

Notes on Mary Seacole

5/11/59

Mary Seacole was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in a building that was perhaps the Blundell Hall Hotel located on East Street. In her autobiography she does not divulge the date of her birth; although she confessed, "the century and myself were both young together, and that we have grown side by side into age and consequence." Her mother was a Creole and her father a Scottish soldier. To her father she traced her affection for camp life and for "the pomp, pride and circumstances of glorious war."

Mary Seacole did not dwell at length on her early childhood. The truth appears to have been that she was illegitimate. It is likely that the Scottish father was called Day, for at one stage she alluded to a paternal cousin by that name.

Mary's mother had the reputation of being a "doctress", because she ministered to the sick soldiers and sailors who frequented the hotel. Mary never mentioned her by name, although it could possibly be procured from the civic records.

For a time Mary lived with a relative at 57 Water Lane, Kingston; but she stated, "when I was about twelve years old I was more frequently at my mother's house, and used to assist her in her duties, very often sharing with her the task of attending upon invalid officers or their wives..."

While still young, she had the opportunity to visit England as a travelling companion or possibly as a servant. There she remained for a year. This opportunity was repeated and Mary lived in England for two years on this occasion.

John Seacole was an elderly man when Mary married him. He was sickly and in order to improve his health, the couple moved to Black River. This was a very unhappy choice, since Black River was at the time a most unhealthy spot, fever being very prevalent there. Mrs. Seacole set up a shop. The sojourn was brief since John became worse and they were forced to return to Kingston. In a little while Mary was a widow.

The trips to England had whetted Mary's travel lust. Over a period of time she visited Nassau, Haiti, Panama. Just how these trips were financed is doubtful, but it is believed that she set up boarding houses in each instance.

Mary's mother had bequeathed to her sister Louisa and herself, Blundell Hall. The building was destroyed in the great fire of 1843. Later it was rebuilt through Mary's assiduousness. Even though the hotel proved overwhelmingly successful, Mary Seacole left the management to Louisa and devoted herself to "doctoring". In 1850 there was a cholera epidemic in Kingston, during which she volunteered as a nurse. She was said to have learnt a great deal from qualified physicians and even developed a medicine of her own.

She went a second time to Panama. This was during the California Gold Rush and thousands were crossing the Isthmus for America to seek their fortune. An American company was also building a railroad from Colon to Panama City. That living conditions were bad, may well be deduced. Diseases were prevalent and Mary Seacole was again recognised for her unstinting efforts. She became "an angel of mercy" to the Americans.

From Panama she went to Cuba. The chronology of this trip is dubious. Her arrival coincided with a terrible cholera epidemic.

Mary Seacole was born in Kingston, Jamaica, early in the 19th century. She would never divulge her age, nor did she disclose the name of her father, but implied, in her life "Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Mary Seacole" that he was of a good Scottish family, and no doubt the energetic ways she displayed, not at all like the usual languid West Indian women, were due to this ancestry.

She married an elderly man, John Seacole, whose health was far from good, and they went to settle in Black River which, in those days was a fever-ridden swamp. Not long after, Mr. Seacole became much worse, and they returned to Mary's mother in Kingston, where he died in a few weeks' time.

Mary became a traveller, and visited Nassau, Haiti and Panama, where she set up a business, but returned to Kingston later. The Crimean War broke out in 1854, and Mary decided to go out to help the soldiers, many of whom had served in Jamaica and had visited the excellent boarding house kept by her mother and herself. The Government did not recognise her officially, but allowed her to go and set up a hotel which was a great success, but not financially, for she had to become a bankrupt at the end of the war.

A Mrs K. Stewart had a letter published in the Daily Gleaner of the 29th August 1939, and she related a story in illustration of the very good terms with which Mrs Seacole had been with members of the Royal Family. Mrs Seacole had been requested by Alexandra, Princess of Wales, to procure some Jamaica mangoes for her. Hearing that a Captain Cooper would be returning to England, Mary wrote and asked him to send a basket 'on the ice', which, as Superintendent of the Royal Mail Company, he would be able to do, and the mangoes were duly brought to London. Mrs. Seacole took them herself to Marlborough House, the residence of the Prince of Wales, and delivered them personally to the Princess. On being asked whether she had made a ~~me~~ nice curtsey when she entered the reception room, she said "Oh my dear, I don't go there! When I go to see the Princess I go up to her private sitting room and we sit and talk like the old friends we are!"

Mrs. Seacole died in 1881, most highly respected and deeply regretted by all who knew her, she had made many friends of all ranks and stations in life, and the care and skill which had been used on behalf of the soldiers in the dreadful conditions in the Crimea were most highly appreciated by all who had received her ministrations.

She proved herself capable in dealing with the situation. Here Mary became known as "The Yellow Woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine."

It is believed that Mary Seacole was in Jamaica when the Crimean War began in 1854. She was stimulated into action by learning that a regiment which had been previously stationed in Jamaica had been sent to the front. Her presence in Crimea was not official and because of lack of support from the War Office she had to be declared a bankrupt at the end of the war.

In her book Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands her adventures, which may be accepted as accurate, are ably recalled. She died in 1881, some accounts say in Kingston and others in London. Her sister survived her for ~~thirty~~^{twenty}-four years, dying at an advanced age in 1905.

No traces of Blundell Hall remains; for after being demolished in the earthquake of 1907, a marble works was built on the site. If posterity remembers Mary Seacole, it is chiefly as an odd type and as the Female Ulysses. Her name may be perpetuated, however, through a Ladies Residence Hall at the University College of the West Indies being named after her.

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SOURCES:

- W. Adolphe Roberts - Mary Seacole, a radio script.
- W.J.S. editor - Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in many lands.
- M. O'Connor Morris - Memini: or a mingled yarn.
- Biographical notes made up of newspaper clippings.

her. Mary was fascinated by her mother's accomplishments.

The little girl lived for a while with relatives at 57 Water Lane. But she was often at the hotel, to which she returned at the age of twelve to help her mother nurse sick soldiers. Not long afterward she got a chance to go to England as a travelling companion, possibly as a servant. She stayed for a full year, then made a second voyage with the same people and remained for two years. When she got back to Jamaica, she ~~married~~ acquired a new and permanent name by marrying Mr. Seacole, whom she described as a sickly man.

The couple moved to Black River, where Seacole opened a store. ~~She~~ could scarcely have chosen a worse spot, for fevers were always present in Black River at that time, and it had the reputation of being the most unhealthy town in Jamaica. He soon collapsed and had to be taken back to Kingston. His wife nursed him to no avail. In a couple of months she was a widow.

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Then ~~her~~ mother died, leaving Blundell Hall to herself and a sister, Louisa. In 1843 Kingston was swept by a disastrous fire, and the hotel burned to the ground. The place was rebuilt, largely through Mary's efforts. It met with even better success than it had had in the past. Mary became as famous a local "doctress" as her mother had been. She was particularly good at handling yellow fever cases. In the big cholera epidemic of 1850 she volunteered as a nurse, is said to have learned much about the disease and its cure from trained physicians, and perfected a medicine of her own.

Meanwhile, she had indulged her love of travel ~~in~~ by making trips to Nassau, Haiti and Panama. The circumstances were a little precarious, but she appears always to have paid her way by means of commercial ventures and opening small lodging houses. Following the Kingston cholera epidemic of 1850, Mary Seacole became an adventuress in the good sense of the word.

She left the management of Blundell Hall to her sister Louisa, who later took title to it, and went to Panama for the second time. This was the period of the California Gold Rush. Thousands were crossing the Isthmus to ship northward on the Pacific side. An American company had begun the construction of a railroad from Colon to the city of Panama. The opportunities for making money were great, but ^{hygiene} were the dangers. Conditions of ~~sanitation~~ on the Isthmus were extremely bad. Diseases of every kind were rampant.

Mrs. Seacole rented a building and opened a combined lodging house and store. Pretty soon her chief activity was caring for sick foreigners, and she gave herself to this humanitarian work without stint. Yellow fever was a yearly problem, and there was at least one outbreak of cholera. The Americans called her an angel of mercy. Railroad workers held a banquet for her, at which a tactless Yankee toasted her in grateful terms as a woman but said he only wished he could serve her by doing something to lighten her complexion. ^{Mary} coolly rebuked him for bad manners and added that she was well satisfied, thank you, ~~was~~ with the colour of her skin.

Partly as a relief from the problems and overwork of the Isthmus, Mary went to Cuba. She almost immediately ran into a frightful cholera epidemic, and as usual pitched in and helped. She proved to be so effective an amateur physician that she was called, "the Yellow Woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine." This time she caught the disease, but dosed herself and recovered. She returned to Panama.

Mary Seacole appears to have been in Kingston when the Crimean War broke out in 1854 between Russia on the one side and England, Turkey and Sardinia on the other. Mary may have heard of the work of nursing at the front that Florence Nightingale was ^{doing} that seems doubtful. She got the idea on her own account

The chronology is
uncertain here - W.C.R.

like to go and help the soldiers. The thing that most stimulated her was the news that regiments she had known in Jamaica had left for the war. She sold property, raised as much cash as possible, and went to London, where she offered her services to the Medical Department, the War Office and the Quartermaster's Office. At all three she was rejected -- mainly because she was coloured.

She then resorted to her favourite device and got the War Office to agree to her setting up a hotel and store in the Crimea. The card she printed was headed, "BRITISH HOTEL, Mrs. Mary Seacole, late of Kingston, Jamaica," ^{It} ~~she~~ went on to say that she respectfully announced to her "former kind friends and to the officers of the Army and Navy generally," that she intended on her arrival at Balaclava to "establish a mess table and comfortably quarters for sick and convalescent officers." It was a camouflaged hospital scheme.

Mary travelled the 3,000 miles aboardship from London to the Crimea by way of Gibraltar, Malta and Constantinople. At Malta an officer gave her a letter to Florence Nightingale, whom she overtook at Scutari on the Asiatic coast opposite Constantinople. The two women had a brief talk on that occasion, and they met again near the front. But they followed different courses, the one official, the other unofficial. The Jamaican had a rough timber building erected on the Spring Road, between Balaclava and Sebastopol. It cost her around 800 pounds. There was a restaurant and bar. More important, there were large rooms for the care of the wounded, and despite the announcement on her business card Mary Seacole did not discriminate between officers and men.

Nominally she was a sutler, a term which the dictionary defines as, "one who follows an army and sells provisions, liquors, etc., to the troops." Note, now, what W. H. Russell, the famous war correspondent

of the London Times, wrote about Mary Seacole: "I have witnessed her devotion and her courage; I have already borne testimony to her services to all who needed them. She is the first who has redeemed the name of 'sutler' from the suspicion of worthlessness, mercenary baseness and plunder; and I trust that England will not forget one who has nursed her sick, who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them, and who performed the last offices for some of her illustrious dead."

The situation of Mary Seacole's British Hotel was very close to the firing line, and she inevitably had close brushes with danger. But she put the needs of her soldiers ahead of her own. Her good-humour never faltered. She was known as "Mother Seacole" and "Aunty Seacole." On her part, she addressed everyone, of whatever rank, as "My son," no doubt giving it the Jamaican pronunciation, "Me son."

Sebastopol fell in 1855, and shortly after that the war ended rather suddenly. The Allied nations got their troops out of the crowded Crimean peninsula as quickly as they could. Mary had to close her establishment in a hurry, and she was able to realize in cash only a fraction of the value of her supplies. She was as good as ruined, for she had sunk all her resources in the venture, and no Government department admitted any responsibility for her. The Government had merely allowed her to operate.

On her return to England she filed a curious petition in bankruptcy, in which she listed money owing to her under the headings of 'good debts and bad debts. Under the former classification were items of meals, drinks and services which a large number of officers had been allowed to charge. These officers included practically every English and French general who had been with the armies in the Crimea. It is said that they all paid up, and attached friendly notes to their remittances. Even so, Mary could not meet her obligations. The court declared her a bankrupt.

Notes.

Mary Seacole: a native of Kingston, at one time the proprietor of Blundell Hall (destroyed by the earthquake of ¹⁹⁰⁷ ~~1897~~), then a lodging house, is best known for the kindness of heart and sympathy for suffering displayed by her when acting as a sutler in the Crimea. The "Wonderful adventures of Mrs. Seacole in many lands" was published in 1857. She died in 1881.

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George William Gordon: born in 1821, merchant, planter, politician and independent minister of religion, was a leader of the people of considerable influence. Accused of participation in the outbreak at Morant Bay on October 11th, 1865, he surrendered himself in Kingston, was conveyed to Morant Bay, tried by court-martial and paid the penalty of interference in the matter by being hanged as a rebel, on the 23rd.

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