my foolish cheeks as I stood in the fast thinning streets; tears of grief that anyone should doubt my motives - that Heaven should deny me the opportunity that I sought."

She also wrote: "Willingly had they accepted me, I would have

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worked for the wounded in return for bread and water."

Eventually, Mary Seacole decided to set up the "British Hotel" in the war zone, supplying much needed provisions and medicines. The profits she received from selling and dispensing medicine to those who could pay, allowed her to treat the poor free of charge.

The Times war correspondent William Russel, who praised Mary Seacole on many occasions, once wrote: "She is always on the battle fields to aid the wounded ... I have seen her go down under fire with her little store of creature comforts for our wounded men, and a more tender or skilful hand about a wound or a broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons."

By the end of the war, however, Mary Seacole was penniless. Her plight prompted a public appeal for assistance, and she settled in England and wrote an autobiography, "The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Mary Seacole in Many Lands", which became a best-seller.

She remained out of the public eye for the last 25 years of her life, and in her last will and testament, which has been preserved at the Institute of Jamaica, Mary

Seacole said she desired to be buried in the Catholic portion of the cemetery at Kensal Green, England, and in a respectable manner.

But after the glowing tributes in newspapers more than 100 years ago, Mary Seacole had been almost forgotten in England. Even her grave was lost, until a chance note in the end of a book gave the clue to its whereabouts.

In 1973, the Lignum Vitae Club, a Jamaican women's organisation in London, reconsecrated her final resting place in St. Mary's cemetery, Harrow Road, London, with inscription in letters of gold and blue: "Mary Seacole: 1805-1881, of Kingston, Jamaica, a notable nurse who cared for the sick and the wounded in the West Indies, Panama, and on the battlefields of the Crimea, 1854-1856".

The memory of Mary Seacole was first honoured by the Nurses Association of Jamaica, when its headquarters at Arnold Road, Kingston was named Mary Seacole House. The all-female hall of residence on the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies has been named in honour of the great Jamaican nurse, as well as a ward at the Kingston Public Hospital. In 1990, the Jamaican Government

awarded her posthumously with the nation's third highest honour, the Order of Merit (O.M.).

The accepted wisdom that modern nursing began with Florence Nightingale alone

begin to be challenged in the 1980s. Now black community groups in London join with the Mary Seacole Memorial Association, to lay a wreath annually at her grave.