

# MARY SEACOLE— —An Early Jamaican Heroine

By INEZ K. SIBLEY

MARY SEACOLE was Jamaica's Florence Nightingale. Born in Kingston in the early 1800s, she was a creole of Scots descent. Her mother kept a lodging house in East Street, next door to the present Institute building, which was known as Blundell Hall. This lodging was the favourite resort of sailors from the ships, as well as British soldiers stationed on the island. One of these, a young Scots army officer, married the lodging house proprietor, and so became the father of Mary.

Mary Seacole inherited the love of nursing and doctoring from her mother who never turned a sick person from her door but cared for them with all the skill at her disposal, gaining for herself the name of "doctress."

Early in Mary's life she declared that "she loved to be at service to those in need — wherever that need arose — whether at home or some distant shore," and the opportunity was to be given her.

## TRAVELLED

Besides caring for the sick and using every means possible of adding to her knowledge of nursing, Mary had the ambition to travel. She soon found it possible to visit relatives in England, where she stayed for one year; she returned to Jamaica, but before long she was on her way back to London again where she remained for two years.

On her return she married a Mr. Seacole and they opened a store in Black



River. Mr. Seacole was very delicate and sickly, but Mary kept him alive by her devoted care. Finally he grew worse and they returned to her mother's home in Kingston, where soon after he died.

This was Mary's first great bereavement, but another was to follow, for her mother died soon afterwards leaving her without any relatives in Jamaica. Feeling alone in the world, Mary was soon, however, to have life further complicated for her when her house was destroyed in the fire of 1843 which burned a large portion of the city.

Mary Seacole, however, did not give way to despair, but turned to work to rebuild and restock her house. Meanwhile

her practice as a nurse had become well known and was to become more so in 1850 when an epidemic of cholera broke out in the island. Learning all she could from the doctors about this dread disease, she was not only able to be of great help, but the experience was one which was to be of use to her later on.

## PANAMA

Her next trip was to Panama, where it is said she gained much useful medical experience. Cholera broke out at Cruces and Mary found her services in great demand. She worked with untiring zest to save lives and became known as 'The Yellow woman from Jamaica with the Cholera medicine.

**Mary eventually caught this dread malady, but recovering, returned to Jamaica in 1853. She arrived at an opportune moment, for an epidemic of yellow fever had broken out and her services were immediately enlisted.**

But Mary Seacole never lost her urge to travel. Soon she was back in Panama and it was while she was there that the Crimean War broke out. No sooner did she hear the news than she was determined to go to the war front as a nurse, especially when she heard that the regiments she had known in Jamaica were now in the war; and also when the rumour of sickness, starvation and insufficient medical supplies began to leak out, there simply was no stopping her efforts to be accepted.

## BLOCKED

But her offer was blocked on every hand. At each place an excuse of some kind was given. It was not until as a last

resort she decided to open a store and hotel in the Crimea for the comfort of the forces that she was given permission to sail. Entering into a partnership with a Mr. Day and after tremendous perseverance and effort the "British Hotel" was erected between Balaclava and Sebastopol.

The Crimea was the place of Mary Seacole's greatest usefulness. Here it was that she shared the dangers of war, knew the sight of blood soaked battlefields, saw death in a hundred shapes, crossed with her old enemy the cholera and many other sicknesses, and was a ministering angel to the sick and wounded.

## BLIND

Attending to a patient whose sight had been destroyed by a shot in his forehead, and having fixed his dressings, and holding a cup of tea to his parched lips, his hands touched hers. Immediately he exclaimed, "Ha! this surely is a woman's hand" — then added, "God bless you, woman, whoever you are, God bless you."

Many other voices during the battle, and after, were to be joined with this lone soldier's, in his devout wish — that God would bless Mary Seacole in her mission of mercy — and when she returned to England and finally to Jamaica, she was rich in lasting friendships of people of all walks of life. She was rich in never-to-be-forgotten memories. She was rich in the satisfaction of a job well done.

Mary Seacole died in Jamaica in 1881.

The two medals which she was awarded for her Crimean service may be seen in the history gallery of the Jamaican Institute — and in the University College of the West Indies, in Jamaica, a hall named for her, honours her memorable work.