

Audrey Lupton Dewjee and Ziggy Alexander

A woman of courage

# THE DEVINE MISS 'M'

BIN -  
Seacole,  
Mary.



**O**NE HUNDRED years ago this month *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* reported the death in Paddington, West London, of a Black woman named Mary Seacole.

Although Mrs. Seacole had been out of the public eye for 25 years, the obituary notices were a mark of respect for a woman whose contribution to the Crimean campaign had made hers a household name in Britain.

History pays tribute to the 'Lady with the Lamp', Florence Nightingale, but 'Mother' Seacole has become the 'forgotten heroine' of that period. Few people outside of Jamaica are aware of Mrs. Seacole's courage and 'healing' skills.

Her autobiography *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* reveals her determination, sense of vocation and pride.

Mary Seacole had a great interest in medicine and took every opportunity to increase her knowledge and experience. Her commitment to nursing was combined with a shrewd business sense which provided her with the independent means necessary for one who loved travel.

The medicine she developed to control cholera was used with success in the Jamaican epidemic of 1850 and she was able, in the following year, to give some relief in Panama when a outbreak of the disease

took its toll. Back in Jamaica in 1853 when yellow fever raged on the island, Mrs Seacole's skills were again called upon.

When England, France and Turkey declared war on Russia in 1853, and bitter fighting took place in the Crimea, Mary felt compelled to offer her services as a nurse. Many soldiers were dying, most from illnesses such as cholera and dysentery rather than from battle wounds, and she felt her experience of these diseases would be of value.

However, she was rejected by those same officials who had only reluctantly allowed Florence Nightingale and a small band of nurses to go to the Crimea. Mary 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...that anyone should doubt my motives - that Heaven should deny me the opportunity that I sought."**

### APPEALS

Appeals to the War Office failed to have the decision reversed, but Mary was determined to succeed in her mission. Eventually, she decided to set up the "British Hotel" in the war zone, supplying much needed provisions and medicines.

The profits she made from selling to and tending those who could afford to pay, enabled her to treat the poor

free of charge. One historian of the war wrote:

"Mother Seacole set up her store, dispensary, hospital, and became historic by right of good deeds, which is almost the rarest claim...even in an enlightened century Mother Seacole stands out pre-eminent, and cannot be passed over. She had the secret recipe for cholera and dysentery, and liberally dispensed the specific, alike to those who could pay and those who could not."

William Russell, war correspondent for *The Times* praised her on many occasions. He once wrote:

"She is always in attendance 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 skilful had out a wound or a broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons."

"I have witnessed her devotion and her courage; I have already borne testimony to her services to all who needed them...and I trust that England will not forget the one who nursed her sick and who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them and who performed the last office for some of her illustrious deeds."

Perhaps, 1981, the centenary of her death will see popular interest develop in this extraordinary Jamaican woman and restore her to her rightful place among history's celebrated ones.●