

# MARY SEACOLE — The Florence

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## Nightingale of Jamaica

By Mary Seivright, M.A., R.G.N.

ON the campus of the University of the West Indies there is a "Mary Seacole Hall". The headquarters of the Jamaica General Trained Nurses' Association has been named "Mary Seacole

House".

At the Kingston Public Hospital, there is an 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 from Jamaica with the cholera medicine", and the Crimean soldiers hailed as "the Florence Nightingale of Jamaica".

I suspect, however, that there might be many nurses to whom the name of the Headquarters House means little or nothing at all. For such nurses, 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 the early Eighteen hundreds; the exact time being unknown. 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 Lacovia, in St. Elizabeth, and, as a young girl, 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 her 'mother's house', and once, speaking about Black River, she mentions her 'father's house'. She also tells how when a young child she was taken by an old lady and brought up as one of her grandchildren. She never mentions her mother's name, nor her father's.

Later in her book she speaks of a paternal cousin named Mr. Day, with whom she entered into business; thus her father's name might have been 'Day'. All these facts 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 Hotel, 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 learnt 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 or their wives.

While still 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 last long 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, 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 disease 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 of

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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.

Mary spent the rest of 1853 in Kingston, and was probably still there when the Crimean War broke out in 1854. She was stimulated into action when she learnt that a regiment which had previously been stationed in Jamaica, was sent to the front. She sold property, raised as much money as she could, and went to London where she offered her services to the Medical Department, War Office, and Quartermaster's Office.

At all three places, she was rejected (allegedly) mainly because of her colour.

She went to the Crimea, howev-

er, as a "sutler" (one who follows an army and sells provisions, liquors etc., to the troops).

W.H. Russell, the famous war correspondent, later said of her in the *London Times*. "I have witnessed her devotion and her courage; I have already borne testimony to her services to all who needed them. She is the first who has redeemed the name of 'sutler' from the suspicion of worthlessness, mercenary baseness and plunder; and I trust that England will not forget one who has nursed her sick, who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them, and who performed the last offices for some of her illustrious dead."

In her own account, Mary describes very vividly her work in the Crimean War, and her subsequent bankruptcy on her return to England. But she received many proofs of admiration in high places. She was awarded two medals; and a nephew of Queen Victoria made a small bust of her in wood. She was

received by several members of the Royal Family.

Two years after her return from Crimea, Mary wrote and published her autobiography edited by a "W.J.S." who, some historians feel, may have actually written the book for Mary at her dictation. The book sold well and gave Mrs. Mary Seacole the reputation of being one of the most picturesque women of that day.

Now advanced in age, Mary Seacole kept traveling back and forth between Kingston and London. She died in 1881; some reports say in Kingston, others say in London. Her final resting place remains unknown and unmarked.

But the name of Mary Seacole will live on, and posterity will remember a Jamaican who, although she may not be counted among the world's 'greats', certainly had, in the words of Adolphe Roberts, "one of the kindest hearts that ever beat in a human breast".

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