

# FAMILY TREE

## MARY SEACOLE, PART II: THE CRIMEA

National Library of Jamaica

In part one, Mrs. Mary Seacole, a nineteenth century Jamaican nurse, learned the treatment of cholera in the epidemic of 1850 on her native island. Later, she helped cure many in a cholera epidemic in Cruces, Panama and she fought yellow fever in Jamaica. In 1854, with the onset of the British war with Russia, Mary, in spite of racial obstacles, went to the Crimea as a sutler in order to aid in the cure of cholera, dysentery and fever which was so prevalent among the British soldiers.

When the Hollander dropped anchor at the bustling port of Constantinople (now Istanbul), Turkey, Mary's first task was to oversee the transport of her cargo to the Medora, a ship which was also a munitions carrier. Here would begin the final leg of her journey across the Black Sea to Balaklava. Still harboring the faint hope that she might secure a position as an army nurse, Mary made the short trip to Scutari where she met briefly with Florence Nightingale, but the response was the same—no vacancies.

Unbelievable chaos greeted Mary upon arrival at Balaklava. The harbor was jammed with incoming ships, some still loaded with rotting food and badly needed supplies simply because there was no space for them onshore. Others were waiting to transport the sick and wounded to the hospital at Scutari. Warehouses were unheard of in Balaklava, and it was with considerable difficulty that Mary was able to find a small vacant corner of the wharf for her own supplies. Poverty was everywhere and thievery was common. Although Mary had taken extra precautions to guard her supplies, some were lost in the transfer from ship to shore.

As protection against the chilling winter rains, Mary scavenged tarpaulin and fashioned a crude shelter under which she spent a part of each day selling provisions. Her paramount concern, however, remained the care of the wounded.

A steady stream of casualties poured in daily from the front lines. Because of poor road conditions, ambulances were almost useless and the wounded often arrived strapped to the sides of mules, creating a grisly human procession. Stretchers littered the already congested wharf, where those ill with fever and dysentery were thrown indiscriminately together with the seriously wounded.



MARY SEACOLE

At first, Mary's presence went unnoticed in the confusion, but one medical officer soon spotted the skill with which she handled the injured and gladly welcomed her assistance, ignoring the fact that she was not in uniform. The soldiers were grateful for her comforting hand and kind words. Before long, Mary Seacole became a familiar figure on the wharf at Balaklava, moving tirelessly amid the sea of misery that surrounded her.

She remained at Balaklava six weeks, spending nights aboard the Medora where she slept over barrels of gunpowder and tons of cartridges in constant fear that at any moment the ship would become the next target for in-harbor sabotage.

After considerable searching, Mary found a better location for her business. Two miles outside Balaklava, within a mile of British headquarters, there was a low rise, a spot which she christened "Spring Hill." In spite of the scarcity of help and materials, Mary was able to muster some of each and construction began on what eventually became a meeting place for both civilian and military personnel for the duration of the war.

By the summer of 1855, the "British Hotel," as the house was now known, was near completion. Although it was no architectural wonder, it did provide a semblance of home for those who had long since been there. Aided by a small staff, Mary ran a profitable business offering wholesome meals, some of which were Mary's own West Indian recipes. It was said that in addition

to good food one could get anything from an anchor to a needle at Mrs. Seacole's house.

Mary put in a six-day week at the hotel, with mornings left open to tend a growing number of patients, many of whom belonged to the Land Transport and Army Work Corps constructing the Crimean railway between Balaklava and the rear of the British camp of Kadikoy. Mary later received numerous letters of gratitude from those who had benefited from her care. She also found time to visit nearby troop camps with her large black bag filled with medicines and provisions. It served as her passport onto the battlefields at Redan and Malakoff. During the Tchernaya offensive, she not only attended British casualties but French, Sardinian and Russian as well. She was the first woman to enter Sebastopol after the final allied assault in September, 1855, and was among the last to leave the Crimea after the war. With the war's finish, the British Hotel was dismantled and its provisions given away. They could not be sold because Mary's presence in the Crimea had not been officially sanctioned.

When she arrived in London, Mary had, for the first time in many months, a chance to reflect on her situation. "I returned from it [the war] shaken in health. I came home wounded, as many others did. A little labour [sic] fatigues me now. Many in my position may have come back to England rich and prosperous—I found myself poor." Shortly after her arrival in London, the firm of Seacole and Day declared bankruptcy, and the partnership was dissolved.

Though her heroism in the Crimea went unheralded by the government, Mary Seacole had won the admiration, respect and love of many of the English people. Public resentment brought attention to those whose prejudice had prevented her official enlistment. *Punch*, a famous British weekly, published a poem to her, the last two verses culminating in glowing tribute:

*She gave her aid to all who prayed  
To hungry and sick and cold  
Open hand and heart, alike ready to part  
Kind words and acts, and gold.  
And—be the right man in the right place  
who can  
The right woman was Dame Seacole.*

When it became known that she was

having financial difficulties, a public benefit was held on Mary's behalf in Surrey Gardens, headed by some of England's most prominent names. In 1857, her autobiography was published by one of London's leading publishing houses. A copy is now in the British Museum.

During later years, Mrs. Mary Seacole divided her time between Jamaica and England. She is believed to have died in Jamaica in 1881. A portrait of her hangs in a gallery at the Institute of Jamaica in Kingston.—by Anita King