

The forgotten compassion of 'Mother Seacole'

THIS year marks the centenary of a forgotten heroine of the Crimean War who deserves to be brought to public attention because her story is peculiarly relevant to our times.

She was Mary Seacole, better known to hundreds of soldiers as "Mother Seacole," a West Indian woman whose nursing skills saved many lives, who combined compassion with humour and was never afraid of bureaucracy, and who was also a successful businesswoman.

Mary Seacole was born in Kingston, Jamaica, towards the beginning of the 19th century (the exact date is not known and in later life she was apt to be rather coy about her age). The British soldiers garrisoned on the island were regular customers at her mother's small hotel, and after her mother's death she took her place as nurse, counsellor, and general provider to the garrison community.

Her marriage to Mr Seacole, a trader, ensured her a comfortable lifestyle and when she was widowed she set out to travel, first to Panama and then to California in the 1849 Gold Rush. The 1850s saw her in Britain and she was in London when the first horrific reports came back from Balaclava.

The high death rate among the soldiers and the disgusting hospital conditions aroused her sympathy and prompted her to brisk activity.

But she faced snubs and

JOANNA BOGLE reassesses an unsung heroine of the Crimean War

administrative blocks in her attempts to join a party of nurses, and she eventually paid her own passage on a ship to the Crimea, armed with a letter of introduction to Florence Nightingale.

On going ashore at Gibraltar for stores she met a group of soldiers who had known her in Jamaica: they were thrilled to hear that "our good old Mother Seacole" was about to arrive in the war zone. They ensured that she was given all the necessary contacts to establish herself in business.

Her hut at Balaclava was built out of wood salvaged from wrecks in the harbour, and advertised "a mess table and comfortable quarters for sick and wounded officers," but it was also a general meeting-place for all ranks. Called the British Hotel, and sporting an immense Union Jack, it was well stocked with supplies coming in from Constantinople.

Specialities of the house included broth for those convalescing, light sponge cakes, lemonade, and—at Christmas—mince pies and rich fruit cake. There was hot sweet coffee for those coming in after a night watch, and spicy rice-pudding, which was a favourite lunchtime dish.

The British Hotel was

extremely respectable, it closed every night at eight, and was never open on Sundays. No cards or dice were allowed on the premises.

But it was as a nurse that Mary Seacole excelled. She did not join Florence Nightingale's group in the hospital, but tended the men as they lay in the harbour awaiting transportation. "Illness and weakness make these strong men as children," she used to say, when accused of pampering them.

Her herbal brews were soon thought to be a great improvement on the officially-prescribed medicines. She had learned nursing as a girl in Jamaica, and she knew far more about bandaging, and the importance of cleanliness, than the clumsy and untrained soldier orderlies.

After the war, a soldier recalled that she would hold a dying delirious man, comforting him and calling him "my son" and that many must have died convinced that the arms that held them were those of their own mothers. Nor did she neglect their graves: she took it upon herself to plant little lilac trees and shrubs on all the plots which marked where "her sons" lay, and she never forgot any of them.

Her energy was enormous, and her compassion deep. She made muslin nets to protect wounded men from the flies, something which no one else had bothered about. She listened to tales of home, fed men unable to help themselves, and cheered convalescents with talk and laughter.

A doctor serving with the Army wrote home from a hospital ship: "Here I made the acquaintance of a celebrated person, Mrs Seacole, a coloured woman, who out of the goodness of her heart and at her own expense supplied hot tea to the poor sufferers while they were waiting to be lifted into the boats. I need not say how grateful they were for the warm and comforting beverage when they were benumbed with cold and exhausted by the long and trying journey from the front.

"She did not spare herself if she could do any good to the suffering soldiers. In rain and snow, in storm and tempest, day after day she was at her self-chosen post, with her stove and kettle, in any shelter she could find, brewing tea for all who wanted it, and they were many."

When the war was over Mary Seacole was hailed in London as a heroine—soldiers contributed to a fund in her honour and she was presented with the Crimean Medal, which she always afterwards wore on her dress. This, plus her great good humour (almost every description of her notes her beaming countenance) and her

considerable size (she was very fat, a fact that the crinoline fashion and her own taste for very bright colours tended to emphasise rather than conceal) made her instantly recognisable and she was a well-known figure until her death in 1881.

But a later century seems to have forgotten her—a pity, because we could use her message now. It proves that the British and the West Indians have ties that go back beyond the era of "race relations" and community experts, and are based on mutual help and trust. It also says something about the way in which a woman of courage and conviction, but without education or social status, can achieve more than many considered, superficially, to be her superiors.

Mary Seacole, along with Florence Nightingale, was one of the few people to emerge from the Crimean War with any dignity and with a sense of real achievement.

Earlier this year the Jamaican High Commissioner attended a ceremony at the St Mary's Cemetery in London's Harrow Road where this remarkable woman is buried. The Mayors of Hammersmith and Brent, together with West Indian groups, joined in the service, which was conducted by a priest from Trinidad.

Let us hope that Mary Seacole's story will be told to the rising generation of Londoners—black and white—and that this warm and human chapter of our history will be given the attention it merits.

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