



MARY SEACOLE

Mary Seacole (1805-81) was born in Jamaica. Her father was a Scottish soldier and her mother was a Creole doctress who ran a boarding house. As a young girl, Mary helped her mother and learnt about traditional Caribbean healing techniques. In 1821, she travelled to London with relatives. She returned there in 1823 and stayed for two years. After this, in 1825, she travelled to Cuba, Haiti and the Bahamas, returning to Kingston in 1826. There, in 1850, she nursed victims of the cholera epidemic; in 1851 in Panama, she did the same. Mary also famously travelled to the Crimea, established the British Hotel, and provided respite for sick and recovering soldiers. After the war, she returned to London.

TEACHING TOPICS

Women and Empire
Medical Humanities
Memoirs & Self-Fashioning
Gender & Professionalisation
Overcoming Obstacles
Travel & Mobility
Transnational & Hybrid Identities
Transimperialism

USEFUL QUOTATIONS

‘I was born in the town of Kingston, in the island of Jamaica, some time in the present century. As a female, and a widow, I may well be excused giving the precise date of this important event ... I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins’. (p. 1)

‘Strangely enough, some of the most vivid of my recollections [of London] are the efforts of the London street-boys to poke fun at my and my companion’s complexion. I am only a little brown—a few shades duskier than the brunettes whom you all admire so much; but my companion was very dark, and a fair (if I can apply the term to her) subject for their rude wit. She was hot-tempered, poor thing!’ (p. 13)

‘A good night’s rest had served to strengthen my determination. Let what might happen, to the Crimea I would go. If in no other way, then would I upon my own responsibility and at my own cost’. (p. 74)

TALKING POINTS

How do we read the colonial experiences of women like Seacole who seem to write their narratives – and their identities – in the service of empire, even when they exist at the margins? (Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness*, 1997: p. 122).

How do we view the text’s instabilities and inconsistencies, especially in relation to Seacole’s experience and expression of race and racism?

FURTHER READING

Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (Columbia University Press, 1997)
Lizabeth Pravasini-Gebert, ‘Mrs Seacole’s *Wonderful Adventures in Many Lands* and the Consciousness of Transit’, in *Black Victorians/Black Victoriana*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 71-87
Sara Salih, ‘Introduction’ to *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.xxxv, p.xxiii)

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Victorian
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