

The Invitation That Never Came: Mary Seacole After the Crimea

Helen Rappaport on Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale and the Post-Crimean War reputation of the woman recently voted 'greatest black Briton': Mary Seacole.



In the summer of 1856, after the last British troops had made their weary journey home from the Crimea at the end of hostilities, there were numerous public celebrations to mark the end of what had been a bitter and difficult campaign. Among those welcomed back was a stout, middle-aged Jamaican widow, whose familiar *nom de guerre* – 'Mother Seacole' – had become legendary during the sixteen months she had been in the Crimea. But it wasn't just the troops who held her in high regard; their families too had come to hear of her exploits – as nurse, cook and sutler – in all the newspapers.

Mary Seacole (c.1805-81) was by no means unique in her native skills as a nurse and doctress. She came from a long line of Creole women trained in the herbal arts, many of whom had been integral to the care of sick slaves on the British plantations. Traditional, too, was the combination of the professions of doctress and lodging-house keeper, which Mary had pursued in Kingston until the early 1850s. Here she had earned a reputation for the care of sick British army and naval officers and their wives. She had then run a provisioning business and a succession of boarding houses in the Panamanian Isthmus during the Gold Rush years of the early 1850s, where her medical skills had frequently been called upon, particularly in the treatment of yellow fever.

Not content with this adventure, the intrepid Seacole had then taken her freelance nursing skills and business enterprise to the war in the Crimea, after being turned down as an official nurse by the War Office, most probably on racial grounds. At her ramshackle 'British Hotel' at Spring Hill outside Balaklava, her Creole herbal decoctions to fight the scourge of camp life – enteric disease – were much in demand. She became legendary for her fearlessness under fire, often riding to the frontlines to offer help and sustenance to the wounded, and returned to England armed with testimonials to her good works. These had already been brought to the public's attention by *The Times* correspondent W.H.Russell, who in September 1855 had reported how 'in the hour of their illness' men from the Army Work Corps in particular, had 'found a kind and successful physician' in Seacole, who 'doctors and cures all manner of men with extraordinary success'. Such sentiments were echoed in letters and journals by the troops themselves, all commending Seacole's unstinting service to the sick, whom she often treated gratis, as well as her 'bountiful kindness', her good humour and the prodigious energy with which she boiled up dozens of plum puddings during the Crimean Christmas of 1855.

At a 'Dinner to the Guards' held at the Royal Surrey Gardens in August 1856, Mary Seacole had been a guest of honour, 'conspicuous among the fair visitors in the upper side gallery', according to the *News of the World*, 'whose dark features were quite radiant with delight and good humour as she gazed on the pleasant scene below'. So rapturous was the welcome she was given, reported *The Times*, as a group of soldiers 'chaired her around the gardens', that two burly sergeants had to rush forward to protect Mary from the crush of the 20,000 people trying to get a look at her. In July 1856 *The Times* announced that 'copies of an admirable likeness of the MOTHER of the British ARMY' were now on sale at the Royal Polytechnic Institution in Regent Street, priced 5s., 10s. and £2 2s.

Taking into account all the public acclaim accorded Seacole after her return, as a nursing heroine of the Crimean conflict like Florence Nightingale, one might have thought she would be deemed worthy of her monarch's commendation and certainly of a personal audience with the Queen at Windsor. But such an invitation never came. Its absence is particularly puzzling given Queen Victoria's curiosity about her black and Asian colonial subjects. For, when it came to issues of race, class and religion the Queen had very

determined and, for her times, unconventional views. In particular, she appeared immune, if not 'colour blind', to the preconceived ideas of her peers about racial inferiority – priding herself that she always judged individuals on their merits alone.

In 1833, as Princess Victoria, she had wholeheartedly welcomed the emancipation of Britain's slaves; together with Prince Albert she would be a staunch advocate of the emancipation of the American slaves too. In 1851, Victoria had been fascinated by the presence at the Great Exhibition of a solitary black exhibitor, Josiah Henson, himself a former slave and the inspiration for the eponymous hero of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). In March 1877, when Henson revisited Britain on a preaching and lecture tour at the age of eighty-seven, the Queen invited him and his wife to Windsor. Here, they were received with considerable warmth, Victoria informing Henson that she had taken the 'deepest interest' in his 'afflicted people' all her life. As late as 1892, Victoria went out of her way to receive Mrs Martha Ann Ricks, another elderly former slave, who had travelled to England from Liberia specially to present her with a handmade quilt bearing the motif of a Liberian coffee tree. An awestruck Mrs Ricks had been entertained to lunch at Windsor, where she had expressed her devotion to the Queen, whom, as the *Illustrated London News* later reported, 'she regard[ed] as the Mother of her people, and of all the poor and oppressed'.

Recent studies of Queen Victoria have thrown light on other colonial subjects in whom she had taken an interest, in particular three children. The first was the young Indian maharaja, Duleep Singh, who had been forced in 1849 to cede the legendary Koh-i-noor diamond to the British Crown, and whom Victoria took under her wing when he settled in England in 1854. Less well known is the Queen's close interest in the West African slave girl, Sarah Forbes Bonetta who was brought to Britain in 1850 as a gift to Victoria from King Guezo of Dahomey who had previously captured her. Undoubtedly the most touching is Victoria's compassion for Prince Alamayou, the orphaned son of the emperor of Abyssinia, when he arrived in Britain lonely and friendless in 1868. She undertook to pay for his education in England, as she had done for Sarah Forbes Bonetta's, and deeply mourned their premature deaths – Prince Alamayou's in 1879 and Sally's in 1881 – both having fallen victim to the damp British climate.



The fact that Queen Victoria never solicited a personal meeting with Mary Seacole cannot therefore have been a matter of Seacole's colour. Nor did Seacole lack personal recommendation from members of the Queen's own family: two of Victoria's nephews, Prince Edward of Saxe-Weimar and Count Gleichen had made her acquaintance in the Crimea and possibly received medical attention from Seacole while serving there; the Queen's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, who commanded a division in the Crimea, was also a loyal supporter and patron after the war. Nor were they alone. Many other military and aristocratic patrons had joined them in openly putting their names to a Seacole Fund, followed by a series of benefit concerts at the Royal Surrey Gardens, attended by 80,000 people – both set up to rescue Mary from financial ruin when the war ended.

Yet Mary Seacole was only acknowledged by Queen Victoria, in a brief and circumspect statement in a circular published in *The Times* on January 30th, 1867, when a second fund was set up to ensure her financial security 'in her declining years'. The Prince of Wales had donated £25 and his brother, the Duke of Edinburgh £15. When it was mooted that the Queen would make a donation of £50, this was on the understanding that it should be strictly private, and that her name should not appear on the list of subscribers published in full in *The Times* on March 11th, the protocol apparently being that the Queen 'never heads a subscription in favour of any individual'. All we have from Queen Victoria in acknowledgement of Seacole's nursing in the Crimea is her statement, at the head of the published circular, to the effect that the Queen had been 'graciously pleased to express her approbation of Mrs Seacole's services' and her 'kind interest in her future welfare'.

There can be only one rational explanation for the Queen's reticence: that good old Victorian value, Propriety. Mary Seacole's professional life – as a sutler to the troops, and in particular a purveyor of alcohol – was the inhibiting factor, despite her widely acknowledged nursing gifts. Indeed, with regard to the Queen's own personal opinion of Mary Seacole, the silence is deafening. In Victoria's letters and journals, Mary Seacole is conspicuous by her absence. Yet Josiah Henson, Mrs Ricks, Sarah Forbes Bonetta, Duleep Singh and Prince Alamayou can all be found in them in the Royal Archives at Windsor, but not one line on Mary Seacole. One finds oneself asking the question: was Seacole's name deliberately erased from the record? Could it be that Victoria's youngest daughter, the censorious Princess Beatrice, who so diligently transcribed, edited and bowdlerized her mother's journals after her death deemed the Queen's remarks about an old Creole woman to be of no particular significance? (It is certainly known that Beatrice had no

qualms about editing out her mother's often affectionate references to her more lowly servants.) Or did somebody turn the Queen's mind against making a public acknowledgement of Seacole?

There is only one logical candidate to fit the latter argument: Florence Nightingale – a woman whom the Queen revered as a paragon of her sex and whose opinions she took as gospel. Victoria was anxious to meet Nightingale the moment she returned from Scutari. In January 1856, she had written commending her for 'the Christian devotion which you have displayed during this great and bloody war', for she would find it 'a very great satisfaction ... to make the acquaintance of one who has set so bright an example to our sex'. But Nightingale, like Seacole, did not leave until the final troops had set off home, both women returning in the late summer of 1856.

Queen Victoria's long-awaited meeting with Nightingale finally came on September 21st, when Nightingale made a private visit to the Queen's physician, Sir James Clark, at Birk Hall, a couple of miles from Balmoral. An afternoon's private conversation with the Queen and Prince Albert was followed by several impromptu visits made to Nightingale at Birk Hall by the Queen, as well as informal dinners with the royal family, during which the two women had commiserated at length on the war and Nightingale's work at Scutari.

At some stage the Queen must, surely, have interrogated Nightingale about the celebrated Mrs Seacole. Nightingale had met Mary Seacole at Scutari, on which occasion she had flatly declined Seacole's offer of nursing assistance. With this in mind, one might also expect that in Florence Nightingale's 13,000 surviving letters there might be several indications of her opinion of Seacole, particularly once Lord Rokeby had written to *The Times* in November 1856 to initiate the public fund-raising appeal for Seacole. But this is not the case. Nightingale's published correspondence contains not a word. Again, it is as though Seacole's name has been deliberately excluded. Or has it? An important clue to Nightingale's position on Mary Seacole has turned up in an unpublished letter recently discovered by Nightingale's biographer, Hugh Small.

This is dated August 5th, 1870, written by Nightingale to her brother-in-law, the Liberal MP, Sir Harry Verney. The fact that the letter is clearly marked, at the top 'Burn' would suggest that any similar comments made by Nightingale on Seacole have been consigned to the flames. The letter makes clear that, despite Nightingale's concession that Mrs Seacole 'was very kind to the men' and 'did some good' in the Crimea, she was not the kind of person who should be associated with the public face of the new profession of nursing. One might also conclude that as far as Nightingale was concerned, Mary Seacole was not the kind of woman with whom queens should be mixing either. The problem, for Nightingale, as it would no doubt have been for all pious Victorians, was that Mary Seacole had been a purveyor of alcohol in the Crimea, and, in Florence's own words, had 'made many drunk'. In alluding to Mary's British Hotel, Nightingale admitted to Sir Harry that she would not go so far as to 'call it a "bad house"', but it was, nonetheless, 'something not very unlike it'. (This fact has been substantiated by eyewitnesses such as Captain Scott of the 9th regiment, who talks of arriving at Mrs Seacole's one dark, rainy night to find 'a number of French Officers having a wine party, and very uproarious'. Other officers remarked too upon her mulled claret being 'first rate'.) For Nightingale, Seacole's association with alcohol smacked too much of the notorious Mrs Gamps of old, leading her to the view that

Anyone who employs Mrs Seacole will introduce much kindness – also much drunkenness and improper conduct wherever she is.

Finally, in a clear swipe at Seacole's top brass patrons, she added:

I conclude (& believe) that respectable Officers were entirely ignorant of what I ... could not help knowing.

One cannot help wondering how Nightingale had inside knowledge of Seacole's exploits up near the front lines on the Crimean Peninsular, when she, for the most part, had spent her war 300 miles away across the Black Sea, at Scutari.

Another, more telling reason behind Nightingale's implacable opposition to Seacole has been revealed by the latest Nightingale biographer, Mark Bostridge, who in a *Guardian* article in February 2004 described the notes he had uncovered of a private conversation between Florence and her sister Parthenope about Seacole after the war. During it, Florence had asserted that Seacole had had a fourteen-year-old illegitimate daughter with her in the Crimea, fathered, so she alleged by a 'Colonel Bunbury'. This would certainly fit the eyewitness testimony of the esteemed French chef Alexis Soyer who, while assisting Nightingale in the reform of army catering arrangements encountered what he assumed was Seacole's 'daughter' Sally at the British Hotel – his assumption long thought to have been an error, because everybody in the Crimea called

Seacole 'Mother'. Sally remains an enigma – a girl so lovely that Soyer dubbed her 'The Fair Maid of the Eastern War'. Bostridge also claims that Nightingale had an additional motive for scuppering the reputation of a woman whom she dismissed as a 'quack': that Florence's old adversary, Sir John Hall, Inspector-General of Hospitals in the Crimea, had given Seacole 'his sanction' to prescribe her own herbal medicines while in the Crimea – much to Florence's professional disgust.

Perhaps the most intriguing comment of all, in the suppressed letter of 1870, is the suggestion by Nightingale, in somewhat veiled terms, that 'A shameful or ignorant imposture was practised upon the Queen' when she was induced to subscribe to the Seacole Testimonial of 1867. Was Nightingale insinuating that this fund had been in some way fraudulent? That perhaps Mary had not been as poor as her supporters had imagined or she herself had claimed to be? Could Nightingale have informed the Queen of this? Sadly we shall never know. What is clear, however, is that the 1870 letter shows Florence Nightingale firmly reasserting her position as the figurehead of British nursing. For, as self-appointed 'Matron and Chaperone and Mother of the Army' she insisted that she 'could not help knowing' Seacole's true character. She was determined that hers was the name that would go down in history as the true 'Mother of the Army' and that nursing as a respectable profession for middle-class women should not be tainted by being associated in the public mind with the exploits of a controversial figure such as Mary Seacole. Propriety clearly drove the motor of her opposition to Seacole.

The irony of all this only unravelled in the immediate post-war years, in the manner in which the two women dealt differently with their own high public profiles. The British nation had come to look upon Nightingale – their 'Lady of the Lamp' – as public property; but after her return to England Florence refused all requests for public appearances and interviews and spent the remainder of her life as a reclusive invalid. Nothing, however, could stop the mythologization process which would ensure Nightingale's 'visible march to heaven', as her contemporary, the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, put it. Meanwhile, Mary Seacole, while clearly being disadvantaged by her colour, and lacking Nightingale's social and political clout, did not live to see her own name immortalized by institutions and monuments being named after her. She was, nevertheless, more than content to be out there among her 'sons' – the men of the British Army and Navy. She shared with them the celebrations to mark the end of the war, proudly wearing the medals with which she privately had been presented (a claim still hotly contested by military historians in the continuing absence of evidence from either Foreign Office or War Office records). After that, for two or three more years after the war, she went on her own idiosyncratic 'royal progress', visiting military hospitals and army and navy barracks at Portsmouth, Sheerness and Chatham, and then, in the autumn of 1859 sailed back to Jamaica, where, evidence suggests, she remained until 1865.

Ever since her vibrant memoirs *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) were republished in 1984, interest in Seacole has been steadily building, given impetus by the recent mushrooming of websites, and a welter of feminist articles that seek to pigeon-hole her as a proto-feminist black travel writer. Many of these articles repeat biographical information pirated from the introduction to the 1984 edition. Others regurgitate unsubstantiated 'facts' about Seacole's life and unquestioningly accept what she chooses to tell the reader. It is, however, becoming increasingly apparent that the memoirs are themselves economical with the truth – especially about Seacole's own illegitimate, mixed-race origins; her illegitimate daughter Sally is, of course, not mentioned at all.

Several sources on Seacole have made assumptions about the duration of her post-war fame as being 'long-standing' without offering any primary material to support this. The evidence suggests the opposite. Mary's high public profile lasted at most for three or four years. Indeed, the only period of her life after her time in Panama that can be independently charted with any accuracy, runs from the newspaper reports of 1855-56 relating her exploits in the Crimea, through her high-profile bankruptcy case that went to court in November of 1856, to the publicity surrounding the Seacole Fund of 1856-57 and the Grand Military Festival held in her honour at the Royal Surrey Gardens in July 1857; after this, there are a couple of stray sightings of her in 1859 before she returns to Jamaica.

The publication in London in July 1857 of Seacole's memoirs, in a cheap library edition by James Blackwood of Paternoster Row, appears to have been the high point of her postwar career. But there is no evidence to substantiate claims, such as the entry on Seacole in the *Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (1990) that Mary Seacole's biography was 'enormously successful' and 'restored her to prosperity'. Although there was a second edition in 1858, Mary's return to Jamaica the following year suggests her fame and finances were already in decline by then. The *Feminist Companion* goes on to assert, moreover, that '*in later years [Seacole] was monopolized by Queen Victoria and her family*' [my italics]. If this had really been the case, then why is there nothing in the Royal Archives? The best evidence we have, from a Jamaican source, is

that Mary was employed as 'rubber' or masseuse to the Princess of Wales, who was plagued with a painful rheumatic knee, some time in the early 1870s. But we don't know how this appointment came about or how long this patronage lasted. When Alexandra died in 1925, almost her entire archive was destroyed. This is but one of many brick walls encountered in the search for the lost years of Mary Seacole's life.

After the Crimean War, Mary Seacole did not rest on her laurels; she was anxious to continue her work and serve her queen and the British Army, in her own unique way. When, in May 1857 the Indian Rebellion broke out, she once more offered her services to the nation. At an interview with the then Secretary at War, as Mary later told *The Times*, she had expressed her desire to 'set out immediately for India' to administer medical aid to her beloved troops:

Give me ... my needle and thread, my medicine chest, my bandages, my probe and scissors, and I'm off.

But she never went. The only surviving evidence as to why she did not go comes via her sister Louisa, who confided to her guest, the writer Anthony Trollope during his stay with her at Mary's boarding house in Kingston (and related in his travelogue *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*, 1860), that the reason Mary had not gone to India was simple: 'The Queen would not let her; her life was too precious'.

This begs the question: if Queen Victoria had indeed regarded Mary as a national treasure, why then did she never invite her to Windsor or make a more personal or public acknowledgement of her work? Of course, we only have Louisa's word for it. But, aside from passing references to Seacole to be found in the Crimean War diaries and letters published by veterans over a period of many years after the war, the contemporary press appears rapidly to have fallen silent. Seacole's main clients in the Crimea, who turned up in droves outside her iron storehouse for the daily medical 'levées' she held after breakfast, had been, in the main, the often illiterate navvies of the Army Work Corps (AWC) and Land Transport Corps (LTC) – the men who had helped construct and run the Balaclava railway and supply the front lines outside Sevastopol – who were based not far from the British Hotel. These two groups lacked their own well-educated officer class, many of whom kept the diaries that have provided historians with eyewitness accounts of the war. The AWC among whom the death rate from dysentery and diarrhoea ran at 16 per cent, according to W.H. Russell, were precisely the men who benefited most from Seacole's herbal remedies.

At the end of July 1857, reporting the events of the 'Seacole Festival' at the Royal Surrey Gardens, *The Times* correspondent made a point of asserting that 'Mrs Seacole ... was the first to give a new character to the trade of sutler, and rescue it from the imputation of worthlessness and plunder', but it is clear that her patrons and supporters rapidly became polarized between the common soldiers who had known and loved her, and the top brass who had personally witnessed her work in the Crimea. In between, the mass of the Victorian middle-classes back home appear to have remained indifferent.

For no matter how assiduously Mary Seacole may have courted the approval of the British establishment, as a loyal colonial subject who endorsed the values of empire and revered the Queen, as a woman of colour, she would never ever have been accepted into polite society as a 'lady'. Indeed the sedate ladies' magazines of the day say nothing of Seacole's Crimean exploits. So what brought about the loss of her story to history for over 130 years? Was it a case of the rising tide of what one writer has called 'British ethnocentric xenophobia' marginalizing such colonial figures, particularly in the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica in 1865? Or was it simply Mary's own lack of desire for self-promotion? The latter seems unlikely. Mary Seacole was no shrinking violet. She was proud and opinionated, also warm and gregarious and took great delight in the attention accorded her when out and about on the streets and at army functions. Perhaps, in the end, it was simply a case of Mary's largely word-of-mouth reputation being lost. As the years went by and the Crimean veterans who had known her died, there was simply no one left to speak for her. By the time she herself died in 1881, Mary Seacole, the self-appointed 'unknown Creole woman' who had proved her usefulness to the British army and to nursing practice in the Crimea had been all but forgotten.

In 1954 with the arrival in Britain of the first West Indian immigrants on the *Windrush*, British racial attitudes entered a new phase. A *Times* journalist decided this was an opportune moment to remind readers of the 'services rendered by a Jamaican lady, Mrs Seacole, to our troops before Sebastopol', lamenting the fact that 'the work of this good and skilful nurse' had been entirely forgotten in Britain. The journalist concluded that Seacole's work 'might serve as a great example to the many West Indian nurses who now receive a better training than Mrs Seacole gathered from her mother'. Such sentiments were not new, however; almost a hundred years previously, a correspondent of the *Morning Advertiser* had commended Seacole as:

... an amusing specimen of the adaptability to circumstances of the darker specimens of the genus homo ... a further proof that the race from which she sprang is one capable of high intellectual development'.

As for her own view of her achievements in the Crimea, Mary's response had been simple. What had prompted her in all her years of nursing across three continents had been her human compassion and her own innate sense of duty. Recalling her experiences of the Crimean War, she wrote: 'I do not pray to God that I may never see its like again, for I wish to be useful all my life', for it was her firm belief that 'it is in scenes of horror and distress that a woman can do so much'.



Seacole's grave at St Mary's Roman Catholic Cemetery, Kensal Green, was rediscovered and restored in 1973 and interest in her work thereafter slowly revived, to occupy its rightful place today as a cornerstone of British black history. A concerted campaign was launched in 2003 to raise a memorial in London to this remarkable woman, who in February 2004 was voted the Greatest Black Briton on a national internet poll. Indeed Seacole now has a whole new worldwide fan-base to rival that of the erstwhile icon of British nursing, Florence Nightingale. The final irony is that, as Nightingale's star wanes, the post-colonial atmosphere of political correctness has now ensured that Mary Seacole's will once more burn bright.

For Further Reading:

Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee (eds), introduction to *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (Falling Wall Press, 1984); Alexis Soyer, *A Culinary Campaign* (Southover Press, 1995); Jane Robinson, *Mary Seacole* (Constable & Robinson, January 2005); Sarah Salih (ed.), introduction to Penguin Modern Classics edition of *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (February 2005).

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The Lost Portrait of Mary Seacole

Painted on specially prepared artists' board, this lost portrait of Mary Seacole is signed on the front 'ACC' and on the back 'A.C. Challen, 1869'. It depicts Mary Seacole proudly displaying the emblem of her Creole identity – a red neckerchief – and wearing a set of three miniature medals: the British Crimea; the Turkish Medjidie and the French Legion of Honour.

It turned up at a small auction at the social club of the Norgren Works in Shipston-on-Stour in the autumn of 2002, where it was bought by a local art dealer, having been put in the sale by another dealer who had, apparently, acquired it at a boot sale in the Burford (Oxon) area, possibly among items from the recently cleared home of a deceased local.

Unfortunately tracking the portrait's provenance has so far proved impossible because the person who sold the portrait at Burford did so without knowing it was there. For the portrait had been used, turned face in, to back a print of some kind. The dealer who bought it had apparently noticed something odd – the Challen signature and date on the back – and had unsealed the frame and discovered the portrait hidden behind the print. There is no way of knowing how and when Seacole's portrait had effectively been discarded by its owners in this way and how long it had thus been lost to view. It is possible it made its way from London, where it was painted, to Oxfordshire as the result of a family bequest made through the Kent family of Brixton, Seacole's closest living white relatives who benefited from bequests in her will. But Seacole's will makes no specific mention of the portrait itself. At present there are no known other works by Albert Charles Challen, who painted Seacole's portrait at the age of twenty-two and himself died only a few months after Mary, in 1881. The portrait is now on show – in the Crimean Room at the National Portrait Gallery.