

OF MARY SEACOLE



On the campus of the University of the West Indies there is a "Mary Seacole Hall". The headquarters of the Nurses' Association of Jamaica has been named "Mary Seacole House". At the Kingston Public Hospital there is a "Mary Seacole Ward". All this has been done in a conscious attempt to perpetuate the name of a great Jamaican, and an even greater nurse, one whom the Americans referred to as "the angel of mercy", the Cubans termed "the yellow woman with the cholera medicine" and the Crimean soldiers hailed as "the Florence Nightingale of Jamaica".

I suspect, however, that there might be some nurses to whom the name of the Headquarters House means little or nothing at all. For such women, the Mary Seacole House provides no "rallying point", stirs no emotions, imparts no inspiration, provokes no loyalty. It is particularly of these persons that I think as I attempt, quite incompletely, to relate the high points in the life of this great woman.

Mary Seacole was born in 1805 and died at the age of 76 in 1881. In her autobiography "Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands" she did not disclose her age, remarking that that was a feminine privilege. She did say, however, that "the century and myself were both young together, and we have grown up side by side into age and consequence". She herself said that she was born in Kingston, but in 1938 when Mr. Frank Cundall published that information, a writer to the Gleaner contradicted it. This writer said that Mary was born at Haughton, near Esparva in St. Elizabeth, and as a young woman went to live in Black River.

Mary tells very little about her childhood and early life. Her mother was a coloured woman who kept a boarding house in Kingston. Her father was a Scottish soldier. She often refers to "mother's house" and once, speaking about Black River, she mentioned her "father's house". She also tells how when a young child she was taken by an old man, and brought up as one of her grand-children. She never mentioned her mother's name, nor her father's.

John's name might have been Bay. All these seem to indicate that Mary was an illegitimate child, an admission that she was not prepared to make. She had a sister (Mrs. Louise Grant) to whom she left the Blundell Hall bequeathed to them both by their mother.

Mary's mother had a reputation of being a "Doctress" because she ministered to the sick sailors and soldiers (from Up Park Camp and Newcastle) who frequented her hotel. From her Mary learned the art of healing and the love of caring for the sick. From about the age of twelve Mary began to share with her mother the task of attending upon invalid officers and their wives. While young, she had the opportunity of visiting England twice (for a total of three years) as travelling companion and nurse of an old lady. These trips only whetted Mary's appetite for travel, and not long after her return to Jamaica, she visited Nassau, Panama, Haiti and Cuba.

On her return to Kingston, Mary states that she nursed her old "indulgent patroness, in her long last illness", and that after her death, she (Mary) went back to live at her mother's house. There she met and married Mr. John Seacole, and took him down to Black River, where they established a store. He was an elderly man then, and very sickly, so Black River was certainly a poor choice. It is possible that Mary chose Black River because of her (alleged) earlier associations. Their sojourn there was brief; John became worse and they were forced to return to Kingston. Within a month after their return, John died. Mary states that she was "very sorrowful".

Soon after this, Mary's mother died and left Blundell Hall to her and her sister, Louise. The hotel was burnt to the ground in the great fire of 1843, but later rebuilt through the efforts of Mary. The venture met with even greater success, but Mary soon left the management to her sister, and devoted herself to "doctoring". She was particularly good at handling yellow fever cases. In the big cholera epidemic of 1850, she volunteered as a nurse. It is said to have learned much about the disease and its cure from trained physicians, and even perfected a medicine of her own.

Later, Mary visited Panama for a second time. This was during the California Gold Rush when thousands were crossing the Isthmus to ships going north on the Pacific side. Sanitary conditions on the Isthmus were very poor, there were diseases of every kind. Mary soon rented a building and opened a lodging-house and store. Before long her chief activity was caring for the sick foreigners, and to this task she gave of her best. It was here that she earned the title of "angel of mercy" from the Americans. It was here too that a Yankee referred to her colour, and stated his regrets that he could not "bleach her white", and so be able to claim her. In appropriate language, Mary retorted that when she came across people like him, she could not but feel happy that she escaped being white.

From Panama, she went to Cuba. There she ran into an epidemic of cholera and was again a great help. Here she was known as "the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine". This time she caught the disease, but cured herself and returned to Panama where she remained for a time. Early in 1853 (about April) she returned to Kingston.

J.H. Biographies