

Nursing pays debt to forgotten heroine

David Brindle on the black unknown who rivalled Nightingale in the Crimean war

NURSING is finally paying its due to Mary Seacole, whose contribution rivals that of Florence Nightingale but whose name slipped from the history books because she was an outsider, did not conform, and was black.

An exhibition opens today on her life and achievements at the Florence Nightingale Museum in London. Alex Attewell, the assistant curator, says: "She failed to reach that critical stage where you get commemorated in pottery souvenirs. I think you have got to say it is because she was black."

Since her death in 1881 she has virtually disappeared from the authorised version of nursing history.

Mary Seacole was born in Jamaica in 1805, the daughter of a Scottish army officer. Her mother, a skilled herbalist, ran a boarding house where wounded or ill British soldiers would stay.

Later, a widow, Mary Seacole pioneered methods of treating cholera victims in epidemics in the West Indies and central America, and was put in charge of medical

facilities at a British military camp in Jamaica.

In 1854 she travelled to London to offer her services as an army nurse in the Crimean war, but was turned down by the War Office, the Medical Department, and the Crimean Fund.

Undaunted, she made her own way to the Crimea where she opened an unofficial "British hotel" for wounded and sick soldiers.

William Russell, the renowned correspondent for the Times in the Crimea, wrote of the woman known as Mother Seacole: "I have seen her go down under fire with her little store of creature comforts for our wounded men, and a more skilful hand about a wound or a broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons."

She earned medals for bravery from the English, French and Turks.

By the end of the war, however, she was penniless and wounded. Her plight upon her return to London prompted a public appeal supported by Queen Victoria, the Times, Punch, and the Illustrated London News.

She settled in London and wrote an autobiography, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, which became a best-seller.

The accepted wisdom that modern nursing began with Florence Nightingale alone began to be challenged 11 years ago on the centenary of Mary Seacole's death.

Now black community groups in London join with the Mary Seacole Memorial Association to lay a wreath annually at her grave in St Mary's Catholic cemetery in Kensal Green, north London.

The exhibition, organised jointly by the Florence Nightingale Museum and Black Cultural Archives, will run until September, and will then be available for hire by schools.

The Mary Seacole Exhibition will be at the Florence Nightingale Museum, 2 Lambeth Palace Road, London SE1 7EW; 10am-4pm Tuesday to Sunday



Mary Seacole . . . lost to history