Mary Seacole, a Jamaican healer and entrepreneur, is a little-known contemporary of Florence Nightingale. Like Nightingale, Seacole served on the front lines of the Crimean War in the 1850s, helping injured soldiers. But unlike Nightingale, she had little support for her endeavors and received scant recognition for her contributions. This look at Seacole's amazing life is part of our National Nurses Week tribute.

By Margaret Ecker, MS, RN

In the spring of 1854, as England's weather warmed, the disagreeable news of war with Russia began to grip the nation and its colonies.

Mary Seacole, Jamaican healer and entrepreneur, heard a clear call to action in the war news. Having just returned from a business venture in Panama, she sought the next venue for her enterprise, selling dry goods, food, and, most importantly, healing potions for the sickness and disease that plagued much of the colonial world. Soon, she determined, she would bring these services to the support of the British military.

Seacole tells her story with wit and wisdom in a long-forgotten autobiography, first published in 1857. Florence Nightingale and Seacole were contemporaries who shared a commitment to care and compassion. But they were born worlds apart socially, racially, and economically. The republication of Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Mary Seacole in Many Lands (Oxford University Press, 1988) sheds a light on a remarkable woman.

Seacole called herself a Creole. Her father was a Scottish soldier stationed in Jamaica, and from him she acquired her feistiness and energy. Her mother was a black Jamaican healer. She nurtured the generous and caring aspects of her daughter's personality. "It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me," Seacole writes.

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Seacole in Many Lands

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Seacole spent months in London, however, trekking from one war office to another, failing to find acceptance. She began to lose heart. "Tears streamed down my foolish cheeks, as I stood in the fast thinning streets; tears of grief that any should doubt my motives—that Heaven should deny me the opportunity that I sought." At her wits' end, she finally determined to go on her own. She cashed in what meager assets remained and set out to build her own "hotel for invalids" in the Crimea.

Upon her arrival, she tried one last time to join the Nightingale nurses. She found Nightingale in a hospital, safely located some distance behind the trenches. Seacole walked down the sad and dreary aisles of hospital cots, finding Nightingale in an office, busy with the work of organizing nurses.

Nightingale received Seacole, after a short delay. "Willingly, had they accepted me," Seacole writes, "I would have worked for the wounded, in return for bread and water." But Nightingale had no room for this offer. Her secretary made clear the situation: "Miss Nightingale," she said to Seacole, "has the entire management of our hospital staff, but I do not think that any vacancy ..." Seacole did not need to hear the end of the sentence.

"One thought never left my mind as I walked through the fearful miles of suffering in that great hospital. If it is so here, what must it be at the scene of war—on the spot where the poor fellows are stricken down by pestilence or Russian bullets, and days and nights of agony must be passed before a woman's hand can dress their wounds. And I felt happy in the conviction that I must be useful three or four days nearer to their pressing wants than this."