

# Mary Seacole: nursing care in many lands

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## Abstract

Mary Seacole, a Jamaican/Scottish nurse and businesswoman, was a celebrated Victorian heroine, due to her bravery in nursing soldiers in the Crimean War (1853–6).

She was also admired for her use of Creole herbal remedies to relieve the symptoms of infectious illnesses such as cholera in Jamaica and Panama..

### Key words

■ Doctress ■ Cholera ■ Jamaica ■ Crimean war ■ Military nursing

**'I trust that England will not forget one who 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.'**

Sir William Howard Russell, war correspondent, 1857, foreword to the first edition of *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (Alexander and Dewjee, 1984:50).

## Box 1. Jamaica and Scotland: influence of Mary Seacole's parents

**My mother** kept a boarding-house in Kingston, and was, like many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress; in high repute with the officers of both services, and their wives, who were from time to time stationed in Kingston. It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from an early age a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which never deserted me.

**My father** was a soldier, of an old Scotch family; and to him I often trace my affection for a camp-life, and my sympathy with what I have heard my friends call 'the pomp, pride, and circumstances of glorious war'.

Chapter 1, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*. 1857. Editors: Z Alexander and A Dewjee. 1984. Falling Wall Press, Bristol, pp56–7.

Mary Seacole (1805–1881) was a celebrity in the Victorian age and the British public was keenly aware of her nursing achievements, due to significant media coverage. Journalists narrated numerous accounts of her compassion, skills and bravery while nursing soldiers during the Crimean War (1853–6). Of Jamaican/Scottish origin, Mrs Seacole, or 'Mother Seacole' as she was affectionately called, was also a businesswoman, hotelkeeper, chef and masseuse.

This article will primarily focus on her nursing practices in Jamaica, Panama and the Crimea and the relevance I believe they have today for all those involved in nursing care, including healthcare assistants (HCAs) and assistant practitioners (APs)—see Box 4.

Seacole was a pioneer, as Florence Nightingale was. The nursing profession was in flux and, as seen in Box 3, many of the qualities displayed by Seacole are as relevant for HCAs and APs today as they were in the 1850s.

It is a great puzzle as to why the fame of Mary Seacole faded in Britain not long after her death in London in 1881. In spite of the hope of the great war correspondent WH Russell quoted left and a brief obituary in *The Times* newspaper (1881), she was then virtually forgotten for nearly a century.

Fortunately, this is no longer the case, as witnessed by a wreath-laying ceremony held at her grave each year since 1981, around the anniversary of her death on 14 May. Three years later, there was the publication of a new edition of *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, her best-selling autobiography of 1857 (Alexander and Dewjee, 1984).

The 200th anniversary of Seacole's birth was celebrated in 2005 in a variety of ways: a lost painting of her was unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery in London (*Nursing Standard*, 2005) and a biography was published (Robinson, 2005).

Encouragingly, there is even a fundraising campaign to erect the first ever statue of Mary Seacole, to be located in the grounds of St Thomas' hospital, London (see [www.maryseacoleappeal.org.uk](http://www.maryseacoleappeal.org.uk) and box at the end of this article). As we were going to press, the announcement came that the London Borough of Lambeth had given the go-ahead for the erection of the Seacole statue.

## Background

Seacole was born Mary Jane Grant in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica, of a Jamaican Creole mother and a Scottish father. In her autobiography, Seacole acknowledges the significant influence of both her parents in the direction of her life and work (*Box 1*). As a result, and in various parts of the world, she followed in her mother's footsteps by setting up boarding houses and practising as a 'doctress'. The role was a mixture of a nurse, midwife, masseuse and herbalist, drawing strongly on the traditions of Creole medicine.

Seacole's father was a Scottish soldier who inspired her with a close interest in military affairs, which led her to become, to all effects, a military nurse. In those days, a British colony such as Jamaica had no formal education programmes for nurses. Schools of nursing in England were only set up after the Crimean war, the first being the (Florence) Nightingale Training School, in 1860 at St Thomas' Hospital in London.

It was shortly followed by the Liverpool Training School, established in 1863 by William Rathbone, the philanthropist and pioneer of district nursing. The earliest similar institution in the US was the Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing in New York City, founded in 1873.

Travelling was Seacole's passion and, even before setting off for the Crimea, she had already visited England (twice), Haiti, the Bahamas, Cuba and Panama. In 1836, Mary married Edwin Horatio Hamilton Seacole, godson—some say illegitimate son—of Admiral Lord Nelson.

The couple set up a store in the Jamaican district of Black River, but by 1844 he had become quite a frail man. Seacole wrote: 'I kept him alive by kind nursing and attention as long as I could.' They returned to Kingston, the capital, but a month later, in October 1844, he died and soon after, around 40 years of age and childless, Seacole also lost her mother.

Seacole took over the management of Blundell Hall, her mother's boarding house in Kingston, which also served as a convalescent home for military and naval staff recuperating from illnesses such as cholera and yellow fever. Her nursing knowledge and expertise came from many sources, particularly observing her mother from childhood, then assisting her from the age of 12. Seacole was aware of her growing reputation and acknowledged the learning she had also gathered from visiting doctors:

**'I had gained a reputation as a skilful nurse and doctress, and my house was always full of invalid officers and their wives from Newcastle, or the adjacent Up-Park Camp. Sometimes I had a naval or military surgeon under my roof, from whom I never failed to glean instruction, given, when they learned my love for their profession, with a readiness and kindness I am never likely to forget.'**

*Box 2* sets out examples of Seacole's nursing experience up to and including her work in the Crimea, while the poem below gives a flavour of what contemporaries



Winchester College

*Mary Seacole photograph, only the second photograph of her known, which was discovered in 2009.*

thought of her contribution of 'kind words, and acts, and gold'.

*The sick and sorry can tell the story  
Of her nursing and dosing deeds,  
Regimental MD\* never worked as she  
In helping sick men's needs.*

\* medical doctor

*She gave her aid to all who prayed  
To hungry, and sick and cold:  
Open hand and heart, alike ready to part  
Kind words, and acts, and gold.*

'A Stir For Seacole,' verses 7 and 11 (*Punch*, 1856).

Seacole's nursing philosophy and the methods by which she nursed her patients throughout the world, not just in the Crimean war where here fame was made, will be described, using examples from her autobiography and from independent written sources.

## Box 2: Examples of Mary Seacole's nursing experience

- 1826: Over the following decade, Mary cared for an elderly woman she called her 'patroness' in her final illness and then helped her mother look after British soldiers who were recovering from yellow fever in Kingston, Jamaica
- 1844: Nursed her husband until his death
- 1850: Nursed victims of Kingston cholera epidemic
- Around 1851: Seacole went to Cruces, Panama, to visit her half-brother, where she coped virtually single-handed with a cholera outbreak. She undertook a post-mortem on a child who had died from cholera in order to understand the illness better.
- 1853: Cared for yellow fever victims in Jamaica. Seacole was invited by medical authorities to provide nursing care at Up-Park Camp in Kingston, home of the British army
- 1855-1856: After her offers of volunteering to be a nurse in the Crimean war were repeatedly rejected, Seacole self-funded her boat passage and built the British Hotel in Kadikoi, outside Balaklava, near the war zone. Here she prescribed remedies, dressed wounds as well as running a store and a canteen. Seacole also visited and nursed sick and injured soldiers in their huts, at the Land Transport Corps Hospital opposite her hotel and, despite the dangers, cared for the wounded and dying on the battlefields.

### Essential elements of care

The overwhelming importance of cleanliness, ventilation, warmth, hydration, rest, nourishment and a tender, caring nurse are all clearly set out in Seacole's recollections of nursing patients. On her way to Panama in 1851, to visit her half-brother Edward, she disembarked from the steamer at Navy Bay, near Chagres in Panama, noting in chapter 2 of her autobiography: 'According to all accounts, fever and ague, with some minor diseases, especially dropsy, were having it all their own way at Navy Bay, and although I stayed only one night in the place, my medicine chest was called into requisition. But the sufferers wanted remedies which I could not give them—warmth, nourishment

and fresh air. Beneath leaky tents, damp huts, and even under broken railway wagons, I saw men dying from sheer exhaustion.'

### Taking control: treating cholera victims

Even though the germ theory of disease was only just being recognised, Seacole and other Creole doctresses clearly appreciated the infectious nature of cholera that she had treated in Jamaica and then in Cruces, Panama: 'I believe that the faculty have not yet come to the conclusion that the cholera is contagious, and I am not presumptuous enough to forestall them; but my people have always considered it to be so ...'

When the cholera outbreak commenced, it quickly became clear that the doctor who arrived was too inexperienced. So everybody looked to Seacole, 'the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine'.

The importance that she attributed to cleanliness and ventilation is again demonstrated in her account of visiting cholera victims in the tawdry hut they lived in: 'Around in dirty hammocks, and on the damp floor, were the inmates of this wretched place, male and female, the strong and the sick together, breathing air that nearly choked me ...'

Demonstrating leadership, she took control: 'I set about my duty. The mule-owner was so frightened that he did not hesitate to obey orders, and, by my directions, doors and shutters were open, fires were lighted, and every effort was made to ventilate the place; and then, with the aid of the frightened women, I applied myself to the poor patients.'

Before Seacole travelled to London to offer to nurse soldiers in the Crimea, she obtained a variety of references. A medical officer of a gold-mining company writes that he 'had many opportunities of witnessing her professional zeal and ability in treatment of aggravated forms of tropical diseases. I am personally much indebted for her indefatigable kindness and skill at a time when I am apt to believe that the advice of a practitioner in the North would have little availed' (Alexander and Dewjee, 1984, p123).

### Nursing in the Crimea

Hostilities broke out between the Russian and the Ottoman (Turkish) Empires over the Crimean peninsula in 1853. A British expeditionary force in support of the Ottomans—even then, Britain did not want a too-powerful Russia—reached the Crimea in July 1854. Seacole arrived in London in the autumn of 1854, aged 49 years, and sought interviews to be part of the second group of nurses to go to the Crimea, Florence Nightingale having already left England with the first set on 21 October. Seacole was shocked that, despite such glowing references, she was repeatedly rejected, but refusing to give up, decided to fund her own passage to the war zone, setting sail in January 1855. Following a brief meeting at Scutari hospital with Nightingale, who organised overnight accommodation for her, Seacole, now in her 50th year, decided to go much closer to the frontline and in March 1855 established her 'British Hotel'.

## Box 3: Nursing skills displayed by Mary Seacole

- Empathy
- Tenderness
- Assessment and treatment of wounds and infectious illnesses
- Ability to observe and respond quickly to patients in need of nursing care
- Appreciation of the benefits of cleanliness, ventilation, comfort, hydration and good nutrition
- Understanding of alleviation of pain and home-sickness
- Awareness of the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the dying
- Extremely hard working and a great sense of humour!
- Demonstrated leadership—took command to treat a cholera epidemic in Central America





*Florence Nightingale at Scutari Hospital: director of nursing, while Seacole was advanced nurse practitioner?*

Although it was primarily a store and canteen, Seacole also organised each morning a type of nurse-led outpatient clinic where soldiers queued for her to prescribe remedies and dress their wounds. She also visited and nursed sick and injured soldiers in their huts and, despite the dangers, cared for the wounded and dying on the battlefields. As early as July of that year, subscribers of the *British Morning Advertiser* (1855) read their Crimean correspondent's glowing report that compared Seacole to both Florence Nightingale and Alexis Soyer, an equally renowned French chef and volunteer in the war effort: 'She is both a Miss Nightingale and a Soyer in her way. A native of Jamaica ... she has acquired great experience in the treatment of cases of cholera and diarrhoea. Her powders for the latter are now so renowned that she is constantly beset with applications ...'

The Crimean war ended abruptly in 1856, leaving Seacole destitute, partly due to the amount of sales on credit she had made to the soldiers. Fortunately, financial security came from various fundraising efforts of devoted admirers, as well as from the proceeds of her bestselling autobiography of 1857. The legacy of her tender nursing administrations can be found in the many other written testaments of soldiers, journalists and doctors (Alexander and Dewjee, 1984; Robinson, 2005).

After the war, *Punch* magazine (1857) recalled that: 'Poor old MRS SEACOLE was ... a mother and a nurse to the wounded soldier ... she often marched under fire, distributing refreshments and restoratives among the wounded, and dressing their injuries with her own hands.'

## Key Points

- Mary Seacole (1805-1881) was a Jamaican/Scottish nurse and businesswoman.
- Demonstrated resilience, determination and leadership when, despite repeated rejections in London, she self-funded her boat passage to the Crimea to nurse the soldiers.
- Included Creole herbal remedies to treat patients suffering from cholera and yellow fever.
- Appreciated the importance of hygiene, ventilation, warmth, hydration, rest, empathy, good nutrition and care for the dying.
- After fading from history, Seacole's achievements are now again recognised, with a fundraising appeal to erect a statue to her in the grounds of St Thomas' Hospital, London.

## Box 4: What relevance does Mary Seacole's story have for nursing today?

- Seacole's story is a wonderful example of how it is possible to overcome barriers of age, race and class to achieve ambitions
- A reminder that it is still possible to nurse patients with respect and tenderness, even in squalid and dangerous environments
- The value of always being willing to learn as much as possible in order to improve nursing care
- The importance of cleanliness in the hospital and home
- Adequate nutrition and hydration is as important for nursing today as recognised by Seacole in the Victorian era
- The need for a nurse to work well with other health professionals, such as doctors
- The history of nursing can alert us to what we should know today

Back in London, Seacole became a masseuse to the Princess of Wales and also made trips to Jamaica. Following a stroke, Seacole died at her home in Paddington, London on 14 May 1881, at the age of 76 years. As requested in her will, she was buried in St Mary's Catholic Cemetery, Kensal Green, London.

## Seacole and Nightingale

During the Crimean war, Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole were highly valued by the soldiers, who praised both for their unstinting care and devotion. There were important differences in some aspects of their nursing contribution. Nightingale's achievements are well known, be that as a lobbyist for soldier's welfare, hospital administrator and superintendant of nurses. Today she may perhaps be described as a director of nursing.

Seacole's patient care was more hands-on and in a variety of settings. This would include prescribing remedies, suturing wounds and nursing the soldiers at the British Hotel, in their huts and also on the battlefield, regardless of any dangers. She may well be described now as an advanced nurse practitioner. See the author's YouTube discussion, *What can Florence and Mary teach us about nursing today?* (Anionwu, 2011).

# MARY SEACOLE MEMORIAL STATUE APPEAL

## Support the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal

**Text your donation free of charge** Courtesy of Vodafone and JustGiving, it is now possible to donate anything from £1 by text [free of charge] to the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal. Let's say that you wanted to donate £5—just text to 70070 the following: MARY11 £5.

On 24 April, Lambeth Council gave planning permission for the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue to be sited in the grounds of St Thomas' hospital. Of the £500 000 needed, £100 000 has been raised, so your donation will be a great help.

**Further information:** [www.maryseacoleappeal.org.uk](http://www.maryseacoleappeal.org.uk)

As Seacole's story is less well known, the following accounts of her nursing activities during the war are included, one by a journalist and the other by a doctor. The first is written by Sir William Howard Russell, the eminent war correspondent for *The Times* newspaper and was published after the war.

**'I have seen her go down, under fire, with her little store of creature comforts for our wounded**

**men; and a more tender or skilful hand about a wound or broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons. I saw her at the assault on the Redan, at the Tchernay, at the fall of Sebastopol, laden, not with plunder, good old soul! but with wine, bandages, and food for the wounded or the prisoners.'** (Russell, 1857).

The second is a testimonial written in the Crimea in June 1856 by Sir John Hall, Inspector-General of Hospitals and included in chapter 13 of Seacole's autobiography (Alexander and Dewjee, 1984, p170).

**Head-Quarters, Camp, June 30, 1856: 'I have much pleasure in bearing testimony to Mrs Seacole's kindness and attention to the sick of the Railway Labourers' Army Works Corps and Land Transport Corps. She not only, from the knowledge she acquired in the West Indies, was enabled to administer appropriate remedies for their ailments, but, what was of as much or more importance, she charitably furnished them with proper nourishment, which they had no means of obtaining except in hospital, and most of that class had an objection to go into hospital.'**

## Conclusion

The name of Mary Seacole, voted Greatest Black Briton in 2004 (Young, 2004) is now well known among many people, including nurses (Anionwu, 2005). As a Victorian woman, she overcame obstacles of gender, class and race in order to expertly nurse the sick and dying in various parts of the world. In chapter 16 of her autobiography, Seacole beautifully describes the satisfaction she gained from nursing: 'And the grateful words and smiles which rewarded me for binding a wound or giving cooling drink was a pleasure worth risking life for at any time.' **BJHCA**

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*Digital mockup of the Mary Seacole statue in situ at St Thomas' Hospital*