

MY HISTORY HERO

Bernardine Evaristo, Booker Prize winning novelist

Mary Seacole

1805–81



Bernardine Evaristo was recently named Author of the Year at the 2020 British Book Awards. Her novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, jointly won the 2019 Booker Prize, and is now available in paperback. beveristo.com



Mary Seacole as seen in a contemporary photo. Although she became famous for her nursing work in the Crimean War, her story subsequently became largely forgotten

IN PROFILE

Mary Seacole was a Caribbean-born, Anglo-Jamaican business-woman and pioneer nurse best known for the comfort that she provided for wounded British soldiers in the Crimean War. Her 1857 autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, is one of the earliest memoirs of a mixed-race woman. In 2004 she was voted the greatest black Briton, and in 2016 a statue of her was erected in the grounds of St Thomas' Hospital, London.

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When did you first hear about Seacole?

I first heard about her when her autobiography was republished in the 1980s. She was celebrated in her day but then disappeared from history books, and it was an eye-opener to read about her extraordinary life.

What kind of woman was Seacole?

She was the daughter of a free Jamaican woman and a lieutenant in the British army, and an individualistic, self-motivated person who travelled a long way from her roots in Kingston, Jamaica. But she wasn't just ambitious and positive-thinking – she was also someone with a lot of integrity and a passion to do good for other people in the world.

What made Seacole a hero?

She was the first black British woman to publish an autobiography. It's a fascinating memoir because we don't have much record of the black British presence in the 19th century, so it's astonishing to read about her life in her own words. She also put her nursing skills to good use during the Crimean War, at a time when the Caribbean and Britain were still living with the legacy of slavery – and her ethnicity doesn't seem to have got in the way of her leading her life.

What was your hero's finest hour?

It was probably her time as a nurse in the Crimea, when she set up the British Hotel to care for wounded servicemen. She was a healer and herbalist, and practised her own herbalism on the soldiers – apparently very successfully. She must have been a formidable person to travel on her own as a woman of colour to Britain and then on to Russia, to tend for British soldiers during the war.

Why was she forgotten about for so long?

I think there are two reasons: because she was black, and because she was a woman. Women's history and black history tend to get lost, and she embodied both.

Can you see any parallels between Seacole's life and your own?

We are both mixed-race women and I think that, like her, I'm also strong-minded, ambitious and driven. I suppose I've made history myself by becoming the first black British woman to win the Booker.

What would you ask Seacole, if you could meet her?

I would ask her what it was inside her that made her lead such an exceptional, brave life – and what she thought were the most important factors in shaping her into the person that she became. 
Bernardine Evaristo was talking to York Membery

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