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Mary Seacole honoured in London

Mary Seacole, a Jamaican heroine of the Crimean War, was remembered in London yesterday at a special ceremony for the reconsecration of her grave, which was attended by Sir Lawrence Lindo, Jamaican High Commissioner, and representatives of the nursing profession in Britain.

The famous nurse died almost 100 years ago - no one knew where she was buried - and her grave lay neglected and forgotten for many years until a chance find was made.

An autobiography of the nurse was brought in a second hand book shop in London for a few pence. It was handed to Miss Elise Gordon, secretary of the British Commonwealth Nurses War Memorial Fund. At the back of the book she found reference to Mary Seacole's will

This fired her imagination and she began to take a special interest in the Jamaican nurse, and her research, which is still continuing, helped her to trace the grave, overgrown and dilapidated, in St. Mary's Catholic cemetery, in northwest London. Miss Gordon, a former editor of the Nursing Mirror newspaper, published in London, has unravelled many facts about Mary Seacole.

Mary's maiden name is unknown but is thought to have been Grant. She had a creole mother and a father who was Scottish soldier. Her invalid husband, Edwin Horatio Seacole, was a godson of the British naval hero Admiral Horatio Nelson.

Mary had learned about nursing from her mother who ran a nursing home in Kingston and was a well known "doctress". Meanwhile, Mary got to know many of the British soldiers who were based in Jamaica - and was to meet many of them later at the hospitals and battlefields of the Crimea.

But epidemics of cholera and yellow fever in Jamaica and Panama occupied Mary for some time. Later the Crimea War started and when she heard of the plight of many of the soldiers she had come to know, she made her own arrangements and travelled to the Crimea.

One of the first people she met was Florence Nightingale. Mary moved onto Balaclava in the Crimea and decided to open her own convalescence home. While it was being built she cared for wounded troops who were waiting for transport to base hospitals.

Her fame grew when she was seen helping the wounded on the battlefields - sometimes while the fighting was still raging.

After the war she arrived in London penniless and in poor health. The British Commander-in-Chief of the Crimea forces and the Duke of Wellington and Newcastle organized a four-day festival of music and gave her the proceeds.

Mary was born in Kingston in 1805. Miss Gordon traced the death certificate to find that the nurse died in 1881. But her autobiography was written only a few years after the war of the 1850s and little is known of the last few years of her life.