DISCUSSION PAPER

Mary Seacole: global nurse extraordinaire

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Abstract

Aims. A discussion of recently discovered literature that reveals how after the Crimean War ended in 1856, Jamaican nurse, doctress and entrepreneur Mary Seacole travelled more widely and gained further international recognition than had previously been appreciated.

Background. New findings demonstrate that Seacole’s international charitable and business activities were reported more widely than realised. Recently discovered literature uncovers her networking and strategic skills in various social milieus. A former Scutari nurse and 39 other women, offered their service to Seacole to nurse British soldiers in India. Newspapers also reported the medal she had been awarded from the Turkish government.

Design. Discussion paper.

Data sources. Digitized 19th-century newspaper reports, and 1857 Dutch and 1858 French translations of Seacole’s autobiography and a recently discovered handwritten letter dated 1 October 1857 from Seacole to Sir Henry Storks, at the time Secretary for Military Correspondence at the War Office, London.

Implications for nursing. Awareness of the findings affords a more thorough understanding of the scope and diversity of nursing history. This can provide valuable role models for the 21st century generations of competent and self-confident healthcare professionals. The new evidence offers further testimony that Seacole can truly be considered as one such figurehead.

Conclusions. British and international primary sources reveal Mary Seacole as an historical and charismatic global phenomenon, more than had been previously realised.

Keywords: historical research, Mary Seacole, military nursing, multicultural issues, research dissemination, transcultural nursing

Introduction

In 1857(a), Mary Jane Grant Seacole (1805–1881) published her autobiography Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands. Essential title keywords portray the manner in which she characterized herself: ‘Wonderful Adventures’ refers to nurse, doctress and entrepreneur Seacole, while ‘Many Lands’ expresses her penchant for globetrotting.
Research by biographers Alexander and Dewjee (1982, 1984), Anionwu (2005), McKay Harmer (2010), Robinson (2005), Salih (2005) and Staring-Derks (2007), and research by Judd (1976), Fish (1996) and Paquet (2002) convey indications as to why Mary Seacole felt comfortable in international settings. These publications in addition elucidate how she conducted herself as a self-confident, independent woman in differing, sometimes hostile, social settings. While interest is still shown in Mary Seacole, e.g. Anionwu (2012) and in the pages of JAN (McDonald 2014), the almost global reach of news coverage of Seacole’s life has only recently been unearthed. Our additional 2013–2014 discoveries, together with an analysis of a newly found hand written, signed letter by Seacole form the basis of this paper.

**Background**

Mary Seacole not only acknowledged being the daughter of a Jamaican Creole mother and a Scottish father but also wrote of her respect for them. She was proud of her parents, recognizing influences of both à propos her chosen livelihood. An interesting clue lies in the three opening words in her autobiography (1857a), published just about twenty years after slavery had been fully abolished in Jamaica in 1838: ‘I was born’ (p. 1), as it was usual for slave stories published at the time to open by these words. On the one hand, the statement that the story’s author was indeed born was valued as more important than to note her/his exact date of birth; on the other hand, these three words express the slaves’ truth of their narratives (Hawthorne 2000, p. 315). Apart from her desire to convince readers of the truth of her tale (Staring-Derks 2007), the opening words of Seacole’s life story testify to her respect for her African-Jamaican heritage. Furthermore, she wrote: ‘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’ (Seacole 1857a, p. 14).

Moreover, in writing her narrative – clearly intended for a British public – Seacole had to deal with Victorian patriotism, social hierarchy and philosophical ideologies. Her ambition to write a bestseller could clash with her personal opinions about race, culture, social status, societal obligations, gender roles, nursing and doctoring. They ran the risk of getting into conflict with, for instance, loyalty to the British Empire, or with Victorian propriety concerning how a true lady should behave. Interestingly, she let her readers laugh and smile whilst simultaneously highlighting moral issues such as slavery and racial bigotry. This analysis is very much in line with McKay Harmer’s (2010) statement that ‘Seacole often used humour as a mechanism for delivering social commentary’ (p. 48). Furthermore, McKay Harmer points out that Seacole ‘was very clear in her disapproval of slavery and racial discrimination and through a variety of literary devices, was able to coach her readers to consider the evidence that racial discrimination may still exist in their Victorian world’ (p. 109). For instance, Seacole (1857a) wrote: ‘Was it possible that American prejudices against colour had some root here?’ (p. 79). This dimension of her autobiography was perhaps better received on the European continent, where it touched strong feelings of Christianity and where deeply religious Mademoiselle Victorine Rilliet de Constant – who had earlier published her French translation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin – published her French translation of the autobiography (Seacole 1858) and where Reverend Jacob Jongeneel in his introductory note to his Dutch translation of Wonderful Adventures...tenderly addressed Seacole’s qualities and her open and direct approach to life, its joys and its miseries, concluding that Seacole was a true ‘wereldburgers’ [global citizen] (in Seacole 1857b, p. x).

Fish (1996) also stresses that Seacole in her autobiography successfully used a mix of irony and playfulness when
addressing themes like heritage, skin colour, gender issues or autonomy vs. dependency. She was able to ‘show herself responding with wit and pluck to the dangers, racism, surprises and challenges that befall her – without coming off as a victim’ (p. 109). Fish finds that Seacole’s irony and playfulness also relate to the autobiography’s opening words ‘I was born’, where she was able to ‘choose to playfully omit her birthday’ (ibid.).

It was with equal pride that Seacole (1857a) talked about her Scottish origins: ‘I am a Creole and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins’ (p. 1). Her autobiography recalls her early yearning for globetrotting: ‘As I grew into womanhood, I began to indulge that longing that longing which will never leave me while I have health and vigour. I was never weary of tracing upon an old map the route to England; and never followed with my gaze the stately ships homeward bound without longing to be in them and see the blue hills of Jamaica fade into the distance’ (p. 4). Seacole’s autobiography is famous for its description of her journey to the Crimea and contains eyewitness accounts of the Crimean War. However, even prior to her 1855–1856 well-known stay in the Crimea (where she opened her ‘British Hotel’ near ‘Spring Hill’ at Kadikoi), she was already a seasoned traveller having journeyed to England twice and visited the Bahamas, Haiti, Cuba, New Granada and Panama.

Circa 1855, war illustrator William Simpson made a sketch of her whilst in the Crimea. Later Simpson (1903) recalled, ‘Mrs Seacole, an elderly mulatto woman from Jamaica, was a well-known character in the Crimea, all the soldiers and sailors knew her. She had a taste for nursing and doctoring, but she added to this a business as a sutler. She told me that she had Scotch blood in her veins. I must say that she did not look like it, but the old lady spoke proudly of this point in her genealogy’ (p. 57).

Seacole was clearly at ease with both her African-Jamaican and Scottish origins. Another clue as to her being relaxed in so many different social settings is to be found in her narrative of early life and her mother’s friendship with British soldiers, officers and medical doctors. As a young woman, she helped her mother while she was nursing and doctoring and preparing traditional Creole herbal medicines for the sick. Soldiers and their wives came to her mother’s Kingston boarding-house ‘Blundell Hall’ for help and treatment from Up Park Camp – HQ of the British Army – and from the military station at Newcastle, Jamaica. Alexander and Dewjee (1984) describe her mother as one ‘familiar with the prognosis and treatment of tropical diseases, general ailments and wounds. Their expertise was recognised throughout the island...The techniques of ‘Creole medical art’ used by such women had evolved on the plantations and was based on knowledge of herbal medicine and midwifery brought from Africa’ (pp. 13–14).

Young Mary Seacole grew up in the company of British soldiers, officers and their wives, and with medical doctors. Her autobiography (1857a) attributes an interest in military affairs to her father who: ‘was a soldier, of an old Scotch family; and to him I often trace my affection for a camp-life and my sympathy with what I have heard my friends call ‘the pomp, pride and circumstances of glorious war’’ (p. 1). She reminisced that from a very young age she became very eager to know more about symptoms and medical diagnosis. Surprisingly and of interest in this context, is the fact that James Barry – the British female and well-known medical doctor disguised as man – was stationed in Jamaica between 1831–1836 (Staring-Derks 2007). She may have frequented ‘Blundell Hall’ at the time and even taught Mary Seacole, the young woman who was so eager to know more about anatomy, physiology, symptoms of disease and pathology (Holmes 2002).

As an African-Jamaican student who was taught by her mother, she grew up to nurse and doctor using practice-based evidence and knowledge of herbal medicine, respecting the importance of hygiene and convalescence (Staring-Derks 2007). Seacole described how European military doctor friends taught her Western medical knowledge and diagnostic skills, for example, recognizing early symptoms of cholera. She combined African-Jamaican nursing and doctoring with 19th century Western medical knowledge. It became, in McKay Harmer’s (2010) words, ‘the blended care that Mary Seacole provided’ (p. 127). Seen from this perspective her career as a nurse and doctress may well be considered as African-Jamaican-European inspired, in some sense a global model of treating the sick and wounded.

All this, together with her parentage, cosmopolitan Jamaican upbringing followed by constant international travel, must be considered crucial elements in Seacole becoming a ‘global’ nurse ‘extraordinaire’.

Data sources

Primary sources are 1855–2014 newspapers, magazines and journals (mainly digitized 19th-century newspapers at the Australian trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper, the British www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk, the American www.fultonhistory.com and the New Zealand paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast sites).

Other primary sources are Seacole’s 1857 autobiography, its 1857 Dutch and 1858 French translations, and a recently discovered 1857 handwritten letter, sent by Seacole...
to Sir Henry Storks – at the time Secretary for Military Correspondence at the War Office.

Discussion

Newly found 19th-century media coverage

The digitized 19th century British newspapers available at the site of the British Library in London, greatly facilitated the search and unearthing of a considerable amount of additional Victorian media coverage of Mary Seacole. It revealed that many newspapers throughout England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales regularly reported on Seacole both during and after the Crimean War. She had undeniably become one of the prominent figures newspapers usually wrote about. For instance, in 1856, John Bull (1856a) and the Belfast News-Letter (1856) reported from the Crimea that one of the ladies involved in Florence Nightingale’s cart accident near Balaklava, was hurt. ‘She was removed to Spring-hill, where the ever-ready Samaritan Mrs. Seacole, immediately made her appearance to tender assistance.’ Shortly after, the Caledonian Mercury (1856) reported another mishap – an omnibus accident to ‘Madame Seacole’ – in England. She ‘met with rather serious injuries...her face was cut and her arm injured...and others also suffered’.

At the end of that same year, the Manchester Weekly Examiner & Times (1856b) covered Seacole’s 1856 bankruptcy court case that eventually led to two 1857 benefits. The first, the London Surrey Gardens Benefit Festival, was extensively reported in scores of newspapers and discussed at length in Seacole biographies listed in the Introduction, above. Second, in six issues between November 1857–January 1858, the Bristol Mercury (1857a,b,c,d, 1858a,b) covered a similar event held later that year in Bristol, entitled the Seacole Fund Fancy Ball. Other newspapers also reported the event.¹

Ten years later, two benefits in aid of Mary Seacole – possibly once again in financial need – were reported, one in England, another in New Zealand. The Era (1867) and Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper’s (1867) announced a ‘performance by the Wandering Thespians, in aid of the Seacole Fund at the Bijou Theatre, Haymarket’. Only this latter show has been reported in Seacole biographies.


New finds made in New Zealand newspapers recount that on the 19 July 1867, officers and men of the ‘H.M.S. Charybdis’ performed in a show entitled ‘Grand Amateur Dramatic Entertainment!’ for ‘The Fund of Crimean Heroine – Mrs. Seacole’ at the Osgood Bijou Theatre in Wellington, New Zealand (Evening Herald 1867, Evening Post 1867a,b,c, Wellington Independent 1867a,b). This New Zealand performance therefore forms the fourth benefit for Seacole – this time a Seacole Fund under the patronage of the New Zealand Governor – and testifies that her renown had permeated through the Colonial press to the very far corners of the British Empire.

Contrary to present-day British opinion, Mary Seacole was well-known too in a former British colony – the United States of America – both during and after the Crimean War.

At the end of February, or early March, 1855, Seacole arrived at Balaklava, Crimea. As of March 8, 1855, British and Irish newspapers began reporting about her, e.g. Standard (1855a). Of great interest is that in June 1855, the New York Daily Tribune (1855a) had already introduced her to American readers in a report on the Crimean War from their own correspondent. Two months later the Auburn Weekly Journal (1855) front page carried an article about her, stating she had ‘acquired great experience in the treatment of cases of cholera and diarrhoea,’ and that she made ‘no charge for her powders’. Long after the Crimean War, the 1943 Pittsburgh Courier included a short Seacole biography (Rogers 1943).

19th-century media coverage re Seacole’s Turkish medal

Research of digitized 19th century newspapers clearly helps solving long-standing historical puzzles. For instance, on several occasions, Seacole had been sculptured and portrayed wearing diverse (Crimean) medals. Two medals owned by Seacole (matching descriptions and measurements of the Turkish Order of the Mejidie and the French Legion of Honour) are kept at the Institute of Jamaica in Kingston, Jamaica, but with no records of their provenance (Staring-Derks & Staring 2010). Now we can provide 1856 newspaper reports that detail that she was at least awarded one medal. The Derby Mercury (1856) stated, ‘The Turkish Government has given Mrs. Seacole, of Balaklava, a medal for her services to the Turkish troops – and without doubt a Crimean medal with the Sebastopol clasp would be well bestowed upon her.’ The Manchester Weekly Examiner & Times (1856a) reported, ‘The Sultan has sent
her a medal.’ At least a dozen other newspapers covered the same news of Seacole’s Turkish medal.\(^2\)

19th-century media coverage of Seacole’s autobiography

After the launch of Seacole’s (1857a) autobiography in July 1857, the Reverend Jongeneel from The Netherlands translated the book into Dutch and published his translation in October (Seacole 1857b). The publisher placed advertisements in several Dutch newspapers and the book was reprinted twice (Staring-Derks & Staring 2010). In January 1858, Mademoiselle Rillet de Constant published her French translation in France and in Switzerland (Seacole 1858) and it was advertised in French newspapers (Staring-Derks & Staring 2010).

Staring-Derks and Staring (2010) collated reprints of one 1857-Swiss, one 1858-Dutch and ten 1857-British reviews of the autobiography.\(^3\) Since then, fourteen additional reviews have been unearthed: in total three 1857-Australian, one 1857-New Zealand, one 1858-Tasmanian, one 1859-Dutch and eight 1857-British reviews.\(^4\)

In a single year, Seacole’s book had become known in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and in Australia, New Zealand and Tasmania and on the European continent too. It was immediately translated into two European languages and consequently immediately reviewed in The Netherlands and in Switzerland.

Additional discoveries concerning Seacole’s life between 1857 and 1858

In 2013, a London rare books and manuscripts dealer advertised a signed handwritten letter by Mary Seacole that was contained in an album of correspondence, bought by him in 2011. The letters were all addressed to Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Storks (1811–1874), an English commissioned military officer, in charge of British bases in Turkey during the Crimean War.

Two of the authors purchased the letter and together with the third author researched its background.

Until this time, there had been knowledge of only three letters written by Seacole. Two were published during her lifetime, the first in The Times in 1856 – reprinted in at least four other newspapers\(^5\) – and then, in 1857, Punch magazine printed parts of a letter she had sent to them.\(^6\) In 2008, there was a discovery of what was considered to be Seacole’s only surviving signed letter, dated 31 March 1869. It was addressed to a family member of Albert Challen, the painter of Seacole’s famous portrait, which is now permanently on display in the National Portrait Gallery, London. It was unearthed by one of Challen’s descendents from a box of inherited relics and published as part of an article in BBC History Magazine (Beaumont James 2010).

Beside Seacole being a capable and experienced doctress and nurse taking care of her beloved British soldiers, she was also an entrepreneur. In the words of an Australian of the time, ‘Mother Seacole was a sutler to the British army…While the genus, as a whole, has acquired for itself so much discredit, many soldier (officer and private) had to bless the day that led this old Creole’s steps across his own’ (Patterson 1857). An eloquent description of entrepreneur Seacole as ‘Mother of the Regiment’ (after the vivandiere

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\(^6\) Parts of a letter from Seacole to Punch magazine were reproduced in Punch, May 30, 1857.
'Daughter of the Regiment') is to be found in the Melbourne (Australia) Argus (1857) and the Wollongong (Australia) Illawarra Mercury (1857). These newspapers contain an eyewitness account (never previously cited) of Seacole’s initial nursing work in the Crimea at the Balaclava sick wharf and her later combined entrepreneurial/nursing work:

Having provided herself, when leaving England, with a large supply of bandages, lint, styptics and other curative appliances, she for the first six or eight weeks after her arrival in the Crimea devoted herself to attendance of the sick wharf, at the head of Balaclava Harbor, to which the sick and the wounded were every morning brought down from the front, for embarkation in the transports, which conveyed them to the Scutari hospitals. She made it her business, with the sanction and approval of the Admiral of the Port and of the Military Commandant, to receive the disabled men, wearied and bruised by their seven miles’ journey over the worst roads and by the worst conveyances – to shift and renew the bandages, which were frequently displaced by the accidents of travel – to chafe and warm their half-frozen limbs – to administer warm tea or refreshing diluent drinks to the fasting and fainting and to cheer the desponding with kind and hopeful words. All this was performed under the supervision of the medical officers, who fully appreciated the value of so efficient a coadjutor; and Sir John Hall, Chief of the Medical Staff7, to whom she applied when her own stores were getting low, gave a general order that Mrs. Seacole preferred treatment at her hands, to seeking relief of their ailments with the sanction of their officers, medical as well as regimental, – morning has frequently witnessed a levee of fifty or sixty around her of a ter, who was one of her nearest neighbours for upwards of a year, brought her into such honourable notice; on the contrary, the wri-

The Argus and the Illawarra Mercury wrote that Seacole, after sanitary conditions had improved, moved to Spring Hill and opened a restaurant near Lord Raglan’s HQ. Again the eyewitness figured prominently:

[Seacole] did not...cease to exercise the kindly offices which first brought her into such honourable notice; on the contrary, the writer, who was one of her nearest neighbours for upwards of a year, has frequently witnessed a levee of fifty or sixty around her of a morning – consisting of soldiers of the line, men of the naval brigade, land transport and army works corps and navvies, – who, with the sanction of their officers, medical as well as regimental, preferred treatment at her hands, to seeking relief of their ailments at their own hospitals.

In her autobiography, Seacole wrote that after the Crimean War had ended, her first thoughts were to start a shop in the British Army camp at Aldershot. This plan, however, did not materialise. Following the 1856–1857 bankruptcy of her firm – a costly aftermath of the sudden cessation of military activities in the Crimea – Seacole drastically changed her survival strategy. First, she embarked on writing her autobiography Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands. Second, she grasped the opportunity of publicity offered by the press reporting her bankruptcy to proclaim that, if possible, she would sail to India to help wounded British soldiers. She ‘was quite ready to go out to India if she could be of any service to the army’ (Watchman & Wesleyan Advertiser 1857). The New Zealand Lyttelton Times (1857a) refined her reasons, adding she ‘was quite ready to go out to India for the Persian war.’ It would appear that her plan around February 1857 was to sail to India to help the British soldiers wounded in the Anglo-Persian War (November 1856–April 1857). Seacole did not, however, leave for India.

The summer of 1857 turned out to be a busy time. Early in July, Seacole launched her British autobiography. A few weeks later, still in late July, a 4-day ‘Seacole Fund Grand Military Festival’ was held in her honour in the London Royal Surrey Gardens. Newspapers reported a huge success with over 80,000 people attending. However, poor management of the festival’s finances resulted in meagre benefits. Still, Seacole used the media to make known that she had had an interview with the Secretary-at-War Lord Panmure (1801–1874), expressing her wish to go to India. The Essex Standard (1857), for instance, reported, ‘Give me,’ said the excellent old lady, ‘my needle and thread, my medicine chest, my bandages, my probe and scissors and I’m off.” These legendary words were reprinted in more than two-dozen newspapers appearing in UK cities far and wide (Table 1).8 The words were also reprinted in the Colonial press, e.g. the Lyttelton Times (1857b), New Zealand. Following Seacole’s launch of her autobiography a few weeks earlier, at least twenty reviews of the book appeared between 1857–1858 in Great Britain and Ireland (see above) – reinforcing media coverage regarding her cause.

Newspaper reports of a July 29, 1857 interview between Mary Seacole and the Secretary-at-War Lord Panmure are

71855 newspapers reported that Seacole had received numerous letters of thanks (e.g., Standard 1855b). A report in the Daily News (1857) confirms the 1855 reports, claiming that Seacole ‘possesses testimonials from Sir John Hall and many other heads of departments and a great number of letters attesting the gratitude of private soldiers.’ For Hall’s testimonial, see Seacole (1857b, pp. 129–130).

intriguing. On the one hand, the Anglo-Persian War had ended in April 1857, while on the other hand the 1857–1858 Indian Mutiny/Rebellion had broken out in May of that year.9

What then, in fact, was the actual subject of Seacole and Lord Panmure’s correspondence? Did the Secretary-at-War approve of her plans regarding India? Or did he perhaps initially refer her to the East India Company?

‘Hospital Nurses In India’, a letter in the September 21, 1857, Daily News (A Nurse in the Late War 1857) by the pen of one of Florence Nightingale’s Crimean nurses lifts part of the veil. The letter reads:

Sir, I have this morning been informed that a recent number of the Daily News contains an article saying that women should go out to India to nurse the sick and wounded. I beg, in reply, to state that many are willing and ready; that myself and others addressed

Table 1 ‘Give me my medicine chest...and I’m off’ 1857–1862 Timeline of Mary Seacole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 4, 1857</td>
<td>A first report that Seacole announces plans to depart to India.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 1, 1857</td>
<td>The New Zealand Lyttelton Times shows that she wished to offer her services in the 1856–1857 Anglo-Persian War.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 18, 1857</td>
<td>A nurse who had worked at Scutari under Florence Nightingale writes a letter to the East India Company, offering the services of 40 women to help Mary Seacole in India train the wives of soldiers to nurse the sick and wounded. The East India Company turns down the offer in a letter dated August 22, 1857.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July–September 1857</td>
<td>Media coverage of London Royal Surrey Gardens Seacole Fund Grand Military Festival (=first Seacole Fund). Seacole speaks to Secretary-at-War Lord Panmure and re-announces plans to go to India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 21, 1857</td>
<td>The London Daily News publishes both a letter to the Editor by ‘A Nurse in the Late War’ and a copy of the negative decision of the East India Company (compare July 18, 1857; listed above).</td>
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<tr>
<td>September–October 1857</td>
<td>Other newspapers report the Daily News scoop: ‘A number of ladies, some of whom had been nurses in the late war, offered to accompany Mrs. Seacole to India’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 1, 1857</td>
<td>Seacole writes a letter to Sir Henry Storks discussing the contents of a letter to be sent to the Secretary of State for War, Lord Panmure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>February–March 1858</td>
<td>Newspapers report that Mary will sail to India ‘in 5 weeks from this time’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 1858</td>
<td>Seacole volunteers to assist with a ‘Fancy Bazaar’ at London’s Wellington Barracks in aid of families of soldiers and sailors and to also assist distressed consecutive of troops departing for the East.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 1858</td>
<td>Belgian, British and Dutch newspapers report the arrival of Seacole at Antwerp, Belgium, from London, on board the Belgian steamer Baron Osy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 1859</td>
<td>Newspapers report Seacole’s visit to Sheerness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 1859</td>
<td>Newspapers report Seacole’s visit to Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 18, 1859</td>
<td>The Standard (1859) reports Seacole was on board the steamship Shannon on her way to the West Indies, accompanied by seven Soeurs de la Charité (Sisters of Charity).</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 1859</td>
<td>Newspapers review Trollope’s The West Indies and the Spanish Main and report that it contains an utterance of Seacole’s sister: ‘Mrs. Seacole wanted to go to India during the rebellion there, but Queen Victoria would not let her – her life was too precious.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1862</td>
<td>Newspapers report Seacole’s visit to Panama.</td>
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</table>

9Florence Nightingale had contemplated leaving for India, something that did not happen in the end (Gourlay 2003).
East India House, August 22, 1857.

Madam, I have laid before the Court of Directors of the East India Company your letter of the 18th ultimo offering your services to proceed to India under the present emergency, with a view to direct the wives of soldiers in their attendance on the sick and wounded. In reply I am desired to convey to you the expression of the Court’s appreciation of the benevolence which has induced you to make the offer. I am, however, directed to inform you that in India every station has its regimental hospital and every moveable force in the field it’s regimental and general hospital. Also, that no European women would be allowed to follow the camp. You will therefore perceive that the military service in India affords no opening for especial measures to secure to the sick and wounded attendance of the nature to which your letter relates. I am, madam, your obedient humble servant,

(Signed) James C. Melvill.

Immediately afterwards, other newspapers began to report the Daily News scoop: ‘A number of ladies, some of whom had been in the late war, offered to accompany Mrs. Seacole to India’ (e.g. Leeds Times 1857). Publication of the nurse’s letter in the Daily News, including James C. Melvill’s reply, provokes probing questions. Why did the anonymous nurse wish that the East India Company’s reply be published in the newspaper? Did the ‘Nurse in the Late War’ and Seacole jointly plan the publication, perhaps to subtly influence the Secretary-at-War to overrule the East India Company in this matter?

Seen in this light, the letter from Seacole, addressed to the Secretary for Military Correspondence at the War Office Sir Henry Storks, shows a level of strategic writing. It may have been part of a campaign by her, perhaps in coordination with ‘nurses in the late war’, to go to India to train the wives of soldiers to nurse the sick and wounded. Seacole’s letter reveals her to be residing at a previously unknown abode, now establishing it as her fifth documented address in London. It was written only less than a fortnight after publication of the above nurse’s letter and reads:

‘11 Rathbone Place, 1 October 1857.

My kind Sir Henry,

I beg to enclose you a letter, I have addressed to Lord Panmure, for your perusal. Would you Sir Henry kindly alter any part that might not meet your approval before returning it to me & you will greatly oblige.

Yours gratefully Mary Seacole’ (see Anionwu et al. 2013).

Regrettably, we do not know the contents of Seacole’s letter to Secretary of State for War Lord Panmure, nor do we know whether she was allowed to proceed with her plans to sail to India. Panmure’s published correspondence holds no letters addressed to Seacole (see Douglas and Dalhousie Ramsay (1908). Further research in the National Archives is necessary.

Later that year, a second, widely reported Seacole Fund Festival was organized, this time in Bristol (see above). The balance handed over to Seacole amounted to more than 100 UK pounds. Was this, perhaps, a good start to finance her needles and thread, medicine chest, bandages, probe and scissors?

While Lord Panmure was on the verge of leaving his post at the War Office in February 1858, newspapers reported, ‘good Mrs. Seacole, ‘Mother Seacole,’ the soldiers’ friend...is about to sail for India and to commence again her work as mother, nurse and friend of the British soldier’ (Leicester Chronicle 1858) and that she would leave ‘in five weeks from this time’ (Morning Chronicle 1858). In total at least more than a dozen newspapers reported Seacole’s upcoming departure for India.

Additional discoveries re Seacole’s life 1858–1862

There are several missing pieces to this intriguing historical puzzle. Did Mary Seacole indeed leave for India? In May 1858, she was still in England, given that the Illustrated London News (1858) reported she had volunteered to assist at a ‘Fancy Bazaar’ at London’s Wellington Barracks in aid of families of soldiers and sailors and to also assist distress consequent of troops departing for the East. A month later, in June 1858, more than twenty Belgian, Dutch and English newspapers reported her arrival at Antwerp, Belgium, from London, on board the Belgian steamer ‘Baron Osy’ (e.g. Belfast News-Letter 1858). Was she making a stopover to India at Antwerp? Or was she perhaps visiting her Dutch publisher? No further reports appear to have been published regarding her intended trip to India.

The following February, newspapers detail a Seacole visit to Sheerness (e.g. Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post 1859). In August of 1859, reports appeared in the media that she had travelled to Ireland (e.g. Newcastle Courant 1859). Interestingly, in October of that year, the London Standard (1859) reported that she had boarded the steamship Shannon on her way to the West Indies – accompanied by seven Soeurs de la Charité (Sisters of Charity). A month later, newspapers reviewing Anthony Trollope’s The West Indies and the...
Spanish Main, note that it contained an utterance of Seacole’s sister Louisa Grant in Jamaica: ‘Mrs. Seacole wanted to go to India during the rebellion there, but Queen Victoria would not let her – her life was too precious’ (e.g. Reynolds’s Newspaper’s 1859). Without supporting sources it is difficult to decide on the factuality and historical value of this remark. And lastly, three years later, newspapers stated that Seacole was visiting Panama (e.g. Leeds Intelligencer 1862).

Implications for nursing

‘There is nothing new except the history we do not know.’
Harry S. Truman.

‘Nursing continues to be predominately a White female dominated profession.’ (McKay Harmer 2010, p. 129). This certainly does not correspond with 21st century healthcare needs: competent, confident nurses who are autonomous critically thinking healthcare professionals, who understand implications of prejudices in respect of age, gender, race, etc. and who recognize and undertake endeavours to overcome barriers which are still present in nursing today. Mary Seacole, this historical charismatic phenomenon, may provide a valuable role model for younger generations of healthcare professionals who wish to acknowledge the adagio, ‘hands that heal know no racial, class or national borders’ (Fish 1996, p. 136).

Conclusion

Several years ago Seacole-biographer Salih (2005) remarked, ‘We do not know what Seacole was doing in the 10 years following the publication of Wonderful Adventures….’ (pp. xxxviii–xxxix). Courtesy of digitization of Victorian British and non-British newspapers, our Timeline of Seacole’s activities during the first 5 years following the publication of her life-story reveals information about unheard of international travel and fame. It is clear that Seacole’s desire for travel never deserted her, or for that matter, her commitment to nurse her beloved British soldiers, no matter where they were in the world. Seacole was a veritable global nurse extraordinaire.

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Drs Corry STARING-DERKS and Jeroen STARING are owners of the recently discovered Mary Seacole letter.

Author contributions

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- substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;
- drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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