

MARY SEACOLE, the Jamaican nurse who treated British and French soldiers during the Crimean War (1854-56) was recognised in a London street years later by a former officer. He arranged a benefit concert to relieve her penurious circumstances which improved further after she published a book about her experiences.

Now a movement is underway to make of her life something more today than a historical footnote and a well cared for grave in Kensal Green cemetery, London.

The Mary Seacole Society, based at Leamington Spa, English midlands, was founded in May last year (1981) on the centenary of her death in Paddington, London. The society's committee, which is composed of academics, doctors and a civil servant, plans to make its first awards for studies in black history at the annual lecture later this year.

Fund raising, through appeals to industry and a concert in the spring to provide for further awards to individuals and schools are planned by this registered charity. A committee is also being formed to write a fuller study of Mary Seacole's life.

Mrs. Dorrette McAuslin, the society's Jamaican-born chairperson, is a former London hospital nurse, who now works in the Midlands as a health visitor and youth counsellor, specialising in Caribbean families.

"At a time when Florence Nightingale was trying to establish nursing as a profession for women, Mary Seacole was travelling the Caribbean treating cholera with a medicine of her own making," Mrs. McAuslin explained.

In the Crimea

"News of the Crimea spread to the British forces stationed in Jamaica and she offered her services to Florence Nightingale but they were refused. She made her own way to the Crimea and set up a stall treating soldiers and charging only those who could pay.

"Somehow she got back to Britain and after some years was discovered living in poverty by a British officer who noticed the French medal she was wearing. Her circumstances appeared to improve before she died in Paddington."

Our Mary marches on...

The Society aimed to perpetuate her name as a contributor to society so that young people and particularly West Indian youth could find figures with whom to identify.

"We also hope to inform and interest the British public about the contribution black people have made in the past and bring about a situation where black people are encouraged to contribute to society in more fields," she added.

The society now has more than a hundred members in all parts of Britain. The inaugural meeting last year was attended by Lord Pitt, the physician and community relations leader, who delivered the lecture, and the Vice Chancellor of Warwick University.

The Mary Seacole Society is located at 2 Lillington Road, Leamington Spa, Warwickshire.

In Jamaica Mary Seacole is remembered in a hall named for her on the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies. It was opened in 1958 and accommodates 250 female students.

National Library of Jamaica