

An Introduction to: Mary Seacole

Mary Seacole (1805-1881), business woman and nurse of the Crimean War gives her name to Seacole House at The John Warner School in Hoddesdon. Seacole House represents the discipline of the *social sciences* and the school value of *respect*.



Summary of Life

Was Mary a Creole, mulatto or quadroon?

One of the most significant things about Mary Seacole relates to her race. Attitudes towards non-white members of British society in the nineteenth century were almost wholly negative and any sense of legal equality

between different races did not come about until the second half of the twentieth century, one hundred years after Mary died.

Mary Jane Grant was born in Kingston, Jamaica (part of the British Empire at the time) in 1805. Her father was a white man from Scotland based in Jamaica with the British army and her mother was a Creole (a person of mixed European and black descent). Legally, Mary was classified as a *mulatto* (a person born from one white parent and one black parent) but technically speaking she was a *quadroon* (a person with one bi-racial parent and one white parent).

Race would play a significant part in her life and meant she had to overcome prejudice, discrimination and lack of opportunity to achieve her remarkable successes.

How did she learn to be a nurse?

Mary's mother ran Blundell Hall, one of the finest hotels (These 'hotels' were more like hostels caring for the sick) in Kingston. Mary acquired her nursing skills from her mother and also from doctors stay at the boarding house. As she grew up, Mary worked alongside her mother and was called to assist at the British Army Hospital in Kingston at times. She also developed a strong desire to travel and took two trips to England as a teenager.

What experiences helped to define her?

On 10 November 1836, Mary married Edwin Horatio Hamilton Seacole. Edwin remained in poor health through most of their marriage and died in 1844. The same year Mary's mother also passed away. Seacole never remarried and instead turned her attention to managing her mother's hotel and nursing. She treated victims in the cholera epidemic of 1850 during which around 32,000 Jamaicans lost their lives. Her experience during the epidemic proved very beneficial in later years.

What nursing experience did she have before the Crimean War?

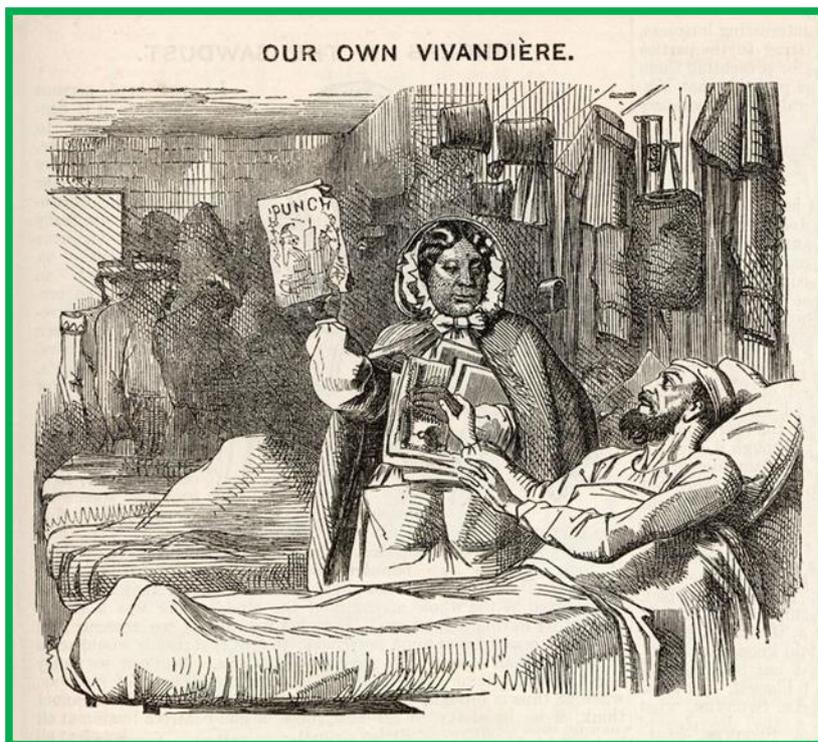
Seacole's half-brother Edward operated a hotel in Cruces, Panama. In 1851, Mary travelled there to visit her brother. The following year Panama was struck by a massive cholera outbreak. Seacole treated a patient who survived which enhanced her reputation. An inexperienced doctor was the only other alternative and this led to many patients visiting her. Seacole's treatment was moderately successful. She charged the rich but treated the poor for free. She herself sickened towards the end of the epidemic but survived.

What happened when Seacole tried to join the British nursing contingency assigned to the Crimea?

The Crimean War, between the Russian Empire and an alliance of the U.K., France, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire, broke out in October 1853. In 1854 there were reports of a lack of necessities and nursing care for soldiers in the war. Seacole, who was in London at the time to attend to some business, applied to government offices offering to help but her plea was rejected despite her nursing experience. Seacole attributes the rejection to racial prejudice.

What contribution did Mary Seacole make during the Crimean War?

After her failure to gain a nursing position, Seacole decided to open a business instead. Seacole formed a partnership with a relative of her husband's, Thomas Day. She went to Crimea and set up a hotel within a mile of the British headquarters naming it Spring Hill. Apart from selling food, supplies, and medicines to the troops, Seacole also assisted the wounded at the military hospitals. Her remedies for cholera and dysentery were particularly valued.



Apart from her services at the hotel, Seacole also provided catering for spectators at the battles. On one occasion while attending wounded soldiers under fire, she dislocated her right thumb. A correspondent of The Times reported that Seacole was always in attendance near the battle-field to aid the wounded. Her work as a nurse was much celebrated. Like Florence Nightingale she too was

hailed as “The Mother of the Army.” While Nightingale was “The Lady with the Lamp,” Mary Seacole was called “The Creole with the Tea Mug.”

What happened to Mary after the war?

When the peace treaty was signed on March 30, 1856, the troops began to leave. Seacole and her partner Day had already brought in expensive supplies. They were forced to auction them for lower than expected prices and hence she returned to England destitute. Service personnel organized a benefit to help pay her debts but it wasn't enough. To raise more money, Seacole wrote her autobiography *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*. The book became a bestseller. Also Queen Victoria helped with a second Seacole Fund, which generated enough money for Seacole to live the rest of her life comfortably.

Contribution and Significance

In 2012 the coalition government faced a huge controversy when it was reported that the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, was considering removing Mary Seacole from the national curriculum in history proposing instead a stronger focus on traditional figures such as Oliver Cromwell and Winston Churchill. The view chimed with organisations like the Crimean War Research Society, whose vice-President, William Curtis had described the ‘hype’ surrounding Mary Seacole as ‘a disgrace to the serious study of history.’ Detractors of Seacole, often supporters of Florence Nightingale, tended to suggest that people had exaggerated the impact she had during the Crimean War, that many of the stories about her were unproven and that her growing fame was more to do with the political correctness of British society rather than the accurate study of history.

Despite some support, opposition to this contentious decision was fierce and following the publication of a petition signed by 35,000 people and pressure from Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, Mary Seacole took a central position in the new secondary history curriculum alongside Florence Nightingale and Annie Besant in the teaching of ‘Britain’s social and cultural development during the Victorian era’.



Mary Seacole's revered position as one of the most celebrated women in our country's largely male-dominated version of history is well-deserved. In 2004 she was voted as the greatest black Briton of all time, she has been adopted as a champion of nursing by The Royal College of Nursing, she has appeared on coins and stamps, her portrait hangs next to those of Florence Nightingale and Queen Victoria in The National Portrait Gallery and her statue proudly stands outside St Thomas' Hospital in London.

Although history is meant to be the pursuit of the whole human story, it is too often restricted by the culture and customs of the very society it is trying to understand. The voices of those not considered worthy often get muffled or silenced in a narrative that is dominated by the privileged and dominant. "There is no justice in history"¹ and too often some of the most important and fascinating aspects of our past are ignored because of prejudices based on race, gender, religion or politics. If we make no attempt to unearth these hidden histories, then we perpetuate the narrow view that great deeds were only achieved by privileged members of society.

The story of Mary Seacole reminds us that people are capable of achieving remarkable things in life, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable barriers.

¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens* 2014