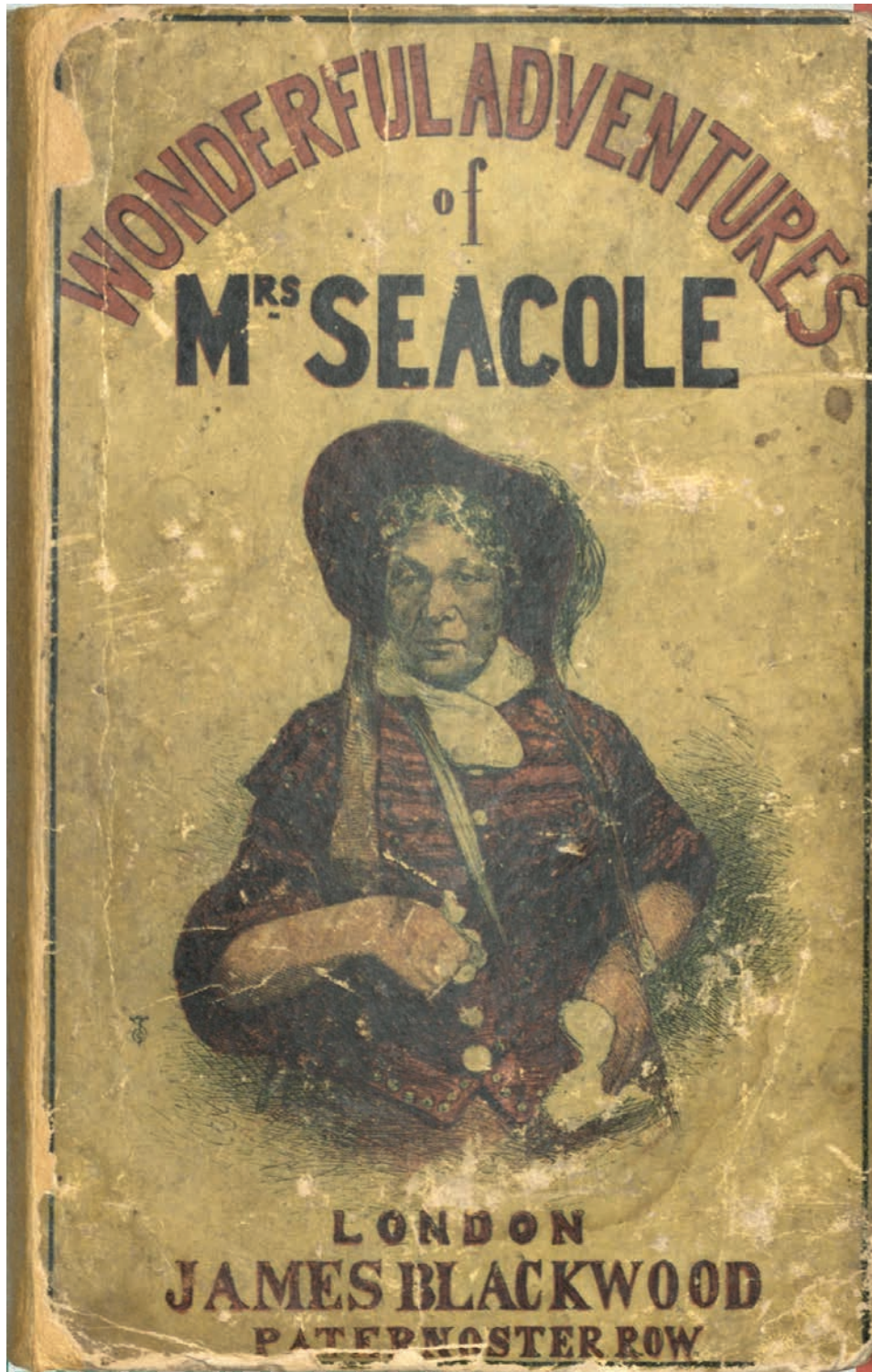


NURSING ICONS

11: Mary Seacole (1857-1881)



**The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands**

Published by James Blackwood, London, 1857



Royal College of Nursing

## 11: Mary Seacole (1857–1881)

The colourful story of Mary Seacole's life is told in her 1857 autobiography, and bestseller, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*. Seacole was born in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica. Her mother was a local woman and her father a Scottish soldier. She became famous for nursing during the Crimean war.

### Finding her passion

Mary first learned to nurse from her mother, who ran a boarding house for invalid soldiers and used traditional remedies to help them. However it was Mary's love of travel that helped to round out her nursing knowledge. She visited other parts of the Caribbean, Central America and even Britain, where she added European medical techniques to her skills.

In Panama, she battled a cholera epidemic, learning much about the disease and catching and recovering from it herself. On her return to Jamaica she was faced with a yellow fever epidemic and the medical authorities turned to her to provide nurses for sick soldiers.

### Nursing in the Crimea

It was on a trip to London that Mary discovered that the nursing system at the Crimean War had

collapsed. She applied to the authorities to travel to the war to tend the sick and wounded but was turned down on every occasion. Both talented and experienced, she was left to wonder if the colour of her skin was causing prejudice against her.

Eventually in 1855, at the age of 50, Mary funded her own passage to the Crimea. She opened the British Hotel near Sevastopol which served as a base from which she would take mules laden with food and medicines to the front line. The hotel also had an officer's club and canteen and soon the whole of the British Army knew 'Mother Seacole'.

The war correspondent W H Russell said of Seacole '[she is] a warm and successful physician, who doctors and cures all manner of men with extraordinary success. She is always in attendance near the battle field to aid the wounded, and has earned many a poor fellow's blessings.'

### Returning to London

Seacole returned from the war bankrupt. The debts of the officers and the expensive, unsaleable items left in her hands after the end of the conflict left her financially ruined. However, the newspapers started a campaign to raise money for her. Backed by royalty and the British army, enough funds were raised to ensure that Mary could live the rest of her life in comfort in London.

### Activity

Mary Seacole's adventures paint her as a very independent woman, at a time when this was unusual. Read an account of one of her trips away from Jamaica, from any part of her book

(freely available online). How does she portray herself to her readers to try and ensure that (a) her achievements are recognised and (b) she is considered respectable?

**Fact:** Seacole is the only named black woman to have a statue in the UK. It is outside St Guys and St Thomas's hospital in London.