

Mary Seacole: Myths in the Making of the Nursing Profession (Notes and References)

by Lynn McDonald

It depends on the sources used: primary sources from the time are of a Jamaican businesswoman, independent, feisty, kind and generous, but not at all the "battlefield nurse," "pioneer nurse" or "first nurse practitioner" shown wearing medals awarded to her for her bravery.

There are solid, contemporary primary sources:

- Seacole's own memoir, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, 1857, much reprinted
- newspaper accounts (especially the *Times*)
- letters and memoirs published by army officers and doctors post-war
- her will.

However, there is no independent corroboration of her activities pre-Crimea, either in Jamaica or Panama.

The chief myths

- volunteered as a nurse for the Crimean War, rejected (1-4 times), rejected specifically by Nightingale (1-4 times)
- Crimean War nurse, built a hotel, or clinic (or hotel with a clinic on top) to nurse soldiers (frequent mentions)
- more "hands on" experience than Nightingale ("the young novice nurse")
- successful healer, developed medicines to treat cholera and yellow fever (without claims of success, but acknowledgment of blunders)
- nursed on the battlefield, under fire (many mentions)
- medal winner, 1-5 medals (numerous mentions)
- her reputation rivalled that of Nightingale's, but then forgotten (*Times* coverage shows 10 - 1 items for Nightingale compared with Seacole)
- a founder of the nursing profession, contributor to health care system in England: the first example of someone from overseas who made an overwhelming difference to health care in the U.K. (NHS Northwest, "Mary Seacole: The Ultimate Role Model").
- first black woman to write an autobiography (this was Mary Prince, three decades earlier)
- Inaugural writer in African-American literature



Figure 1: Studio photograph of Mary Seacole wearing medals; it was common (and acceptable) at the time to wear borrowed medals in public or in photos

What primary sources say:

Seacole's own memoir is the major source for refutation of the myths. After brief coverage of her origins and her mother's boarding house in Kingston, she describes her travels (none for nursing), her business in Panama (3 chapters on it), her trip to London to attend to her gold investments, then her attempts to get a post as nurse (after the others had all left). She gave 3 chapters to her business in the Crimea, with much material on the food and drink she served, her elite customers (including Omar Pasha). Ordinary soldiers could come to purchase her medicines, but otherwise get only one mention "a canteen for the soldiery" (soldiers and officers did not mix socially).

On the battlefield: Seacole described her going out on battle days, three of them (she missed the first three, major battles). She claimed to have been the first woman to get into Sebastopol after the Russians left (not to nurse, it was an expedition of friends). Her business did well over the winter, as the fighting was over. She and her business partner over-stocked, and then could not sell their goods. No complaints!

Far from claims of successful treatment for cholera and yellow fever, Seacole describes "lamentable blunders" on her cholera remedies (she added lead and mercury) and no successes on yellow fever (when she bravely stayed up all night with the sufferers).

Primary sources: The Times

1855: Announcement of her business: “*Inter alia*, we are to have a *hotel* at Balaclava. It is to be conducted by Mrs Seacole, late of Jamaica. I suppose the lady calculates on a liberal share of the patronage when the excursion visitors come out to the siege in the summer” (9 March 1855, 9).

Her catering at a horse race: “[she] presided over a sorely invested tentfull of creature comforts” (17 December 1855, 7).

1856: Fund-raising events for Seacole: “whose appearance awakened the most rapturous enthusiasm. The soldiers not only cheered her, but chaired her around the gardens” (26 August 1856, 7).

Portsmouth event: “The soldiers will be gratified to hear that the father of Miss Nightingale has given a handsome donation to the fund and a hamper of game for their entertainment” (15 September 1856, 15).

Bankruptcy court: “Mrs Seacole is a lady of colour and has been honoured with four Government medals for her kindness to the British soldiery. She was present in person and attracted much attention, the gaily coloured decorations on her breast being in perfect harmony with the rest of her attire” (7 November 1856, 9).

Letter-to-the-editor on her bankruptcy: commends her for “acts of benevolence which were characteristic of Mrs Seacole in her capacity of *vivandiere* of the British Army in the Crimea” (24 November 1856, 8).

Lord Rokeby letter-to-the-editor on a subscription for Seacole when she got her certificate from Court of Bankruptcy “to enable her to recommence the business to which she is accustomed” (25 November 1856, 6).

Seacole’s letter to Rokeby in appreciation (29 November 1856, 12).

“A Stir for Seacole” *Punch* cartoon of her (3 December 1856, 4).

1857: “Bankruptcy. Seacole and Day” (8 Jan 1857, 11).
“The bankrupts were provision merchants and proprietors of stores at Balaclava” (31 Jan 1857, 11).

Letter-to-the-editor by Thomas Day, her business partner: “The principal causes of the bankruptcy...were losses by the elements and by robbery and the depreciation of stock-in-trade and buildings subsequent on the unexpectedly rapid evacuation of the Crimea on the conclusion of the war” (14 April 1857 7).

“Seacole Fund” list of patrons (13 June 1857, 9).

“Seacole Fund” list of donors (1 July 1857, 9).

“Seacole Fund” Tickets for Surrey Gardens event (24 July 1857, 1).

“Festival at the Royal Surrey Gardens”: “Mrs Seacole sat in state in front of the centre gallery, supported by Lord Rokeby on one side, by Lord George Paget on the other, and surrounded by the members of her committee....[she was] the first to give a new character to the trade of sutler and rescue it from the imputation of worthlessness and plunder” (28 July 1857, 10).

Failure of the fundraising to provide much money (27 August 1857 8).

“City of London Theatre”: “an actress played Mrs Seacole as *vivandière*...and freely handed glasses of cordial about” (28 December 1857, 9).

1859: “Military and Naval Intelligence”: “Mrs Seacole, of Crimean celebrity, visited several of the military and naval heroes doing duty at Sheerness on Friday and Saturday last. She received a hearty and kind welcome from the garrison officers whose quarters she made her home during her stay. She purposes in a few days paying a visit to the officers of the navy, many of whom now in part partook of her creature comforts while in the Crimea” (1 February 1859, 10).

Her return to Jamaica: Royal Mail steamer *Shannon* listed “Mrs Seacole, and seven Sisters of Charity”(18 October 1859, 6).

1865: Seacole arrives at Southampton from Jamaica on the *Atrato* (14 October 1865, 10).

1866: “Mansion House Cholera Relief Fund” lists donation by her, 100 bottles of anti-cholera medicine and 100 boxes of pills” (31 August 1866, 6).

1867: New Seacole Fund Formed “a Committee to carry out a scheme to ensure for Mrs Seacole, in her declining years, the means of obtaining remunerative employment,” lists patrons and donations (30 January 1867, 5).

“The Jamaica Prosecutions” Mrs Seacole in court, she sat “behind the witness box” (30 January 1867, 5).

“portrait of Mrs Seacole” on sale by auction (29 March 1867, 16).

“The Wandering Thespians” A performance in aid of Seacole Fund,” lists patrons (18 July 1867, 8).

1869: Review of a book, *Letters from the Levant*, “past the scenes of the Balaclava charges and the heaps of broken bottles by Mrs Seacole’s store” (3 May 1869).

1871: Miniature bust of the famous Mrs Seacole adorned with her Crimean medals at studio (21 July 1871, 4).

1881: “Obituary” (21 May 1881, 7).

Legal notice to creditors “Mary Seacole deceased” (21 July 1881, 14).

Figure 2. Illustration from *Punch*, depicting Mary Seacole handing out copies of *Punch* and other magazines to patients in a field hospital.



Mentions in other newspapers

1856: Installation of Order of the Bath, Balaclava, Seacole attended (*Daily News* 7 June 1856).

1858: "Promotion of Mrs Seacole" she "arrived yesterday at Antwerp having on board Lady Seacole who has been decorated with the order of the Legion of Honour, the English Crimean medal and the Medjidie. This lady was the companion of the celebrated Miss Nightingale who had gone to the East during the war in the Crimea to carry aid and consolation to the wounded and dying. On the arrival of the vessel, Lady Seacole was adorned with all her decorations" (*Morning Chronicle* 17 June 1858).

1862: "Mrs Seacole, the famous Crimean camp follower, is now living at Panama" (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 18 April 1862, 3).

Seacole's will: Her estate was valued at £2500 total, including two houses; in addition to money bequests, she left such household items as a bedstead, bedding, furniture, linen sheets, calico sheets, counterpane, her watch, her husband's ring, other jewellery, trinkets and ornaments, pictures, prints, engravings, plate and china, but no medals or letters (Probate Office, will of Mary Seacole, 11 July 1881).

Mentions in published memoirs, letters, etc., of officers

Chef Alexis Soyer on meeting her: "God bless you my son, are you Monsieur Soyer of whom I heard so much in Jamaica? Well, to be sure! I have sold many and many a score of your British and other sauces--God knows how many" ...Come down, my son, and take a glass of champagne with my old friend, Sir John Campbell....No sooner had we entered than the old lady expressed her desire to consult me about what she should do to make money in her new speculation" (Soyer, *Soyer's Culinary Campaign*, 231-33).

"She had a store at Kadikoi, near Balaclava, gave hot tea to soldiers waiting to board ship "out of the goodness of her heart and at her own expense" (V. Bonham-Carter, ed. *Surgeon in the Crimea*, 157).

"she had wisely pitched her tent equally close to it on the opposite side or the line being used for the transport of goods and material from the port to the front....Mrs Seacole kept a perfect Omnibus Shop,

which was greatly frequented." Also, she "freely giving to such as could not pay" (Lady Alicia Blackwood, *Narrative of Personal Experiences and Impressions during a Residence on the Bosphorus throughout the Crimean War*, 262).

Met the "very well known... Mrs Seacole, who lived near the railway below Kadikoi and kept a sort of general store. She was a wonderful woman, a native of the West Indies and had travelled over half the world. All the men swore by her, and in case of any malady would seek her advice and use her herbal medicines" (Vieth, *Recollections of the Crimean Campaign*, 73).

Seacole "kept a store at Kadikoi, two or three miles from British headquarter, where, in an emergency, one could obtain some kind of a meal" (Buzzard, *With the Turkish Army in the Crimea and Asia Minor*, 179).

"The officers were to keep the men in sight the whole time, and not to refresh themselves at Mrs Seacole's store" (Pollock, *United Service Magazine*, 1857, 360).

"On the afternoon of the 16th of June, when returning from a ride to Balaclava, we stopped at a store kept by an old black woman, whom we used to call Mother Seacole, and bought some bottled fruit, which we laughingly agreed should be kept for the survivors of the assault" (Wood, *The Crimea in 1854 and 1894*, 294).

Saw Mrs Seacole "an elderly mulatto woman from Jamaica, was a well-known character in the Crimea, all the soldiers and sailors knew her. She had a taste for nursing and doctoring, but she added to this a business as a sutler" (Eyre-Todd, ed. *The Autobiography of William Simpson*, 57).

She was spotted in Panama by a traveller: "we saw the sunny face of Mrs Seacole of Crimean renown, gadding

about with naval officers on leave from the frigate *Orlando*" ('A Trip to Vancouver Island,' *United Service Magazine*, No [July 1863]:383).

Seacole was decidedly a celebrity, did press mentions of her are not about nursing or health care, but fund raising for her post-Crimea and her travels.

Nightingale's coverage was on substantive matters, from her Crimean War work, the reports on it afterwards, the founding of her school, publication of her *Notes on Nursing*, agitation for social reforms, in the Poor Law, the establishment of district nursing and the extension of nursing to other countries, her *Notes on Hospitals* and its application in many places.

Secondary sources propagating the myths

Nursing journals

Nursing Standard (numerous)
Nursing Times (numerous)
British Journal of Nursing (several, 2011, 2015, 2018)
British Journal of Healthcare Assistants, 2010
British Journal of Perioperative Nursing, 2005
Journal of Advanced Nursing, 1984, 1999, 2015
American Journal of Nursing, 1984, 2016
Journal of Nursing Management, 2010 (she "far outdid Nightingale's experience of hands on nursing")
Nursing Mirror, 1983
Reflections (Sigma Theta Tau International), 1996
Nursing History Review, 1998
Contemporary Nurse, 2007
Journal of Orthopaedic Nursing
Christian Nurse International, 1996
Paediatric Nursing, 2008
Clinical Excellence for Nurse Practitioners, 1998
 "Mary Seacole Exhibition," *British Journal of Perioperative Nursing*, 2005: re her "caring for the military garrison at Kingston" responded to the same call to go to the Crimean War as Nightingale.
 Santy and Knight, "Nurses in War," *Journal of Orthopaedic Nursing*, 2008: "While Florence Nightingale, it could be argued, was more of a nurse administrator, Mary Seacole was a true trauma nurse".

Medical journals

Mathiasen, "Black Nurse, White Nurse: Heroines and the Horrors of the Crimean War," *American Journal of Cardiology*, 2010.
Scottish Medical Journal, 2011 (Short, "Mary Seacole: Forgotten Hero?"); her store had "desperately needed equipment, mackintoshes, greatcoats, boots, caps, linen, bedding"; in her clinics "she treated frostbite in winter, heatstroke in summer, typhus, scurvy, malnutrition, cholera and the ubiquitous dysentery."
 Ellis, "Mary Seacole: Self-Taught Nurse and Heroine of the Crimean War," *Journal of Perioperative Practice*, 2009: (in Kingston, many of her residents were disabled British soldiers and sailors; in Panama

epidemic, her therapy comprised tender loving care, mustard poultices, calomel; she helped organise the nursing at Kingston hospital during a severe outbreak of yellow fever).

Military journals

Military History. "Women at War" 2016: "Jamaican caretaker of the wounded at Balaclava"

Other journals

Philological Quarterly, 1997, 2004
Jamaican Historical Review, 1991, 2006
History Today, 1981, 2005
New Yorker, 2001
Feminist Studies, 1994
African American Review, 1992
Victorian Literature and Culture
History Compass, 2007
Women's Studies, 1997
Ariel: A Review of International English Literature, 2008
Journal of Women in Educational Leadership, 2005.
 Harmer, "Women in History--Mary Seacole": invited to assume the supervision of Nursing Services at the Kingston headquarters of the British Army; "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 request to join the campaign in Crimea were refused by Br officials on four separate occasions, including once by the young novice nurse who had been appointed to head the nursing services in the Crimea--Florence Nightingale.

Nursing textbooks

Pharris, et al., eds. *Transforming Nursing Education: The Culturally Inclusive Environment*, 2009
 Mortimer and McGann. *New Directions in the History of Nursing: International Perspectives*, 2005.
 Williamson et al., *Contexts of Contemporary Nursing*, 2010
 Hill and Howlett, *Success in Practical/Vocational Nursing*, 2013
 Polifko-Harris, *Practice Environment of Nursing: Issues and Trends*, 2009
 Cherry and Jacob, *Contemporary Nursing: Issues, Trends and Management, 1999-2017* (subsequently omitted, 2019)
 McAllister and Lowe, eds. *The Resilient Nurse: Empowering Your Practice*, 2011
 Peate, et al., *Nursing Practice: Knowledge and Care*, 2014
 Peate, *Nursing Care and the Activities of Living*, 2009
 Klainberg, et al., *Today's Nursing Leader: Managing, Succeeding, Excelling*, 2010. (Pre-Crimea, she traveled to Cuba and Panama and worked during cholera and yellow fever, yet refused an interview because of her

race and ethnicity, funded her own trip to the Crimea, brought supplies, established a hospital and respite home for wounded and fatigued soldiers in Balaclava)

Encyclopedias: *Encyclopedia Britannica* (academic ed.), 2014

Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present, 2006

Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience, 1999



Figure 3. Illustration from a children's book. Mary Seacole, who is dressed in an early 20th-century nurse's uniform, is also shown as much younger than Seacole was during the Crimean War.

Andrews, et al. eds. *Oxford Companion to African and American Literature*, 1997

Historical Encyclopedia of Nursing, 1999

Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography

Biographies of Jamaican Personalities

Oxford Companion to Black British History

Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History

Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers

Third World Women's Literatures: A Dictionary and Guide to Materials in English, 1995

Fister, "The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands.": in the war, "her contribution was in many ways as notable as that of Florence Nightingale")

Dictionary of Medical Biography, 2007

Reeves. "Seacole, Mary Jane," (went to war after Britain declared war, refused).

The Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography, 1998

("She used her nursing skills more directly than did Florence Nightingale, whom she met several times")

"tended wounds on the battlefields under gunfire")

Women in Medicine: An Encyclopedia (Served with the British in the Crimean War, "made a significant contribution to the war effort")

Doctoral Dissertations: (up to 2014): 21 American, 3 British, 1 each Canada, Poland and Netherlands

Children's books: (14 at least)

National institutions:

Department of Health

NHS and NHS Employers

NHS Leadership Academy

Unions: Unison and RCN

BBC (2 films, websites); "Horrible Histories"

Channel Four

National Portrait Gallery

National Science Museum

National Army Museum

Department of Education

OCR (Oxford, Cambridge, Royal Society of Arts) examinations

NHS

The **National Army Museum** currently has a (free) programme on for children. It previously had a greatly fallacious description of Seacole on its website: "Civilian supplier of food/medical care to British Expeditionary Forces." lists 3 medals.

NHS Leadership Academy: On the 70th anniversary of the founding of the NHS, a senior official published a list of the "great leaders of nursing," topped by Mary Seacole. She gave not one example of nursing leadership by Seacole, but

repeated the fallacious statement that Seacole was twice turned down by the British government to go to the Crimean War, got there herself and cared for the "wounded and sick" (Price-Dowd, "The changing face of nursing: from the pioneers to the future of leadership," *British Journal of Nursing*, 2018).

African-American Nurse and Author: Seacole "the Black British nurse whose fame equalled Florence Nightingale in the mid nineteenth century; she is one of the inaugural writers in a burgeoning African-American literary canon" (Salih, "'A Gallant Heart to the Empire.' Autoethnography and Imperial Identity in Mary Seacole's Wonderful Adventures." *Philological Quarterly* 83,2 (spring 2004).

Military histories: Royle, Trevor. *Crimea: The Great Crimean War 1854-1856*, 2000

Ponting, Clive. *The Crimean War: The Truth behind the Myth*, 2004

McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad*, 2011.

Donald, *Loose Cannons: 101 Myths, Mishaps and Misadventures of Military History*, 2009.

Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade*, 2010: "At the start of the Crimean War she travelled to England and

attempted to get herself recruited as a nurse with Florence Nightingale, but she was rejected several times, no doubt partly because of the colour of her skin."

General histories: Wilson, A.N. *The Victorians*, 2002
Schama, *A History of Britain*, 2002: "another heroine of the Crimea whose work was unknown"; "If you had been sick or wounded and managed to get taken to her 'British Hotel,' you stood a decent chance of surviving. It was not so at Scutari."

Back-up Quotations (from *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*)

Intention to open a "British Hotel" as "a mess table and comfortable quarters for sick and convalescent officers" (WA 81), but became instead a restaurant, store, takeaway, catering services. For ordinary soldiers: "a canteen for the soldiery" (WA 114)

On cholera: "I have no doubt that at first I made some lamentable blunders, and, may be, lost patients which a little later I could have saved." "One stubborn attack succumbed to an additional dose of ten grains of sugar of lead, mixed in a pint of water, given in doses of a tablespoonful every quarter of an hour." By then, reviewing her "cholera medicines" made her "shudder" (31).

Yellow fever: "The groans of the sufferers and the anxiety and fear of their comrades were so painful to hear and witness.... I found the worst cases sinking fast, one of the others had relapsed, while fear had paralysed the efforts of the rest.At last I restored some order and, with the help of the bravest of the women, fixed up rude screens around the dying men. But no screens could shut out from the others their awful groans and cries for the aid that no mortal power could give them. So the long night passed away; first a deathlike stillness behind one screen, and then a sudden silence behind the other, showing that the fierce battle with death was over, and who had been the victor" (28-29).

In her kitchen: "The officers, full of fun and high spirits, used to crowd into the little kitchen...would carry off the tarts hot from the oven, while the good-for-nothing black cooks...would stand by and laugh with all their teeth." (WA 140-41).

Battlefield: "My first experience of battle was pleasant enough.... one fine morning they [Omar Pasha and Turks] were marched away towards the Russian outposts on the road to Baidar. I accompanied them on horseback, and enjoyed the sight amazingly" (WA 146-47).

After the fighting: "Pleasure was hunted keenly. Cricket matches, picnics, dinner parties, races, theatrics, all found their admirers. My restaurant was always full, and once more merry laughter was heard

and many a dinner party was held beneath the iron roof of the British Hotel. Several were given in compliment to our allies, and many distinguished Frenchmen have tested my powers of cooking" (WA, 178)

For New Year's Day, 1856, Seacole made plum puddings and mince pies for the Land Transport Corps Hospital (WA, 187).

References on Seacole

Biography: The best is Jane Robinson, *Mary Seacole: The Black Woman Who Invented Modern Nursing*, 2004.

For a refutation of the myths see Lynn McDonald, *Mary Seacole: The Making of the Myth* (Toronto: Iguana 2014). Website: www.maryseacole.info/

For further reading, please also see the Nightingale Society website: <http://www.nightingalesociety.com>



Kofoworola Abeni Pratt

In our April lecture at King's College,, we introduced the Nigerian-born Mrs "Rola" Pratt -- who began her nurse training at the Nightingale School in 1946 -- as the first black nurse in the NHS, when it was launched in 1948.

For more on this outstanding nursing leader, see nightingalesociety.com/backgrounders/8-kofoworola-abeni-pratt/