

REMEMBERING MARY SEACOLE

By Frank Cameron

TODAY IS being observed as International Women's Day and in keeping with the theme for this year, "Women for National Development and Peace," it is an opportune time to look at the history of this our nation to see something of the heritage of which we have been heirs. This is a foundation on which our national fabric can be fashioned.

People are motivated by the pattern of the past as well as by the challenge of the present and the future. It is therefore wise to bring into focus today, one of the heroines that this country produced -- MARY SEACOLE. Despite the fact a ward at the Kingston Public Hospital and a hall at the University of the West Indies are named in her honour, there may not be many in the succeeding generations after her death, who remember her accomplishments. These make it necessary for her to be regarded as one of the heroines of this island and she has been often referred to as the Florence Nightingale of Jamaica.

Always caring the sick

She was born at a house in lower East Street in Kingston which was known as Blondell Hall where her mother kept a boarding house. This was a short distance south of the premises of the present Institute of Jamaica. Her father was a young Scottish army officer and at an early age she displayed a tendency towards nursing and "doctoring" which she inherited from her mother. Whenever the opportunity presented itself she was always caring for the sick and she acquired many skills in this direction.



Early in her life she travelled extensively, first to England then to Cuba and Haiti and paid two visits to Panama. On the first such visit, there was an outbreak of cholera and her services were much in demand. From this she gained great experience.

She married a Mr. Seacole with whom she opened and for some time managed a store in Black River and when he died, she continued to be involved wherever there was a sickness and need for medical help as when an epidemic of yellow fever broke out in Jamaica in 1853. She was a victim of this malady herself, but recovered and was ready to go to Crimea when the war broke out in South-

eastern Europe. Not being able to travel to the war area, she contrived to form a partnership with one Mr. Day to go to Crimea and open a store. There she was able to be near the scene of war. On the way, friends in Malta gave her a letter of introduction to Florence Nightingale who was then breaking new ground as founder of the British Red Cross and giving valuable service in the bitter Crimea War.

Mary Seacole worked unceasingly for the sick, suffering and dying in the hospitals at Sevastopol and Balaklava on a scale hardly known before in military history. When the war was over, she returned to England and afterwards Jamaica with a deformed index finger on one hand which was caused by a Russian soldier from whose mouth she was trying to extract a bullet when in his death throes he closed his teeth on her finger.

Two medals which she was awarded for her service in the Crimean War are still in the gallery of the Institute of Jamaica. Despite all this, however, there were some detractors who regarded her as a sutler, who is a person following armies selling provisions and liquor to troops. She died here in 1881.

It can be said of her as was said of her contemporary Florence Nightingale "perhaps no one woman in all history has been the means of saving so many lives as the Lady of the Lamp. She seemed never to tire and night after night would go softly round the wards carrying her shaded lamp."

What the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said in paying tribute to Miss Nightingale in his poem "Santa Filomena," can also be said of Mary Seacole.

*"A Lady with a Lamp shall stand
In the great history of the land,
A noble type of good,
Heroic womanhood."*