

Y5 Information Text: Biography

Who Was Mary Seacole?

Mary Seacole (born Mary Grant) was a British-Jamaican woman who became famous in the 19th century as 'Mother Seacole' due to her work caring for injured soldiers in the Crimean War.

Mary's Early Life

Mary Anne Grant was born in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica. Her father was a Scottish soldier and her mother was a well-known Jamaican 'doctress', who treated people using herbal remedies (such as aloe vera and ginger). Mary also had two siblings, Edward and Louisa.

As a child, Mary was fascinated by her mother's work and practised the skills she learned using dolls and pets as patients. By the age of 12, she was helping her mother as a nurse. Because of her father's connections, she was also able to travel twice to visit England in her teens and this made her quite unusual for a black person at that time.

When she was 31, Mary married a naval officer called Edwin Horatio Seacole. She was a good businesswoman and together they ran a successful store. Unfortunately, her husband died only eight years later. In 1853, she went to Panama, where her brother lived, and opened a hotel for the gold miners there. She continued to look after ill people and even risked her own life to care for the victims of an illness called cholera.



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The Crimean War

The Crimean War began in 1854. Mary was determined to help the soldiers so she travelled to London and offered to go with Florence Nightingale's nurses. However, this was a time of racial prejudice, which meant that black people were not allowed to do certain things. The government refused to co-operate with her, probably because of racial narrow-mindedness.

Instead, Mary and Thomas Day (a family friend) went to Crimea together taking medicines and stores. There they set up the 'British Hotel', which was a simple building that provided medicine and hot food to fortify the soldiers. Additionally, she sold clothing and blankets to make them comfortable. Unlike Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole treated the soldiers' injuries even in the thick of the fighting. They called her 'Mother Seacole' because she was so kind. She said in her autobiography, "It was the grateful words and smiles which rewarded me."

Mary's Old Age

At the end of the war in 1856, Mary returned to England with very little money. However, veteran soldiers started a campaign to help her and she was therefore able to live comfortably until her death on 14th May, 1881. Some people have criticised her fame because she was not a real nurse like Florence Nightingale but she must be regarded nowadays as an excellent role model for doing good work in difficult situations

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