Mary Seacole has received unprecedented media coverage due to the phenomenal success of the Operation Black Vote petition to keep her included in the national curriculum. In a period of a month, more than 35,000 people signed it since it went online on 3 January 2013. The nationwide and international response has been remarkable. So too the overwhelming display of respect for Mary Seacole, as demonstrated in the comments of thousands who signed the petition.

A leaked draft of the proposed new history curriculum was featured in MailOnline on 29 December 2012 (Petre, 2012). The report stated that pupils will again have to study these traditional historic figures and examples included Oliver Cromwell, Lord Nelson and Winston Churchill. In contrast, Mary Seacole and other ‘social reformers’ such as Elizabeth Fry, Olaudah Equiano (ca 1745-1797) and Florence Nightingale would be excluded. This was followed on 31 December 2012 with an article in MailOnline headed: ‘The black Florence Nightingale and the making of a PC myth: one historian explains how Mary Seacole’s story never stood up’ (Walters G, 2012).

The petition led to extensive analysis in newspapers, online media and radio and in February, the Government made it clear Seacole would not after all be dropped from the national curriculum (Rawlinson, 2013). Mary Seacole generated a debate: on the one hand, there was acknowledgement of her achievements, while on the other hand doubts were raised as to whether she merited this acclaim and admiration. It was argued by some that myths created about Seacole need to be corrected; three examples are explored here.

Myth 1: Mary Seacole never called herself a nurse and was not recognised as somebody who nursed soldiers in the war zone

Rather than a nurse, instead it is asserted that Seacole was just a kind and motherly ‘sutler’—someone who sold provisions to the army. An example of where this has been challenged is in a Ros Asquith cartoon in the Guardian, 14 January 2013, citing Seacole’s obituary in The Times of 21 May 1881 (Asquith, 2013). That Victorian tribute included these words: ‘The deceased, it will be remembered, greatly distinguished herself as a nurse on the battlefield and in hospitals during the Crimean war.’ In her autobiography, Seacole did refer to herself several times as both a nurse and a ‘doctress’. Excluding testimonials in her book, there are many others who, during her lifetime, praised her nursing expertise. Some are included in an article I had published last year: Mary Seacole: nursing care in many lands (Anionwu, 2012).

Myth 2: Mary Seacole should not be considered as a ‘black historical figure’

Seacole was, for example, voted the Greatest Black Briton in 2004 (Taylor, 2004). Some suggest that accolades of this nature are dubious, as Seacole was ‘three-quarters white’ and, it is claimed, more at ease with her white and Scottish roots than her black Jamaican heritage. Evidence to back this up uses selected extracts from her 1857 autobiography, Wonderful Adventures Of Mrs Seacole In Many Lands, including that her skin colour is ‘only a little brown’ and disparaging remarks she made about her black cooks.

Let’s look at three examples of what she wrote in that same book, published nearly 20 years after slavery had been fully abolished in Jamaica in 1838 and 8 years before being outlawed in the US in 1865. In chapter 2, Seacole says: ‘I have a few shades of deeper brown upon my skin, which shows me related—and I am proud of the relationship—to those poor mortals whom you once held enslaved, and whose bodies America still owns. And having this bond, and knowing what slavery is; having seen with my eyes and heard with my ears proof positive enough of its horrors—let others affect to doubt them if they will—is it surprising that I should be somewhat impatient of the airs of superiority which many Americans have endeavoured to assume over me?’

In chapter 6, she recalls an American toasting her at a dinner in Panama, possibly in 1851, in recognition of the excellent nursing care of him and fellow countrymen during a cholera outbreak. He wished that he could bleach her skin ‘and thus make her acceptable in any company as she deserves to be’. Her outraged response included: ‘I don’t altogether appreciate your friend’s kind wishes with respect to my complexion.’

Further on in the same chapter, Seacole shows her sympathy with American slaves, recounting how a young

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Scotching three myths about Mary Seacole
African-American woman had been rescued from being ‘bound hand and foot, naked, and being severely lashed’ by her cruel young American mistress. A magistrate, ‘himself a man of colour’, pronounced that she was free to leave her mistress. Seacole and others persuaded the petrified girl to flee to freedom and helped to purchase her child from the slave-owner.

**Myth 3: Mary Seacole was never awarded the medals she is seen wearing in various images**

The charge that Seacole wore decorations to which she was not entitled is naturally a serious one, if proven.

The number of decorations Seacole is reported as having during her life ranges from two to four. A week after the death of Seacole’s sister Louisa Grant, on 21 July 1905, for instance, the *Jamaican Gleaner* (27 July 1905) related that Seacole had ‘… received three decorations for her services in the Crimea, which are on exhibition in the Portrait Gallery of the Jamaica Institute’. Evidence for Seacole’s medals includes portraits, photos and a terracotta bust sculpted in 1871 by Count Victor Gleichen, a half-nephew of Queen Victoria. Some of these images have been known about for some time, while others have only been discovered in the past 10 years. Jane Robinson, in her 2005 biography of Seacole (Robinson, 2005:167), proposed that in a photograph, Seacole is wearing decorative miniature or ‘dress’ medals. Helen Rappaport is the historian who discovered the lost 1869 portrait of Mary Seacole, now owned by and hanging in the National Portrait Gallery, London. Rappaport was advised by medal experts that, in the 1869 painting, Seacole is wearing ‘a set of three miniature medals: the British Crimea, the Turkish Medjidie and the French Legion of Honour’ (Rappaport, 2005).

These opinions are in sharp contrast to those who have either seen the two medals housed in the Institute of Jamaica, Kingston and/or the photograph of them that is owned by the National Library of Jamaica. Their view is that the medals are authentic and include the Turkish Order of the Medjidie and the French Legion of Honour. This difference of opinion has understandably created confusion.

So, forgetting about enjoying my retirement and as the temperatures plummeted and the snow fell, I decided to hibernate in my flat and pull together some facts. Books and articles on Mary Seacole were taken down from my shelves and the computer was switched on to browse the internet. I also contacted Drs Corry and Jeroen Staring-
Buried in Kensal Green

I was surprised to discover that she was buried in St Mary's Catholic Cemetery in Kensal Green, London, just half a mile down the road from my old school of nursing. On page 36, the editors write in some detail about the medals. They include The Times report (7 November 1856) of Seacole's bankruptcy hearing, which noted that 'the lady of colour' had been 'honoured with four Government medals for her kindness to the British soldiery'. Alexander and Dewjee go on to observe that 'the exact identity of these medals has till now remained a mystery. The Daily Gleaner of Jamaica, in an obituary article on Mrs Seacole, which appeared on 9 June 1881, stated that she received 'English, French, Russian and Turkish decorations'.

While it was consistent with the reception she received on returning that such awards should be conferred upon her, there seems to be no easily accessible record of when this was done. Even so, independent contemporary sources confirm their existence and on a bust carved in 1871 by Queen Victoria's nephew, Count Gleichen, who knew her in the Crimea, Mrs Seacole is wearing the four medals. This bust and two of her medals are held by the Institute of Jamaica. Through the recent researches of Anita Johnson of the National Library of Jamaica and JMA Tamplin of the Royal Commonwealth Society, the surviving two medals have been identified as: the Order of the Medjidie, which was a commendation granted by the Turks to the British for outstanding service; and the French Legion of Honour. Identification of the missing pair does pose problems for researchers. A quick search I did on the internet identifies that JMA Tamplin is a recognised expert and writer on British gallantry awards.

Jane Robinson's 2005 biography, Mary Seacole—The Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea, was published by Constable to coincide with the bicentenary of her birth in 1805. On page 167, Robinson states that 'None of Mary's medals can now be found (although the Institute of Jamaica thinks it might have the French and Turkish ones, at the moment, at least, they are lost)'. Robinson notes that the four medals on the 1871 terracotta bust are 'apparently the British Crimea medal, a Sardinian award, the French Légion d'honneur and the star-shaped Turkish Order of the Medjidie. They are rather small, though. A recently discovered photograph of Seacole, taken at about the same time, only shows three decorations. And, judging by their size, they are all miniatures, or "dress medals". Robinson was also unable to find any notice of awards to Mary Seacole in the London Gazette or the War Office archives.

Also published in 2005 was the Penguin Classics edition of the Seacole autobiography (Seacole and Salih, 2005), with a 52-page introduction by the editor, Sarah Salih, professor of English at the University of Toronto, Canada. She wrote that Seacole 'was eventually decorated with four medals for her services to the Crimea (page xxxviii). And Salih had slightly better luck during her visit to Jamaica. On the one hand, in her Note 65 on page xxviii, Salih explains that two of the medals were said to be in the 'Jamaica National Institute, but the staff there were unable to locate them when I visited'. On the other hand, she did see the photograph of the medals in the Jamaica National Library, which she compared with images in Ribbons and Medals by Captain H Taprell Dorling (1944). One she concludes 'is undoubtedly the Order of the Medjidie, and the other resembles the description and image of the French Legion of Honour...'

In 2007, a reprint of the 1857 Dutch edition of Seacole's autobiography, Mary Seacole's Avonturen in De West En In De Krim (Mary Seacole's Adventures in the West and the Crimea) was published (Seacole and Staring-Derks, 2007). There is a 27-page editor's foreword by Dr Corry Staring-Derks, a lecturer in anatomy, physiology and pathology in the nursing department of Avans University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. When she and her husband Jeroen visited the Institute of Jamaica in 2006, they had the good fortune to see and measure the medals and view Count Gleichen's terracotta bust of Mary Seacole.

As with Salih, they were satisfied that the two medals matched the descriptions of the French Legion of Honour and the Turkish Order of the Medjidie found in Dorling's publication. Notably, on page xxi of her own edition of the book, Staring-Derks includes the National Library of Jamaica's photograph of the two medals.

The Institute's Journal of Jamaica features the same black and white photograph in an article, 'More than a nurse', by Aleric Josephs, a lecturer in history at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica (December 2006, page 52). When the couple were in London in August 2009, they pored through Victorian newspapers in the British Library and unearthed over 30 unknown references to Mary Seacole (see page 72, Nursing Standard, 1 October 2010). The couple compiled into a book, written in English, a selection of the cuttings, together with 12 international reviews (from 1857-58) of Seacole's autobiography (Staring-Derks and Staring, 2010).

The couple enabled a limited edition of the book to be published in aid of the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal, a charity for which they are ambassadors. On page 12 are some examples of scanned newspaper reports from May 1856 of Seacole being awarded a Turkish medal.
The Derby Mercury of 14 May 1856 announced: ‘The Turkish government has given Mrs Seacole, of Balaklava, a medal for her services to the Turkish troops when they were encamped last winter near her iron house.’ Similar accounts appeared in the Manchester Times (24 May 1856) and the Aberdeen Journal (28 May 1856). No equivalent written record has yet been found concerning the award of the French Legion of Honour.

When the Staring-Derks couple were at the Institute of Jamaica, they met a member of staff, Staci-Marie Dehaney, who told them that Seacole had been awarded a Russian medal after her death, but could not supply any further information. In 1990, Seacole was posthumously honoured by Jamaica with the award of the Order of Merit.

Research is still required to discover whether Mary Seacole was awarded any other medals, be they British, Russian or Sardinian. Verifying or dismissing some, but not all, historic claims concerning Seacole is akin to a detective story. This is poignantly illustrated in a letter to the Jamaican Gleaner from RA Walcott (26 July, 1905): ‘Who can tell us … where to find the Crimean War Medal and [clasp] that she received, or the bust of herself executed by a member of the Royal Family? Who can point out the resting place of the honoured bones of Mrs Seacole?’

Well, two out of three of the questions have been answered, but not the one about the location of the Crimean medal, notwithstanding tantalising accounts from people who believe they saw her wearing it. Enthusiastic history sleuths are needed to complete the whole of this fascinating jigsaw puzzle.

Conclusion

As for me, it is now time to see more of the family, including my 5-year-old granddaughter. She is one of the reasons that I am working with a team of volunteers to raise funds for the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue that will be located in the grounds of St Thomas's hospital in London. I want her and other children to visit it and touch history. As Sir WH Russell, the Times Crimean War correspondent wrote about Mary Seacole in 1857:

‘Let England not forget one who nursed her sick, who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them, and who performed the last offices for some of her illustrious dead.’

If you agree, please make a donation via: www.justgiving.com/maryseacolememorial/Donate.