

# Mary Seacole

A true unsung hero of the Crimean War, Mary Jane Seacole (born Mary Jane Grant in 1805) was from Kingston, Jamaica. Both determined and resourceful, she dedicated her life to caring for the sick and injured, despite the challenges she faced to be recognised as an equal in society.



## Early Life

Mary described herself as Creole (a person with parents from different ethnic backgrounds). Her father was a Scottish soldier while her mother was Jamaican: she ran a hotel and worked as a healer. As part of her role as a healer, Mary's mother used her knowledge of traditional Jamaican and African treatments and herbal remedies to cure many ailments. During her childhood, Mary would help her mother to care for patients in the community, learning about holistic and traditional medicine as she did so.

In Jamaica, many Black people at the time of Mary's birth were enslaved: they were denied their freedom and basic human rights and were forced to work without pay. Mary's mother was a free Jamaican, meaning that she was not enslaved. However, she did not have the same civil rights as White people and was not treated as an equal. Although slavery was abolished in Jamaica by 1836, many people still faced prejudice and discrimination – Mary included.

Unusually for a woman at the time, Mary travelled widely. She visited countries such as Panama, Haiti and Cuba, gaining experience in treating many tropical diseases including cholera and yellow fever. In 1836, she married Edwin Seacole.

## The Crimean War

In 1853, Russia wanted to take control of parts of Europe. Many countries, including England and France, protested this, leading to conflict. Britain declared war in 1854 and over 20,000 British soldiers were deployed to the Crimean Peninsula (a piece of land in eastern Europe surrounded almost completely by water). Conditions for the soldiers were deplorable: living accommodation was cramped and cold and there was not enough food to go around. During the three-year conflict, over 500,000 soldiers lost their lives – many to diseases such as cholera, rather than because of the battle itself.

When news of the soldiers' terrible circumstances reached Mary Seacole, who was residing in London at the time, she petitioned for passage to Crimea so that she could nurse the wounded and sick. Frustratingly, while others were granted permission, she was refused more than once – Mary believed this was due to racial prejudice. Determined to find her way there, she financed her own journey and set up a hotel a few miles from the epicentre of the battle. The aim of the hotel was to offer a safe place for her to treat ill and wounded soldiers. The hotel also acted as a restaurant and general store; all profits from these facilities were used to buy medicines. Every day, Mary rode to the front line to collect injured men (she was often seen treating wounds on the field of the battle itself). She would then bring them back to care for them and allow them to convalesce in safety.

Known as Mother Seacole by the soldiers that she nursed, Mary provided them with care, comfort and support during their challenging experience of war.

### **Mary's Legacy**

Following the war, Mary returned to London without finances and in ill health. Although some soldiers that she had cared for had put on a concert to try and raise money for her, she still had little money. She continued to look after the injured and sick while simultaneously writing her autobiography. This was published in 1857 with the title 'The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands'. Remarkably, the book is still in print today.

For a century following her incredible and selfless efforts in Crimea, Mary's inspirational kindness and bravery were all but forgotten. It was not until 2004, when she was voted the greatest Black Briton in a poll of 100 prominent figures, that the spotlight returned to her and she finally received the recognition and respect that she deserved. In 2016, a 12-year campaign led to a memorial statue of Mary being unveiled in the grounds of a London hospital. This seminal moment was particularly significant as the statue is thought to be the first memorial statue of a named Black woman in the UK.

# Questions

1. Draw **four** lines and complete each sentence.

Following the war, Mary returned to London without finances...

and over 20,000 British soldiers were deployed to the Crimean Peninsula.

Britain declared war in 1854...

Mary financed her own journey and set up a hotel a few miles from the epicentre of the battle.

Her mother was Jamaican: ...

and in ill health.

Determined to find her way there...

she ran a hotel and worked as a healer.

2. **Unusually for a woman at the time, Mary travelled widely.**

What does this tell you about women at the time? Tick **two**.

- That Mary was an exceptional woman.
- That it was illegal for women to travel.
- That women did not have the opportunity to travel much.
- That men liked to travel.

3. What did Mary have experience in treating?

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4. Look at the section titled **The Crimean War**.

Write down **two** words which mean the same as **dire**.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

5. Fill in the missing words.

A few miles from the battle, Mary set up a \_\_\_\_\_ as a safe place to treat ill and \_\_\_\_\_ soldiers.

6. Compare the experiences of Mary Seacole and her mother. Discuss the similarities and differences in their stories.

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7. Mary Seacole travelled to many wonderful lands during her life. What sort of experiences do you think she had while she was abroad? Explain your reasoning using evidence from the text.

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8. **Soldiers that Mary Seacole had cared for performed a concert to raise money for her.** What do you think this tells you about Mary Seacole? Explain your reasoning.

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9. Summarise in 25 words or fewer how Mary Seacole helped soldiers in the Crimean War.

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10. Explain why Mary Seacole is thought to be an unsung hero using evidence from the text.

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# Answers

1. Draw **four** lines and complete each sentence.

Following the war, Mary returned to London without finances...	and over 20,000 British soldiers were deployed to the Crimean Peninsula.
Britain declared war in 1854...	Mary financed her own journey and set up a hotel a few miles from the epicentre of the battle.
Her mother was Jamaican: ...	and in ill health.
Determined to find her way there...	she ran a hotel and worked as a healer.

2. **Unusually for a woman at the time, Mary travelled widely.**

What does this tell you about women at the time? Tick **two**.

- That Mary was an exceptional woman.**
- That it was illegal for women to travel.
- That women did not have the opportunity to travel much.**
- That men liked to travel.

3. What did Mary have experience in treating?

**Mary had experience in treating cholera, yellow fever and other tropical diseases.**

4. Look at the section titled **The Crimean War**.

Write down **two** words which mean the same as **dire**.

- **deplorable**
- **terrible**

5. Fill in the missing words.

A few miles from the battle, Mary set up a **hotel** as a safe place to treat ill and **wounded** soldiers.

6. Compare the experiences of Mary Seacole and her mother. Discuss the similarities and differences in their stories.

**Pupils' own responses, such as: Mary Seacole and her mother were both healers who ran hotels. They used traditional Jamaican and African medicines in their treatments. However, Mary Seacole travelled widely and worked close to the frontline during a battle while her mother only lived and worked in Jamaica.**

7. Mary Seacole travelled to many wonderful lands during her life. What sort of experiences do you think she had while she was abroad? Explain your reasoning using evidence from the text.

**Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that Mary Seacole spent a lot of time abroad learning how to nurse people with diseases such as cholera because this is how she gained experience in treating these illnesses.**

8. **Soldiers that Mary Seacole had cared for performed a concert to raise money for her.** What do you think this tells you about Mary Seacole? Explain your reasoning.

**Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that this shows that Mary Seacole was a kind and generous person who was very dedicated to looking after her patients. In my opinion, the soldiers must have liked and respected her very much to try and help her when she returned to London with no money.**

9. Summarise in 25 words or fewer how Mary Seacole helped soldiers in the Crimean War.

**Pupils' own responses, such as: Mary Seacole helped soldiers in the Crimean War by setting up a hotel and treating them when they were sick and injured.**

10. Explain why Mary Seacole is thought to be an unsung hero using evidence from the text.

**Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that Mary Seacole is thought to be an unsung hero because she helped many sick and injured soldiers in very dangerous conditions with no support. It was not until 2016 (a long time after her work was finished) that a statue was unveiled in her honour, showing that for many years she was not recognised as the hero that she was.**