

MARY SEACOLE

Several people have asked for information on Mary Seacole. There are some excellent texts. One particular text (which is well worth reading for other references) is called *Staying Power - The History of Black People in Britain* by Peter Fryer (1984).

Besides Mary Seacole, Fryer writes about many of the black people who have lived in Britain and who have contributed to British history. *Staying Power* is published in paper back by Pluto Press ISBN 0-86104-749-4. I have the fifth impression, printed in 1991. In referring to Mary Seacole, Fryer quotes from *Mary Seacole: Jamaican National Heroine and 'Doctress' in the Crimean War* by Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee, (Brent Library Service, 1982). Several editions of *The Times and Wonderful adventures of Mrs Seacole in many lands*, ed WJS (James Blackwood, 1858), and others. I have read the *Wonderful adventures* and would recommend it to anyone who is interested in this 'lost' historical figure. I am quoting five pages from Fryer's text. They begin on p 246 and end on p 252.

'A challenge to empire of a very different kind was that of Mary Seacole, the Jamaican nurse whose reputation just after the Crimean War (1853-6) rivalled Florence Nightingale's. Mary Seacole's challenge, quite simply, was to have her skills put to proper use in spite of her being black. A born healer and a woman of driving energy, she side-stepped official indifference, hauteur, and prejudice; got herself out to the war front by her own efforts and at her own expense; risked her life to bring comfort to wounded and dying soldiers; and became the first black woman to make her mark in British public life. But while Florence Nightingale was turned into a legend in the service of empire, Mary Seacole was soon relegated to an obscurity from which she has only recently been rescued, by Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee.

Mary Seacole was born in Kingston around the year 1805. Her father was a Scottish soldier possibly called Grant; her mother, a competent practitioner of Jamaican traditional medicine, kept a boarding-house where she cared for invalid officers and their wives. From early youth, Mary had 'a yearning for medical knowledge and practice'; at first she practised on her doll and on cats and dogs, but in due course she was helping her mother look after the invalid officers. She soaked up knowledge from her mother, soon gaining a reputation as 'a skilful nurse and doctress'.

Both before and after her marriage to Horatio Seacole, who died young, she travelled widely. There were two trips to Britain, where London street-urchins jeered at her. In 1851, during the California gold rush, she joined her brother Edward in Panama, where she opened an hotel. Soon she had saved her first cholera patient and had gained valuable knowledge from a post-mortem examination of an orphan baby that had died of this disease - which she herself contracted and recovered from. A white American who toasted her, as 'Aunty Seacole', for her work in the cholera epidemic, ventured to suggest that she be bleached in order to make her 'as acceptable in any company as she deserves to be'. Mary Seacole replied stingingly:

"I must say that I don't altogether appreciate your friend's kind wishes with respect to my complexion. If it had been as dark as any nigger's, I should have been just as happy and as useful, and as much respected by those whose respect I value; and as to his offer of bleaching me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As to the society which the process might gain me admission into, all I can say is, that, judging from the specimens

I have met with here and elsewhere, I don't think that I shall lose much by being excluded from it. So, gentlemen, I drink to you and the general reformation of American manners."

When she returned to Jamaica in 1853 her house was filled with victims of the yellow-fever epidemic. One man died in her arms, and the medical authorities asked her to provide nurses for the stricken soldiers. The following autumn found her in London, where news was beginning to come through of the collapse of the British army's nursing system in the Crimea and the agonies, heightened by gross mismanagement, of the sick and wounded. Feeling that her skill and experience could and should be put to good use, Mary Seacole applied in turn to the War Office, the army medical department, the quartermaster general's department, and the secretary for war. She produced fine testimonials and pointed out that she already knew many of the officers and soldiers in the regiments concerned, having nursed them when they were stationed in Jamaica.

But authority closed ranks against this plump, middle-aged West Indian lady in her flamboyant red or yellow dress and blue straw bonnet from which flowed a length of scarlet ribbon. She was turned away by everybody - including one of Florence Nightingale's assistants, in whose face she read 'the fact, that had there been a vacancy, I should not have been chosen to fill it'. Was it possible, she asked herself, 'the American prejudices against colour had some root here? Did these ladies shrink from accepting my aid because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat duskier skin than theirs?' And, in her disappointment, Mary Seacole wept in the street.

A distant relative, a man called Day, was going to Balaklava on business. They came to an agreement to launch a firm called Seacole and Day, and to open, as a joint enterprise, a store and an hotel near the British camp in the Crimea. So, taking with her a large stock of medicines and home comforts, Mary Seacole, at the age of 50, went out to the battle zone as a sutler - ie one who follows an army and sells provisions to the troops. Skill, experience, and personality together made her the right woman in the right place at the right time.

Hardly had she landed at Balaklava when a party of sick and wounded arrived on the wharf. Here was work for her to do:

"So strong was the old impulse within me, that I waited for no permission, but seeing a poor infantryman stretched upon a pallet, groaning heavily, I ran up to him at once, and eased the stiff dressing. Lightly my practised fingers ran over the familiar work, and well was I rewarded when the poor fellow's groans subsided into a restless uneasy mutter...He had been hit in the forehead, and I think his sight was gone. I stooped down, and raised some tea to his baked lips...Then his hand touched mine, and rested there, and I heard him mutter indistinctly, as though he discovery had arrested his wandering senses - "Ha! This is surely a woman's hand"...He continued to hold my hand in his feeble grasp, and whisper "God bless you, woman - whoever you are, God bless you! - over and over again."

Mary Seacole's British Hotel opened its doors in the early summer of 1855 at Spring Hill near Kadikoi, 'a small town of huts' between Balaklava and the besieged city of Sevastopol. It was built from floating wreckage, for virtually all the trees in the area had long since been cut down. Soon almost the entire British army knew of 'Mother Seacole's', where 'you might get everything...from an anchor down to a needle'. The soldiers were her 'sons' and she was their 'mother'. At the sound of a new arrival, she would come to the door, crying: "Who is my new son?" That was how she greeted the head chef of

London's Reform Club, Alexis Soyer, who revolutionised army cooking methods during his visit to the Crimea. He describes her as 'an old dame of jovial appearance, but a few shades darker than the white lily'.

A lieutenant in the 63rd (West Suffolk) Regiment wrote in his memoirs:

"She was a wonderful woman...All the men swore by her, and in case of any malady would seek her advice and use her herbal medicines, in preference to reporting themselves to their own doctors. That she did effect some cures is beyond doubt, and her never failing presence among the wounded after a battle and assisting them mad her beloved by the rank and file of the whole army."

Another account of 'store-dispensary-hospital claims that:

"She had the secret of a recipe for cholera and dysentery; and liberally dispensed the specific, alike to those who could pay and those who could not. It was bestowed and an amount of personal kindness which, though not an item of the original prescription, she evidently deemed essential to the cure, and innumerable sufferers had cause to be grateful."

Through some of the army doctors, despite her saving them a lot of work, may well have looked on her as 'a cunning and resourceful quack', others were less bigoted. The assistant surgeon of the 90th Light Infantry saw her on the Balaklava landing-stage, serving hot tea to the wounded as, numb and with cold in a temperature well below freezing-point and exhausted by the long journey from the front, they waited to be lifted into the boats:

"She did not spare herself...In rain and snow, in storm and tempest, day after day she was at her self-chosen post, with her stove and kettle, in any shelter she could find, brewing tea for all who wanted it, and they were many. Sometimes more than 200 sick would be embarked in on day, but Mr Seacole was always equal to the occasion."

Mary Seacole was generally up and busy by daybreak, serving breakfast to off-duty troops, caring for the sick and wounded able to make their own way to her hut, visiting the military hospital with books and paper, mending torn uniforms, Rats and thieves gave her much trouble: she lost over 20 horses, 4 mules, 80 goats, and numerous sheet, pigs and poultry. Frequently she was under fire and she was so overweight that she found it easier to take cover than to rise to her feet again when the danger pad passed:

"Those around would cry out, 'Lie down, mother, lie down!' and with very undignified and unladylike haste I had to embrace the earth, and remain there until the same voices would laughingly assure me that the danger was over, or one more thoughtful than the rest, would come to give a helping hand and hope that the old lady was neither hit nor frightened."

It was W H Russell, the first modern war correspondent - and the last war correspondent to be free from military censorship - who made Mary Seacole famous in Britain. This 'kind and successful physician', he wrote in a dispatch dated 14 September 1855, 'doctors and curses all manner of men with extraordinary success. She is always in attendance near the battle-field to aid the wounded and has earned many a poor fellow's blessing'.

She was, as she had vowed to be, the first woman to enter Sevastopol when it fell. But the end of the war left the firm of Seacole and Day with expensive and now unsalable stores on their hands. They were forced into bankruptcy, and

Mary Seacole returned to England, 'ruined in fortune and injured in health' to live at 1 Tavistock Street, Covent Garden. There was talk of her setting up a provision store at Aldershot, but this scheme evidently fell through, for a letter in The Times was soon demanding:

"Where are the Crimeans? Have a few months erased from their memories those many acts of comforting kindness which made the name of the old mother venerated throughout the camp? While the benevolent deeds of Florence Nightingale are being handed down to posterity...are the humbler actions of Mrs Seacole to be entirely forgotten...?"

Lord Rokeby, who had commanded a British division in the Crimea, joined with Lord George Paget, another Crimea commander, and others to arrange for her benefit a gigantic four-day musical festival at the Royal Surrey Gardens in Kennington. There were almost 1,000 performers, including nine military bands and an orchestra, and Mary Seacole sat between Rokeby and Paget in the front of the centre gallery. At the end of both parts of the programme her name was 'shouted by a thousand voices' and 'the genial old lady rose from her place and smiled benignantly on the assembled multitude, amid a tremendous and continued cheering'. "Never", wrote a reporter, "Did woman seem happier." Unfortunately, though the admission charge was quintupled for the first performance, the festival raised only £228. At an official dinner in honour of the Guards, Mary Seacole, was 'cheered, and chaired,...by the adoring soldiers', receiving, it is claimed, 'the reception that Florence Nightingale would have had, had she not studiously avoided it'. In 1857 Mary Seacole published her autobiography, an outstandingly vivid piece of writing: the 'as-told-to' narrative is so skilfully edited that her voice, personality, and individual turn of phrase shine through on page after page. Wonderful adventures of Mrs Seacole in many lands is prefaced by a further tribute from the pen of W H Russell: "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."

England did, of course, forget Mary Seacole very quickly. Prince Victor of Hohenlohe-Langenburg (afterwards known as Count Gleichen), sculptor and nephew of Queen Victoria, did a bust of her. She was awarded a Crimean medal, and one officer who had known her in the Crimea saw her wearing it in London some years later: "The medal first attracted my eye...Of course I stopped her, and we had a short talk together about Crimean times." But the last 25 years of her life were passed in obscurity. Not, however, in penury, for when she died on 14 May 1881, she left over £2,500. Some money and a diamond ring went to Count Gleichen, and her 'best set of pearl ornaments' were left to her eldest daughter. Rokeby and his daughter were also remembered. The Times had room for a curt obituary: "She was present at many battles and at the risk of her life often carried the wounded off the field."

Mary Seacole was buried, by her own wish, in the Roman Catholic section of Kensal Green cemetery. In 1973 her grave was reconsecrated and the headstone was restored.'

End