

# BLACK HISTORY

The Portland Observer

## Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole: A historical saga

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

Quite naturally, all the world has heard a thousand times or more of the wealthy patrician English lady who became the flower of the nursing profession, a model for thousands of young women to follow over the century.

A challenge to empire of a very different kind was that of Mary Seacole, the Jamaican nurse whose reputation just after Crimean War (1853-6) rivalled Florence Nightingale's. Mary Seacole's challenge, quite simply, was to have her skills put to proper use in spite of her being black. A born healer and a woman of driving energy, she side-stepped official indifference, hauteur, and prejudice; got herself out to the war front by her own efforts and at her own expense; risked her life to bring comfort to wounded and dying soldiers; and became the first black woman to make her mark in British public life. But while Florence Nightingale was turned into a legend in the service of empire, Mary Seacole was soon relegated to an obscurity from which she has only recently been rescued, by Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee.

Mary Seacole was born in Kingston around the year 1805. Her father was a Scottish soldier possibly called Grant; her mother, a competent practitioner of Jamaican traditional medicine, kept a boarding-house where she cared for invalid officers, and their wives. From early youth, Mary had 'a yearning for medical knowledge and practice; at first she practiced on her doll and on cats and dogs, but in due course she was helping her mother look after the invalid officers. She soaked up knowledge from her mother, soon gaining a reputation as 'a skilful nurse and doctress'.

Both before and after her marriage to Horatio Seacole, who died young, she travelled widely. There were two trips to Britain, where London street-urchins jeered at her. In 1851, during the California gold rush, she joined her brother Edward in Panama, where she opened an hotel. Soon she had saved her first cholera patient and had gained valuable knowledge from a post-mortem examination of an orphan baby that had died of this disease - which she herself contracted and recovered from. A white American who toasted her, as 'Auntie Seacole', for her work in the cholera epidemic, ventured to suggest that she be bleached in order to make her 'as acceptable in any company as she deserves to be'. Mary Seacole replied stingingly:

I must say that I don't altogether appreciate your friend's kind wishes with respect to my complexion. If it had been as dark as any nigger's, I should have been just as happy and as

useful, and as much respected by those whose respect I value; and as to his offer of bleaching me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As to the society which the process might gain me admission into, all I can say is, that, judging from the specimens I have met with here and elsewhere, I don't think that I shall lose much by being excluded from it. So, gentlemen, I drink to you and the general reformation of American manners.

The autumn of 1853 found Mary Seacole in London, where news was coming of the collapse of the British army's nursing system in the Crimea and the agonies of the heightened gross mismanagement of the sick and wounded. Mary applied to the War Office, to the Army, the Quarter Master General's Office and to the Secretary of War -- all without avail.

She produced fine testimonials and pointed out that she already knew many of the officers and soldiers of the

regiments concerned, having nursed them when they were stationed in Jamaica. But authority closed ranks against this plump black middle-aged West Indian lady in her flamboyant red or yellow dress and blue bonnet.

The tide turned when a distant relative called Day came to an agreement with her to open a hotel and store in the Crimea with a stock of medicines and home comforts. So at the age of 60 skill, perseverance and

personality put her into the right place at the right time. Hardly had she arrived, when a party of soldiers discovered the hotel. "God bless you woman", they cried over and over again and again.

Mary Seacole's hotel opened its doors in the early summer of 1855, built on floating wreckage, for all the trees had virtually been cut down. Soon the entire British army knew "you might get any thing, from an

anchor down to a needle. The soldiers were her sons and she was their mother. That is how she greeted the head chef of London's Reform Club, Alex Soyer, who revolutionized Army cooking, in the visits to the Crimea.

The famous magazine, "Punch", published an appeal on Mary Seacole's behalf, "that berry-brown face, with a kind heart was a sight to behold, though snow clouds rolled across that iron sky."

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## IT ALL STARTED ON A BUS



Rosa Parks

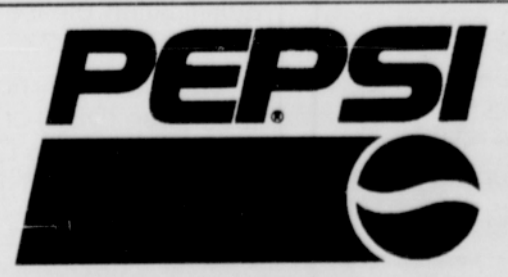
On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks took the first step toward bus desegregation. This African-American woman chose arrest rather than relinquishing her bus seat, simply because of the color of her skin. Her stand against racism inspired a boycott which has improved all our lives.

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