

The Blue Plaque

Mary Seacole

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Everyone has heard of Florence Nightingale and her achievements. Not enough people have heard of Mary Seacole, who played an equally heroic role in nursing British soldiers during the Crimean War, often tending their wounds while under fire herself.

Born Mary Jane Grant in Kingston, Jamaica in 1805, the daughter of a free black woman and a Scottish army officer, she married Edwin Seacole in 1836 and was widowed eight years later. She had learned nursing skills from her mother who ran a boarding house for invalid soldiers and, when the Crimean War broke out in 1854, she travelled to England to offer her services to the British government. She was turned away, doubtless because of her colour. As she herself suggested, she was not wanted, 'because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat duskier skin than theirs.'

Undaunted, she financed her own journey to the Crimea and there established the British Hotel near Balaclava to provide comfort and medical care for wounded soldiers. At the end of the war she was bankrupt but was rescued by public subscription when her work was given publicity by a number of newspapers. Two English officers who had fought in the war and recognised her achievements organised a benefit festival for her in the Royal Surrey Gardens in Kennington and she was eventually awarded a Crimean medal by the British government.

Her autobiography, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, was published in 1857 with an introduction by the famous war correspondent W. H. Russell. The blue plaque to Mary Seacole is on a house in George Street, off the Edgware Road, where she lived in the 1870s.



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