

Mary Seacole

1805-1881

Brief Biography

Mary was born in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica. At this time most black people in Jamaica were slaves. Slavery was abolished in Jamaica in 1838. Mary's mother was a free born black woman and her father was a Scottish soldier. Mary was proud of her skin colour and wanted to be treated equally. Mary travelled to England in 1822.

Mary's mother taught her traditional African and Caribbean remedies for illnesses including cholera, diarrhoea and fever. Mary's treatment for cholera involved mustard plaster, emetics (which make you sick), calomel (mercury) and water boiled with cinnamon. She used pomegranate juice to help cure Diarrhoea.

Mary's attempts to volunteer to help nurse during the Crimean War were turned down so she decided to set up the British Hotel in 1855 and provide nursing services to the troops at the frontline. Her hotel was only four miles from the frontline in Crimea which was part of the Russian Empire. It operated as a general store, restaurant and hotel. She used profits from the hotel to cover the costs of the medicines she provided to poor soldiers. She rode nearly every day to the battle front to give out medicines and nurse the injured and dying.

When the war ended Mary was bankrupt, she had spent all her money on goods for the hotel which she now could not sell. Mary returned to London. Queen Victoria, herself, donated £50 to a charitable collection on her behalf.

Mary's love for the British army and her loyalty to Britain were inspired by her pride in her Scottish military father. A number of the soldiers fighting in the Crimea had previously been stationed in Jamaica so Mary knew some of them. Mary received four medals from a grateful British Government. In 1857 eighty thousand people turned up to honour Mary in a four day gala held to raise money for her. She later died in England in 1881

Much of what we know about Mary comes from her memoir *The Wonderful Adventure of Mary Seacole in Many Lands*, published in 1857.

In 2004 she was voted number one in a poll of Great Black Britons.