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## Women in History--Mary Seacole

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# Women in History

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## Mary Seacole

Bonnie Harmer

Born in Jamaica in 1805, Mary Seacole (nee Grant), was the daughter of a Black Creole boarding house owner and a Scottish Army officer. Like many Creole doctress women, Mary was taught African herbal medicine arts from her mother. In addition to understanding traditional herbal medicine, she gleaned an understanding of Western medicine from the British military physicians who were stationed on the island colony. Mother Seacole, as she was affectionately called, garnered an outstanding reputation as a compassionate nurse and a competent doctress as she cared for sick and injured British officers and their families (Seacole, 1988).

Widowed by age 40, Seacole's longing for adventure and her entrepreneurial character prompted her to embark on numerous journeys to England and throughout the Caribbean. Carrying jars of homemade West Indian preserves and delicacies to sell en route, and equipped with her medicine chest to treat the ailing, she continually battled social prejudices, thieves, and harsh travel conditions (Seacole, 1988).

Seacole, in her autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), described the wretched conditions in which she found herself in Panama during 1850. She characterized it as an uncivilized, frontier land where lawless travelers traversed to and from the California gold fields, ill prepared to fend off the bandits and tropical diseases. The cholera epidemic that engulfed the region killed thousands; and Seacole became lauded for her expertise in treating victims. She conducted an autopsy to learn more about cholera and taught disease prevention and treatment to those living in squalor (Seacole, 1988).

Recognizing her leadership and expertise, Seacole was invited to assume the supervision of Nursing Services at the Kingston headquarters of the British Army upon her return to Jamaica in 1853 (Anionwu, 2004). The same year, the British military was deployed to Turkey to battle Russian troops in the Crimean War. Reading reports of the tremendous number of deaths due to cholera and dysentery, Seacole was certain she could be of service. Using her own funds, she crossed the Atlantic to offer her assistance.

Seacole's requests to join the campaign in Crimea were refused by British officials on four separate occasions; including once by the young,

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novice nurse who had been appointed to head the nursing services in Crimea—Florence Nightingale (Anionwu, 2004; Seacole, 1988). Undaunted by the lack of support from the British authorities, Mary Seacole, 50 years of age, traveled alone to the front lines in Turkey where she was reunited with many of the men she had known in Jamaica. Several miles from the front, she built the “British Hotel” to provide meals and medical care to those who sought her services.

Risking her life, Mary Seacole ventured onto the battlefield, caring for wounded and dying soldiers. Testimonials of Seacole’s heroism and her engaging personality, which were often published in the *London Times* newspaper, warmed the hearts of British readers, and guaranteed her popularity when she returned to London. But, despite the accolades, when the war ended in 1856, Seacole returned to England bankrupt. Encouraged by her friends and a British public that was enthralled with her story; she was persuaded to write her autobiography (which was published in 1857). Proceeds from the best-selling book assisted her to repay her debts and live comfortably in London. Mary Seacole became an advocate for the needs of war widows and orphans, a masseuse to the Princess of Wales, and she maintained popularity with the British public until her death in 1881 (Anionwu, 2004; Watters, 2004).

Despite the recognition bestowed upon Seacole during her lifetime, her name and her story faded with the years into obscurity until being rediscovered in the 1980s (Iveson, 1983; Watson, 1984). Her autobiography was reprinted in 1988, allowing new generations to read her words, and to recognize Mary Seacole’s contributions as a courageous, independent woman leader who overcame tremendous barriers in her quest to serve others.

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