



MARY SEACOLE STATUE

London, United Kingdom

51.4991572, -0.1233706



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Executive Summary

The 2016 statue commemorating Mary Seacole at St. Thomas Hospital in London is the first statue in the United Kingdom dedicated to a named black woman. Mary Seacole is remembered for her involvement as a nurse in the Crimean War. However, some argue that her figure has been mythologised and she should not get such a prominent statue. This case study analyses the controversies provoked by the monument and her figure and how it came to be with the involvement of governmental support and grassroots advocacy.

Introduction

In 2016, a ten-foot statue of Mary Seacole, known as the ‘Crimean War Heroine,’ or the ‘Black Florence Nightingale,’ was unveiled outside St Thomas’ Hospital in London, overlooking the Houses of Parliament. Fundraising for the monument took twelve years, hampered by consistent resistance from politicians, foremost Conservative MP and Cabinet minister Michael Gove, and proponents of Florence Nightingale’s legacy, who contested its justification and location. Eventually, through governmental support and advocacy, the statue was completed, becoming Britain’s first in honour of a named black woman.¹

Background

Mary Seacole was born in 1805 in Kingston, the capital of the British colony of Jamaica, to a Scottish father and a mixed-race mother. Having allegedly learnt herbal remedies and tropical medicine from her mother in 1850, she nursed victims of the Jamaican cholera outbreak. She then travelled to Panama in 1851, nursing patients of another cholera epidemic, and in 1853 returned to Jamaica to support sufferers of yellow fever. The British army asked her to supervise nursing services at their headquarters in Up-Park Camp, Kingston.²

When a call for nurses to be sent to Crimea was released, Seacole travelled to London in the hopes of joining a mission but was refused by the War Office, by another nurse, and by the managers of the Crimean Fund.³ Instead, she founded her own travel and, upon arrival in the Crimea, established a hospital-cum-hotel and visited the battlefield to nurse the wounded.⁴ She was referred to as ‘Mother Seacole’ and was hugely popular with her patients, eventually writing an autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, in 1857.⁵ Whilst in Crimea, she is said to have met Florence Nightingale, who later accused Seacole of having a ‘bad character’ and running a ‘bad house’ (brothel).⁶ Upon her return to Britain, she declared bankruptcy due to the expenses of setting up a business during the war, subsequently being supported by a high-profile public fund established in her aid.⁷

¹ BBC, “UK’s ‘first’ black woman memorial statue,” *BBC News*, June 30, 2016.

² Steve Ford, “Seacole statue shortlisted for public sculpture award,” *Nursing Times*, October 20, 2017; Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63.

³ There are varying accounts of Seacole’s rejection. Some describe her as having been rejected by recruiters for Nightingale, though Seacole mentions rejection by a nurse named “Mrs. H-” in her autobiography. The War Office, as it came to be known, did not yet exist. However, in her autobiography, Seacole describes making an application there and being rejected. She had probably applied to the Secretary at War’s office, which was more commonly known as the “War Office”. Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 77-79; Hampden Gordon, *The War Office* (London: Putnam, 1935), 51-52 cited in Paul H. Harpin, *The British War Office: From the Crimean War to Cardwell, 1855-1868* (MA Thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1976), 15-16, 27-28.

⁴ Shropshire Star, “Covid-19 recovery hospital named after nurse Mary Seacole,” *Shropshire Star*, May 4, 2020.

⁵ Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (London: James Blackwood Paternoster Row, 1857).

⁶ Claydon House Trust Collection, MS Nightingale 110, cited in Jane Robinson, *Mary Seacole: The Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea* (London: Constable, 2005), 122-123.

⁷ Steve Ford, “Seacole statue shortlisted for public sculpture award,” *Nursing Times*, October 20, 2017; Jane Robinson, *Mary Seacole: The Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea* (London: Constable, 2005), 161-166, 175-9.

Following her death in 1881, Seacole largely fell into obscurity and out of the British public consciousness until the late twentieth century, when her residence was marked with a blue plaque, and her grave was rediscovered in London.⁸ In 2004, she was voted the Greatest Black Briton in a public consciousness-raising campaign spearheaded by Patrick Vernon OBE.⁹ This accolade led to the President of the Royal College of Nursing, Sylvia Denton, calling for a statue commemorating Seacole's achievements. Plans for a statue were also kickstarted by a group of Caribbean women who approached their local MP in Hammersmith.¹⁰ The Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal, headed by Lord Soley, then began what became a twelve-year-long campaign to achieve the necessary funding.¹¹

The Appeal raised half a million pounds, mostly in small donations from schools, nurses and army units in support of the project.¹² In September 2015, it was reported that the statue's expected unveiling in the Autumn of that year was being delayed by unexpected installation costs, and a further £180,000 was required in donations.¹³ When funding the project in November 2015, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced that £240,000 of LIBOR banking fines would be donated to reach the necessary target.¹⁴

The statue, by renowned sculptor Martin Jennings, is the first of a named black woman in Britain.¹⁵ 300 attendees, ranging from professional historians, NHS Chief Officers, nurses and the armed forces, attended the statue's eventual unveiling by Baroness Floella Benjamin OBE on June 30, 2016.¹⁶ Standing in the St Thomas' Hospital gardens, the 10-foot bronze Seacole faces and appears to stride towards the Houses of Parliament that lie across the river. Wearing medals, she holds a medical bag, her cape blowing in the wind. Jennings explained:



Figure 1: "Mary Seacole Statue." Image by Ethan Doyle White via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0

⁸ Helen Rappaport, "Mary Seacole," *The British Empire*, no date.

⁹ 100 Great Black Britons Campaign, "100 Great Black Britons," 100 Great Black Britons Campaign, published 2019 ; Matthew Taylor, "Nurse is greatest Black Briton," *Guardian*, February 10, 2004.

¹⁰ Kashmiri Gander, "Mary Seacole Statue: Why Florence Nightingale fans are angry the Crimean War nurse is being commemorated," *Independent*, June 24, 2016.

¹¹ Amy Fleming, "Sculptor defends his Mary Seacole statue: 'If she was white, would there be this resistance?'" *Guardian*, June 21, 2016.

¹² Mary Seacole Trust, "Mary Seacole Statue," Mary Seacole Trust, published June 30, 2016.

¹³ London SE1, "Mary Seacole statue delayed by 'unexpected costs'," *London SE1*, September 5, 2015.

¹⁴ Steve Ford, "Seacole statue shortlisted for public sculpture award," *Nursing Times*, October 20, 2017.

¹⁵ Amy Fleming, "Sculptor defends his Mary Seacole statue: 'If she was white, would there be this resistance?'" *Guardian*, June 21, 2016.

¹⁶ NHS, "Mary Seacole statue unveiled," *Guy's and St Thomas'*, June 30, 2016.

The sculpture represents her marching defiantly forward into an oncoming wind, as if confronting head-on some of the personal resistance she had constantly to battle.¹⁷

On the ground behind her are inscribed the 1857 words of Sir William Howard Russell, then a war correspondent for *The Times*:

I trust that England will not forget the one who nursed the sick, who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them, and who performed the last offices for some of her illustrious dead.¹⁸

Behind her body stands a 4.5 metre-high wall-like disc cast from shell-blasted Crimean rock from the battlefields where Seacole worked.¹⁹ As well as representing the international context of her experience, this disc was intended to symbolise the stonewalling of a society that attempted to prevent and then erase her work.²⁰ In 2017, the statue was shortlisted for the Marsh Awards.²¹

History of the Contestation

The Nightingale Society, an organisation devoted to upholding the legacy of Florence Nightingale, was founded in response to the plans for Seacole's statue.²² Its members criticised the statue's proposed location, arguing that Seacole had no connection with St Thomas,' and that her presence would detract from the memory of Nightingale; Nightingale had established her nursing school at the hospital and is remembered with a museum onsite. More generally, they contend that Seacole is inaccurately eclipsing Nightingale in the public consciousness as the pioneer of modern nursing.

The Society's co-founder Lynn McDonald, a Canadian academic and former politician, has been particularly vocal in her opposition. McDonald is the author and editor of multiple works on Nightingale, and in 2014 published a book entitled *Mary Seacole: The Making of the Myth*.²³ She argues that decision-making on the statue was top-down and non-consultative; that primary source evidence does not support popular claims about Seacole's life; and that Seacole was merely an entrepreneur who had limited, if any, impact on the nursing profession. She writes in *The Guardian* that Seacole:

was not a "pioneer nurse" at all. She called herself a "doctress," as did her mother, who trained her in traditional herbal remedies. What they were we do not know, for Seacole never gave precise lists of ingredients [...] The board of the Guy's and St Thomas' NHS trust approved the placing of a Seacole statue on their grounds without public consultation, expert advice or even notification of the proposal to its governors, staff or the many "Nightingale nurses" who for years trained there. The board made its decision behind closed doors, on the basis of false

¹⁷ Mary Seacole Trust, "Mary Seacole Statue," Mary Seacole Trust, published June 30, 2016.

¹⁸ Amy Fleming, "Sculptor defends his Mary Seacole statue: 'If she was white, would there be this resistance?'" *Guardian*, June 21, 2016.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mary Seacole Trust, "Mary Seacole Statue," Mary Seacole Trust, published June 30, 2016.

²¹ Steve Ford, "Seacole statue shortlisted for public sculpture award," *Nursing Times*, October 20, 2017.

²² Nightingale Society, "What the Nightingale Society Is," Nightingale Society, updated 2020.

²³ Lynn McDonald, *Mary Seacole: The Making of the Myth*, (Toronto: Iguana, 2014).

information, which it subsequently labelled “history” and circulated [...] Seacole was a businesswoman who gave not a day of her life to advance nursing.²⁴

McDonald has also created a website called ‘Mary Seacole Information,’ which seeks to challenge perceptions about Seacole’s life and work, including its worthiness of commemoration and Seacole’s claim to the title of ‘nurse.’ Among its claims is that Seacole, being only one-quarter black in ancestry, is not a black hero and further did not identify herself as black.²⁵

The statue’s completion sparked further criticism from Nightingale supporters, particularly due to its prominent size. At 10 feet, it is significantly taller than both the statue of Nightingale at nearby Pall Mall and that of First World War nurse Edith Cavell in front of the National Portrait Gallery.²⁶ The Nightingale Society sent complaints to the Memorial Statue Appeal, alleging that the Seacole statue unduly dominated the landscape and disrupted views and clear airspace.²⁷ According to Jennings, however, the statue’s height was an artistic choice to ensure Seacole was not overshadowed by the huge hospital building.²⁸

Attempts to resolve the debate have been made through reminders to the public that there need be no competition between the two women, as both did separate work and can be memorialised for different contributions, and ‘happily sit alongside each other.’²⁹ As Hugh Muir argued in *The Guardian* in 2013, ‘Does she threaten Nightingale? No. Nightingale developed modern nursing and training. Seacole reigned on the battlefield. It’s not a competition.’³⁰

Discourse on race

In 2013, Michael Gove, then Education Secretary, sought to have Seacole removed from the British school curriculum. He argued that Seacole was the tool of a multicultural, politically correct agenda and questioned the significance of her legacy. Gove was forced to retract his plans following a successful public petition, and Seacole remains on the curriculum.³¹

Jennings claims that the statue was contested since its inception, citing the fact that fundraising took significantly longer than the average two years, as well as explicit resistance from Gove and the Nightingale Society. He attributes this delay to a larger context of

²⁴ Lynn McDonald, “Statue of ‘nurse’ Mary Seacole will do Florence Nightingale a disservice,” *Guardian*, June 8, 2012.

²⁵ Mary Seacole Information, “Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal,” Mary Seacole Information, updated November 15, 2020.

²⁶ Lynn McDonald, “Statue of ‘nurse’ Mary Seacole will do Florence Nightingale a disservice,” *Guardian*, June 8, 2012.

²⁷ Mary Seacole Information, “Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal,” Mary Seacole Information, updated November 15, 2020.

²⁸ Kashmiri Gander, “Mary Seacole Statue: Why Florence Nightingale fans are angry the Crimean War nurse is being commemorated,” *Independent*, June 24, 2016.

²⁹ Amy Fleming, “Sculptor defends his Mary Seacole statue: ‘If she was white, would there be this resistance?’” *Guardian*, June 21, 2016.

³⁰ Hugh Muir, “Why is Gove trashing Mary Seacole?” *Guardian*, January 6, 2013.

³¹ Kashmiri Gander, “Mary Seacole Statue: Why Florence Nightingale fans are angry the Crimean War nurse is being commemorated,” *Independent*, June 24, 2016.

indifference and a general reluctance to memorialise black figures and history in British public space.³² Similarly, Vernon stated:

To me, what's happening seems clear, for this campaign of denigration is not happening in isolation. I see it as part of a wider tradition by an elite, particularly in academia and parts of the media, to suppress and hide the black contribution to Britain... It seems fitting that Mary's monument should itself be the result of fortitude.³³

Such commentators see the ongoing resistance to Seacole's recognition as merely a continuation of the racism which played a part in her applications to travel to the Crimea being rejected and in Florence Nightingale impugning her character. However, the Nightingale Society does promote the legacy of one other Black pioneer in the medical field, Nigerian nurse Kofoworola Abeni Pratt, whom it considers a legitimate contributor to the history of nursing.³⁴

Though in support of a statue for Seacole, historian David Olusoga argued that the focus on black icons and heroes is not the correct direction for Black History, as a focus on individuals creates a 'conceptual prison,' writing:

Our black heroes are at risk of becoming cardboard cut-out versions of individuals who were, in reality, far more complex... Whatever the validity of comparing [Seacole] to Florence Nightingale, this angelic version of Seacole is a two-dimensional avatar of a woman of incredible energy and disturbing contradictions.³⁵

Nevertheless, the statue has gained a popular following for its symbolic appeal and is seen by many as a "poignant reminder" of the contributions made to both the NHS and wider British society by the many members of black and minority ethnic groups over the centuries.³⁶

Decision-Making Processes

Decision-making for the Seacole statue has been both community-led and top-down. The Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal solicited a mix of private and government funding. Active MP petitioning and the public nomination of Seacole in the 2004 campaign *100 Great Black Britons* raised Seacole's profile in the public consciousness, and later, public intervention halted Gove's plans to remove her from the curriculum. Information has not been made available about whether staff, experts or the public were directly consulted before the board of the Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust made the decision to position the statue outside St Thomas' hospital.

³² Amy Fleming, "Sculptor defends his Mary Seacole statue: 'If she was white, would there be this resistance?'" *Guardian*, June 21, 2016.

³³ Patrick Vernon, "Rubbishing Mary Seacole is another move to hide the contributions of black people," *Guardian*, June 21, 2016.

³⁴ Mary Seacole Information, "Other Nurses of Colour," Mary Seacole Information, updated November 15, 2020; Lynn McDonald, "Kofoworola Abeni Pratt," *The Nightingale Society*, 2021.

³⁵ David Olusoga, "Black History Month needs a rethink: it's time to ditch the heroes," *Guardian*, October 9, 2015..

³⁶ Kashmiri Gander, "Mary Seacole Statue: Why Florence Nightingale fans are angry the Crimean War nurse is being commemorated," *Independent*, June 24, 2016.

Ultimately, the efforts of the Nightingale Society and others to prevent or move the statue have not succeeded beyond potential delays in fundraising. The contestation over Seacole's historical significance remains fierce. However, during the coronavirus pandemic, a petition to name the specially-built Birmingham NEC Nightingale hospital after Seacole was successful, suggesting her enduring presence in British public consciousness.³⁷

Dynamics to consider in decision-making around the Seacole monument include: the rationale behind choosing a location for a monument; consultation with appropriate parties regarding location; engagement with public feedback; the interrelated nature of legacies of historical individuals; political motivations for erecting a monument; diverse opinions on racism, political correctness and tokenism; the possibility of anti-individualistic memorialisation; the potential for monuments to take on unintended or amplified symbolism.

Summary and Conclusions

Since its inception, the Seacole statue has polarised debate. Its location, size and justification were contested, most notably by the Nightingale Society and politicians like Gove. Both argued that the celebratory culture emerging around Seacole is disproportionate to her actual historical impact. Governmental support, as well as many years of public campaigning and funding, have ensured that the monument went ahead. As the only named black woman to currently stand memorialised in the UK, the project is perceived by some as an inspiration, and it serves as a successful example of enfranchising figures who have traditionally been denied a place in the national narrative. However, the episode establishes an unnecessary rivalry between her and Nightingale. This rivalry may be further exacerbated by the belated and limited acknowledgement of women's roles in history, which have elevated very few women to prominence with the same mythologized status. Substantial disagreement as to Seacole's historical significance and relation to the nursing profession remains, and her legacy is likely to evolve over time.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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