

# Mary Seacole — nurse courage

By CHRISTINE BELL

She had played an important part in fighting the serious outbreak of cholera which threatened Panama in 1850. Among the people this "yellow woman" from Jamaica had nursed back to health were some white Americans ... and they expressed their gratitude by honouring her at a 4th of July banquet. In proposing a toast to her at the banquet, one of her hosts expressed regret that she wasn't white, and cynically suggested that her skin be bleached. To this she replied simply:

"I must say I don't altogether appreciate your friendly, kind wishes with regard to my complexion and the offer of bleaching me. I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As for the society which this process might admit me to, judging from the specimens I have met here and elsewhere, I don't think I should lose much in being excluded from it. So I drink to you and the general reformation of American manners!"

## Pride in heritage

This proud but humble woman was Mary Seacole — a nurse who, apart from being often described as an "indefatigable worker among the poor and suffering, was also often praised for her skill as a nurse; her noble, gentle, sympathetic and generous nature; her strong sense of humour which saw her through many trying circumstances; and for her firm pride in her heritage.

Mary Seacole (after whom the Mary Seacole Hall at the Mona Campus of the U.W.I. is named) was born in Kingston, Jamaica in the early nineteenth century. She was the daughter of a Black woman and a Scottish officer whose family name is believed to have been "Grant".

Mary received an education above the average for her class — and this is believed to have been a result of the influence of an old female relative who adopted Mary from quite an early age and brought her up with her own grandchildren.

However, by age 12, Mary was back in her mother's house, and it was from her that Mary received much of her trainings to become a nurse. Mary's mother was a highly respected "doctress" who operated a house called Blundell Hall — catering for officers and their wives stationed at New Castle and Up Park Camp.

## Off to London

Mary later married John Seacole, a considerable older and sickly man. They moved to Black River in the hope that this would cause her husband's health to improve, and Mary opened a store to help support them. However, when his health continued to deteriorate, they returned to Kingston, where he died a few months later.

Mary at this point gave in to what had always been a strong desire to see the world. She went off to London with some relations and returned to Jamaica after one year. She made a second trip to England soon after and on the homeward journey two years later, she experienced the terror of being on a burning ship. In her autobiography she gives a humorous account of how she bargained with the ship's cook to strap her to a hen coop as a last resort ... for the sum of £2!

When her mother died, Blundell Hall was left to Mary. But it was burnt down in the Kingston Fire of 1843 and Mary almost lost her life trying to save it. She managed to rebuild the house and established it as a sort of private sanatorium and lodging house. Despite this success, however, she left the management of the house in the hands of her sister Louisa so she could attend to her first love — that of nursing the sick.

Mary soon built up a reputation as a nurse and doctress and her house was always filled with invalids for Camp and New Castle. It was the strong relationships she developed with these officers and their families whom she treated which partly influenced her decision to go to the Crimea when the war with Russia broke out.

## Cholera epidemic

When the cholera epidemic struck Jamaica in 1850,

Mary Seacole helped to control the ravages of the disease not only by nursing those

afflicted but by developing a medicine which produced remarkable results. At this time too, she was able to gain further, valuable experience in nursing from a doctor who lodged in her house

— experience which was later to prove so useful in fighting the same plague when it struck Panama while she was there visiting her brother. She was able to bring relief to many who developed the disease and although they were at first reluctant to be treated by a foreigner — and especially a woman — the rising death toll encouraged them to seek her assistance. The effectiveness of her cure soon built the confidence of many in "the yellow woman from Jamaica."

Soon after Mary returned to Jamaica in 1853, the fearful yellow fever epidemic broke out in the island. Invalid officers, their wives and children kept her house constantly filled — and in addition to attending to her own patients, she had to organise the nursing of sufferers at Up Park Camp.

When Britain declared war against Russia and many of Mary Seacole's ex-patients were sent to the front, Mary made every effort to go to the Crimea. But at that time, woman in the British army in any capacity was very rare ... and Mary was unable to fulfill her desire.

Meanwhile, the war was progressing — and disease and starvation was causing more deaths than front-line battles. The provisions made for the army were shocking — there was general mismanagement of hospitals, supplies of food were short, as were supplies of clothing and medicine.

## Help rejected

Overcoming innumerable obstacles, Florence Nightingale convinced the British Government to allow her to lead the first batch of nurses to Scutarin in Turkey. Mary Seacole, who had heard of the poor care being taken of the men who served their countries, arrived at the London enlistment centre in the autumn of 1854. Her desire to help her suffering fellowmen now even more urgent, she applied to all battle sec-

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B/N Mary Seacole

# Nurse courage

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tors — but was rejected. In her autobiography, she records her thoughts at that time:

“Was it possible that American prejudices against colour has taken root here? Did they shrink from accepting my aid because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat dusker skin than theirs?”

Mary decided to enter the army as a Subtler — people who follow the army selling provisions. However, she had little money and so she sought the assistance of a distant relative of her husband — a Mr. Day. He had to go to the Crimea on shipping business and he expressed willingness to invest in her venture. The partnership of Seacole and Day was therefore born with Mary responsible for the management of the business.

## Gift for writing

After buying her provisions, Mary arrived in the Crimea. She opened her hotel for officers and soldiers at Spring Hill near Balaclava and went into business. Having been refused the protection she would have had as an army nurse, she had to live by her own earnings. Yet those who couldn't afford to pay her never went away without help — and the services she rendered to the sick were unremitting.

Mary spent all of her spare time visiting and administering to the sick. She seemed to have an inkling always

when there was to be an encounter between enemy troops — and this was when her heroism showed through most. Carrying her bags filled with lint, bandages, needles, thread and medicine and accompanied by mules loaded with sandwiches and other foods, wine and spirits, she would venture onto the battlefield at dawn. THE TIMES and PUNCH made her name popular and dear to the hearts of those who had sons, husbands and brothers at the Crimea.

At the end of the war, Mary was quite without funds. She returned to England dependent on money raised by subscription by her soldier friends and others. Hopefully, she was later adequately remunerated for the account she gave of her life in an autobiography for the TIMES.

Not the least of Mary's achievements is this autobiography. She possessed an extraordinary gift for writing — and though written in the simplest language, her description of both places and scenes are clear and forcibly written.

In November of 1973, this Jamaican heroine of Crimean war was remembered in London at a special ceremony for the reconsecration of her grave. For many years, no one had known where she lay buried and her grave was neglected and forgotten. A chance find of her grave was finally made in St. Mary's Catholic cemetery in North West London.



THIS GRAVE HAS BEEN RESTORED BY THE LIGNUM VITAE CLUB  
A CHARITABLE SOCIETY OF GARDENERS IN LONDON AND THE  
NORTH COUNCIL OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS AND IS  
MAINTAINED BY THE LIGNUM VITAE CLUB, 2008, LONDON.

Photos courtesy of the Institute of Jamaica

HERE LIES MARY SEACOLE, the grave in London has been restored by the Lignum Vitae Club, a Jamaican women's group in Britain.



BUST OF MARY SEACOLE.