

History Topic of the Month

Mary Seacole (1805-1881)

Mary Seacole crossed the world to help soldiers in their hour of need. She was the daughter of a Scottish Lieutenant in the British Army and a free woman of colour. Mary grew up in Jamaica (part of the British Empire) at a time when many people in the Caribbean were forced to work as enslaved people. Mary was proud not only of her Jamaican roots, but also considered herself British, calling herself 'Creole', a term many children of European settlers in the Caribbean used to describe themselves at that time.

Her life was already remarkable when, in the 1850s, war broke out in Crimea (a peninsula in modern-day Ukraine) between Russia and an alliance of Great Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire. Mary travelled to Crimea to help nurse soldiers. In doing so she was to leave an impressive legacy, that continues to have a huge impact today.



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Mary Seacole

Mary's early days

Treating the sick was a part of Mary's life from childhood. Her mother, Rebecca, was known as "The Doctress". Rebecca used traditional Caribbean and African medicines to help the sick. Women like Rebecca had a huge practical experience of treating diseases like yellow fever and cholera. Rebecca ran a nursing home, Blundell Hall, in Jamaica, where Mary learned about the importance of hygiene, rest and nutrition. Because her father was a soldier, many other soldiers were treated at the nursing home and Mary also learned from watching army doctors.

Tragedy and triumph

Mary travelled a lot when she was young. She first visited England in 1821 and later travelled all over the Caribbean. She married Edwin Seacole in 1836 – Edwin claimed to be a godson of Lord Nelson, although a family legend he said he was actually Lord Nelson's son. Edwin was an unsuccessful merchant and he and Mary returned to Blundell Hall. Then tragedy struck: between 1843 and 1844 Blundell Hall burned down in a fire and both Rebecca and Edwin died of illness.

Mary was heartbroken – but she decided she had to carry on with her work. She rebuilt Blundell Hall and "turned a bold front to fortune" (as she later wrote in her auto biography). The New Blundell Hall was a huge success and in a cholera outbreak in Jamaica she helped many people.

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Business and sickness in Panama

As well as a healer, Mary was an entrepreneur. In 1851 she travelled to Cruces in Panama to join her brother-in-law. She planned to open a hotel business for people travelling to California following the Gold Rush. She arrived in the middle of another cholera outbreak – but was able to save her first patient. It made her very well-known, and she treated many other people in the area, from rich to poor (who she treated for free). Mary later caught cholera herself – but survived.

The treatments Mary used she later said (after she had learned more) were “blunders” and made her “shudder”. She used mustard emetics to encourage patients to vomit, mustard plasters on the stomach and mercury chloride (which can cause blood poisoning). However, Mary’s medicines were used by many other doctors at the time as there was still very little known about medicines.

War in Crimea

Mary left Panama for Jamaica in 1853. There she helped people, including British soldiers, through a yellow fever outbreak. Returning briefly to Panama to settle her business interests, she heard from a relative of her husband about the outbreak of war in Crimea.

The Crimean War (1853-56) was fought between Russia and the French, British and Ottomans. Both sides wanted to increase their overall influence in Europe. After a border clash between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, the British and French sent an army to support the Ottomans and attacked Russia’s naval base in Crimea. In the war that followed new, more deadly guns and weapons were used – but the commanders of the armies planned their campaigns as if nothing had changed in warfare since the Battle of Waterloo, forty years earlier.

The more efficient weapons, combined with the terrible heat and hygiene conditions in Crimea, meant disease and death were common among the ordinary soldiers. Hospitals were over-crowded and unclean. There was a desperate need for nurses. Florence Nightingale had already recruited a team of nurses and travelled to Crimea.

Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was a pioneer of nursing, who also cared for wounded soldiers in Crimea. Florence recruited a team of nurses and pressured the British government to build a hospital in Crimea. Like Mary, she believed in the importance of hygiene. She was famous as “the Lady with the Lamp” which she carried to inspect wounded soldiers in the night. In 1860 she founded the first nursing school in the world and wrote several important books on health and nursing. Some historians have argued Florence’s ability to influence governments was helped because she came from a wealthy, well-connected family.

After the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, Crimea became part of modern-day Ukraine. In 2014 Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula and then launched a larger invasion of Ukraine in 2022.



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Mary volunteers - but is refused

Mary arrived in England and volunteered her services as a nurse. She was turned down by the War Office and the Crimean War Fund. They told her she was not experienced enough.

Mary wondered if her skin colour played a role. In her autobiography she wrote "Was it possible that American prejudices against colour had some root here? Did [they] shrink from accepting my aid because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat duskie skin than theirs?" although she also suggested that people might not have understood her role as a 'Doctress'.

Mary was determined not to be stopped. She decided to pay to go to Crimea herself.



Contributor: © GL Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was a nursing pioneer who also worked as a nurse in Crimea and later founded a nursing school



Contributor: © Science History Images / Alamy Stock Photo

An artist's impression of part of Mary Seacole's hotel in Crimea. Mary is shown in the centre of the drawing.



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Heroism in Crimea

Mary arrived at Balaclava, a town on the coast near the front lines. There, at a place she called Spring Hill, she built 'The British Hotel'. It was made from any material she could scrape together – wood, packing cases, iron sheets and old doors and window frames. It opened in 1855 having cost her £800 (about £60k today!).

Although it was called a hotel, it was a mix of canteen and supply store for soldiers and a free clinic. Mary filled it with food and clothing supplies from England. Her clinic became famous among soldiers: her herbal treatments and the clean and comforting conditions at the Hotel became hugely popular. Mary believed hygiene was vital for helping sick people recover – a view not shared by all doctors at the time.

A *Times* journalist wrote that she was a “warm and successful physician, who doctors and cures all manner of men with extraordinary success. She is always in attendance near the battlefield to aid the wounded and has earned many a poor fellow's blessing... a more tender or skilful hand about a wound or broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons.”

Mary became a hero to hundreds of soldiers. She also treated captured Russian soldiers. Many spoke of her tireless efforts to help people who called her “Mother Seacole”. She helped save many lives.



Contributor: © Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Despite her achievements Mary did face criticism, some of it unfair and racist. This cartoon mocks Mary for claiming she reads *Punch*, in an article that criticised the campaign to raise money for her. Look at how the cartoonist has drawn Mary: what is the impact of exaggerating her facial features?

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After the war

At the end of the war, Mary travelled back to England, arriving in August 1856 where she was of the guests of honour at a celebration dinner for soldiers (Florence Nightingale was also a guest). But Mary was also in a lot of financial trouble. She was deep in debt after spending so much of her money running her hotel and was declared bankrupt in November 1856.

People were horrified. A press campaign was started to raise money to help. The “Seacole Fund Grand Military Festival” in July 1857 was supported by thousands of army officers and men. In 1857 Mary wrote an autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Foreign Lands*, which became a best seller.

Mary settled in London, continuing to work as a “Doctress”. Among her patients was the Princess of Wales. Mary’s portrait was painted (it now hangs in the National Gallery) and she remained a well-known figure in Britain, until her death in Paddington, London in 1881.

Mary’s legacy

After her death, Mary had no family to help keep her memory alive. Unlike Florence Nightingale, she did not leave a legacy of training other nurses. As the soldiers who she had helped in Crimea died, fewer people remembered her. Many have argued this was because of the colour of her skin or her class background: in the early twentieth century, people preferred to remember Florence Nightingale as the female hero of Crimea. She was largely forgotten for decades after her death in Britain – although buildings were named after her in Jamaica.

Things started to change after the Second World War, when the Windrush generation arrived in Britain. Student nurses from the Caribbean knew exactly who she was. They helped the people to remember this remarkable woman. Her grave was rediscovered and the Mary Seacole Memorial Association was formed to promote her legacy.



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A portrait of Mary Seacole, dating from 1869



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Today, like Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole is celebrated around the world as a nursing pioneer. Her name appears on buildings, monuments and research centres across Britain.

While some historians have debated Mary's impact on the development of nursing, everyone agrees that she was a pioneer in challenging attitudes in Britain. Mary was one of the first women of colour to become a national hero in Britain. She was one of the first women to challenge some of the ideas around the roles people of colour could have. She became a role model for future generations and her heroism is an inspiration to millions.

There is no chance of this remarkable woman being forgotten again!



Contributor: © PjrStatues / Alamy Stock Photo

A modern memorial to Mary Seacole,
at St Thomas' Hospital in London

MARY SEACOLE
 Nurse of the Crimean War
 1805-1881
 Wherever the need arises
 on whatever distant shore
 no higher or greater privilege

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Discussion points

- How did Mary's earlier life prepare her for the role she played in the Crimean War?
- How do you think Mary's medical knowledge developed over time?
- What can you find out about the West African healing traditions that lay behind the skills of Jamaican doctresses like Mary?
- Mary spent a huge amount of her own money setting up 'The British Hotel'. What might this tell you about the sort of person she was?
- Mary met a lot of tragedy in her life. How do you think this might have affected her attitudes to the soldiers she cared for?
- Mary became quite a celebrity after the Crimean war – why do you think she might have been less well remembered after her death?
- In the 1850s slavery was still legal in the USA, but not in the British Empire. What do you think Mary meant when she talked about "American prejudices against colour"?
- Why do you think Mary Seacole was such an inspiration to the Windrush generation of NHS nurses?
- What do you think was Mary Seacole's most important contribution to the history of nursing?
- There has been a great deal of debate about who made the most impact, Mary Seacole or Florence Nightingale. Do you think this is a useful way to think about the legacy of either woman?

About the author

This article was written by Alistair Nunn, Pearson's Senior Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources. Alistair has a degree in History from Cambridge, specialising in post-15th century British political and social History.

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Further reading and resources

Books



The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands
by Mary Seacole (1857)

In Search of Mary Seacole: The Making of a Cultural Icon
by Helen Rappaport (2022)

Mary Seacole
by Jane Robinson (2006)

The Extraordinary Life of Mary Seacole
by Nadia Redgrave (2019)

Websites



[Mary Seacole Trust](#)

[Black History Month 2022](#)

[BBC](#)

[National Geographic](#)

[Helen Rappaport](#)

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.