Mary Seacole

by Linda Baxter

The most famous nurse of all time must be Florence Nightingale, the 'lady with the lamp', who became famous for her work during the Crimean War in the middle of the nineteenth century. But have you heard of Mary Seacole?

I hope your answer is 'Yes', but I must admit that, until recently, the name meant nothing to me at all. Then, earlier this year, I read that a woman called Mary Seacole had been voted the 'Greatest Black Briton' of all time in a BBC poll. I was shocked to realise that I had no idea who she was. When I found out more about her I realised that she was 'the black Florence Nightingale' that I had heard mentioned on a BBC history programme a few years ago. So I did some research. What was her story? And, more importantly, why isn't her name as well-known as Florence Nightingale's?

The story

Mary Seacole was born in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica. Her mother was Jamaican and her father was Scottish. Her mother ran a boarding house for invalid soldiers and was also an expert in herbal remedies, which she used to treat the soldiers. When her mother died, Mary took over the boarding house and the care of the sick soldiers. In 1850 there was a serious outbreak of cholera in Jamaica. Mary worked night and day to help the victims and created her own herbal medicine for the disease. She also believed that clean conditions, fresh air and good food were important in fighting the disease, ideas which most doctors thought were ridiculous. She saved the lives of thousands of people.

The war

When the Crimean War started, Jamaican troops were sent to fight, and stories soon started to reach Kingston about the terrible conditions that they were suffering, and how badly they needed nursing care. So Mary travelled to London in 1854 and presented herself at the War Office as a volunteer nurse. But they refused her. She went to all the military and nursing organisations but not one of them wanted her services. So Mary decided to go to the Crimea independently. She opened a boarding house there to earn the money to finance her nursing work. She regularly went out onto the battlefields to feed and care for the fallen soldiers, often putting her own life in danger. The soldiers loved her and called her 'the black nightingale'.

The fame

When the war finished Mary came back to London as a famous figure - well-known and well-loved by the British people, but completely bankrupt as a result of her work. Some of the officers and soldiers who knew her raised money for her, but she still had financial problems. So Mary once again decided to do something herself. She wrote her autobiography called 'The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands'. This was the only book she ever wrote, but it was very successful and generated enough money to allow her to live the rest of her life in comfort, dividing her time between Jamaica and London. She died in 1881 and was buried in London, but as the years passed, her story was forgotten outside of her native Jamaica.

The rediscovery

In 1973 a British nurse bought an old copy of Mary's book in a second hand bookshop. She did some detective work and found Mary's forgotten grave in a London cemetery. She organised the restoration of the grave and a special ceremony was held to honour her. People began to hear about Mary and she became a symbol for people involved in civil rights, anti-racism campaigns, women's liberation and of course, nursing groups. In 1981 a special service was held to mark the centenary of her death. In 1984 'The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands' was reprinted so that Mary's story could reach a wider audience. And of course, as you already know, she was voted the Greatest Black Briton in 2004.

So, the question remains

Why was Mary Seacole forgotten? Racism? Prejudice against such an independent woman? Florence Nightingale was white and had friends in high places. Mary Seacole was black but overcame a lot of the racial prejudice against her and had friends in high places too. Both women wrote books. Florence Nightingale's

'Notes on Nursing' became a standard nursing textbook, whereas Mary Seacole wrote nothing about the theory of nursing. The medical community accepted Florence Nightingale, whereas Mary Seacole worked independently, outside of the hospitals, and without the supervision of doctors. Whatever the reasons, after a hundred years of obscurity, Mary Seacole isn't going to be forgotten again.

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