

# Mary Seacole's grave restored in London

LONDON: THE GRAVE of Mary Seacole, the Jamaican nurse who is best known for her work during the Crimean War, has been restored by the Lignum Vitae Club, a Jamaican women's organisation in London, together with the British Commonwealth Nurses War Memorial Fund. The grave, which lies in St. Mary's Cemetery, Harrow Road, London, was reconsecrated recently in the presence of the High Commissioner for Jamaica, Sir Laurence Lindo, Lady Lindo, who is President of the Lignum Vitae Club, Miss Elise Gordon, Hon. Secretary, British Commonwealth Nurses War Memorial Fund, Miss Clover Jarrett, representing the Jamaican Nurses Association, who will maintain the frame, Mrs. Ruby Newnham, Miss Perti Burrowes, a Jamaican sister at St. Mary's

Hospital, Paddington and Mrs. Pamela Beshoff, vice-Chairman of the Lignum Vitae Club.

Sir Laurence Lindo laid a bouquet of flowers on the grave, the restored headstone of which reads:

"Here lies Mary Seacole, 1805-1881, of Kingston, Jamaica, a notable nurse who cared for the sick and wounded in the West Indies, Panama and on the battlefields of the Crimea, 1854-1856."

During the memorial mass, which took place in the chapel adjoining the cemetery, Miss Elise Gordon, Secretary of the British Commonwealth Nurses War Memorial Fund, said of Mary Seacole:-

"Today we pay tribute to a great nurse, Mary Seacole of Jamaica. She was born in 1805, according to her own statement, in Kingston; her mother was a Creole, her father a Scottish soldier. To her father she ascribes her love of camp life, and her energy and activity. From her mother she undoubtedly inherited her love of nursing. Her mother was (in her phrase) 'an admirable doctress,' skilled

in the arts of medicine and nursing. She kept a boarding house — cum-nursing home in Kingston, where she cared for the officers and families of the regiments stationed at nearby camps — and was very highly thought of. Young Mary, determined to follow in her mother's footsteps, practised nursing on her dolls and on her pets, becoming so proficient that at 12 years old she was allowed to help her mother with real patients.

From then she never looked back, although she had two diversions — visits to England, the second lasting two years, during which she proved her ability as an excellent business woman selling West Indian products — a skill that was to prove vital to her later work as a nurse. (She also visited islands in the Caribbean).

"When she married Edwin Horatio Seacole we do not know, but perhaps we can guess partly why. 'Poor man, she writes, 'he was very delicate' — and not expected to live 'I kept him alive by kind nursing and attention as long as I could'; but that was not long. His death was her first great sorrow.

"The second was that of her mother. Mary Seacole then took over the running of her mother's nursing home — getting to know the officers in the 97th regiment very well. She also grew familiar with the nursing of cholera, as an epidemic swept Jamaica in 1850. She was to meet this disease again in Panama, where she went to join her brother, and set up her own hotel there. In

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her autobiography she gives a vivid and horrifying description of the disease and how it spread in the terrible tropical conditions. Also of how she worked, night and day without rest, caring for the sick, burying the dead and bringing comfort and consolation to all around her. When she finally succumbed to the disease mercifully it was slight, and she rallied to return in due course to Jamaica "just in time to find my services needful" — in a violent epidemic of yellow fever. Not only did she nurse sufferers in her own house, but she organised nurses for the sick at Up-Park military camp.

"This was in 1853, the year she returned to Panama to wind up her affairs there (and of course find herself involved in nursing).

"But greater affairs were brewing while she was there the Crimean War had broken out in Europe, and learning that the regiments she had known in Jamaica had already gone to the War, Mary Seacole determined to follow them.

National Library of Jamaica

Scutari

"Going direct to England, she applied to the authorities for a post as a nurse, quite reasonably feeling that her experience would be valuable on a battlefield where cholera and dysentery were already raging. No one, however, would listen to her, so she decided to go to the Crimea on her own responsibility. Joining forces with a distant cousin, a Mr. Day, she decided to open a store and a "British Hotel", at Balacava where officers could buy home comforts, eat good meals and be nursed through convalescence.

"On the way she visited the great barrack hospital at Scutari, and was kindly received by Florence Nightingale. While her hotel in Balacava was being built she lived on a ship in the harbour, and tended the wounded and sick who were in transit from the battlefield to base hospital. "The scenes I witnessed there, oh they were heart-rending," she says.

"Once established in her British Hotel on Balacava hill, Mary Seacole had more than enough to occupy her, as a Manager, Cook, and as a nurse. She tended the sick and wounded in their own huts. She nursed cholera in the nearby Land Transport Hospital, and in the various battles she went out with her medical bag slung over her shoulder. The famous Times correspondent, W. H. Russell wrote of her thus:

"I have seen her go down under fire with her little store of creature comforts for our wounded men, and a more tender or skilfull hand about a wound or a broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons."

"From the highest to the lowest "Mother Seacole", as she was affectionately called, was loved and admired, and when she returned to England after the war, penniless and broken in health, she received a heroic welcome. At a dinner given to the Guards at Surrey Gardens, she was chaired round the gardens by the soldiers. A four day musical festival in her honour was organised in those same gardens, by a Committee headed by the Crimean Commander-in-Chief, Lord Rokeby, the Dukes of Wellington and Newcastle and many other famous persons. Little or nothing is known of the rest of her life, which she presumably spent in England, with visits to Jamaica in 1857 she published a vividly written account of her life up to that time: throughout her remaining years she apparently kept in close touch with those important friends she made in the Crimea. (In her will she left legacies to some of them and their children.) Queen Victoria's nephew, Count Gleichen, a well known sculptor, did a bust of her which is now in the Institute of Jamaica, and in Jamaica her memory has been kept green. The Nurses Association of Jamaica has named its headquarters after her; there is a Mary Seacole Ward in Kingston Hospital, and a university block bearing her name.

"In England, however, apart from glowing obituary tributes in newspapers when she died in 1881, Mary Seacole has been almost totally forgotten. Even her grave was lost, until a chance note in the end of a book gave the clue to its whereabouts.

"But today we remember this brave, compassionate woman, through the joint interest of the Lignum Vitae Club — an organisation of Jamaican women in London, and the British Commonwealth Nurses War Memorial Fund, Mary Seacole's name, and fame, are inscribed once more, in letters of gold and blue, over her resting place, which is to be reconsecrated in the presence of Jamaica's highest representative in this country. And her own colleagues, the Nurses Association of Jamaica will maintain it in repair for ever."

"Let us, remember Mary Seacole with gratitude and pride."