

Statue of Mary Seacole Unveiled

Article by Joanna Barnes in 3rd Dimension Magazine 16th October 2016

The monument which portrays the pioneering nurse, Mary Seacole, stands in the gardens of St. Thomas's Hospital on London's Southbank and is the work of figurative sculptor, Martin Jennings FRBS. The statue, which was unveiled by the actress and broadcaster, Baroness Floella Benjamin, is result of a 12 year campaign, which was sparked when Seacole was voted 'the Greatest Black Briton' in a BBC survey in 2004.

Mary Jane Seacole, née Grant (1805-1881) was born in Jamaica, her father was a Scottish soldier, her mother, who was a Creole, ran a boarding house in Kingston. From the latter, who practised as a 'doctress', she gained the knowledge of herbal medicine and healing, which led to her own nursing career. Seacole firmly viewed herself as 'a Creole' who had a 'bond' with and was 'related to' the black race and opined that the opposition she experienced in her working life at the hands of the authorities was almost certainly due to prejudice against her colour.

Following the death of her husband, Edwin Seacole, godson of Admiral Nelson, in 1844, Seacole pursued a passion for travel and adventure. Visiting her brother in Panama in 1850, she nursed patients in a cholera epidemic and, on returning to Jamaica, looked after the victims of a yellow fever outbreak in 1853. She was then asked by the British army to supervise nursing services at their headquarters in Kingston, but in 1854, armed with glowing references from senior medics in Jamaica and Panama, Seacole travelled to London offering her services to the War Office to nurse soldiers at Scutari during the Crimean War alongside Florence Nightingale, for whom she had great admiration.

Her offer of help rejected, Seacole displayed great determination and persuasive skill by raising the funds for her passage to the Crimea herself. By March 1855, she was working as a sutler, supplying provisions to the army, and set up the British Hotel near Balaclava, nursing and caring for the soldiers. She rode out to the front line with baskets of medicines of her own preparation to treat the sick and wounded of both sides on the battlefields. She acted as a surgeon, as well as administering natural remedies, and became well-known to the soldiers, who called her 'Mother Seacole'.

When the war ended suddenly in 1856, Seacole was left bankrupt. Her admirers, soldiers, generals and even members of the Royal family came to her aid and arranged a gala the following year to raise funds for her. Taking place on four nights on the banks of the River Thames, it was a great success with over 80,000 people attending. The same year Seacole published her autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, with an introduction by Crimean War Correspondent of *The Times*, Sir William Howard Russell, which became an instant bestseller. Towards the end of her life, Seacole travelled back and forth to Jamaica, but is buried in St. Mary's Catholic cemetery in Kensal Green, London.

At least one sculpture of Seacole was made during her lifetime. In 1871 the sculptor, Victor, Count Gleichen, a nephew of Queen Victoria and a patient of Seacole's in the Crimea, who also supported her fund-raising efforts, modelled her portrait bust in terracotta. This is now in the Institute of Jamaica, West Indies, and recorded in an album of nineteenth-century photographs of Gleichen's sculptures in the National Portrait Gallery Archive. This Gleichen bust has been copied by the contemporary Jamaican sculptor, Fowokan (George Kelly).

Martin Jennings' public statue of Mary Seacole is the first full-sized monument to her in the UK. The bronze statue has a dark patina, while, the disc behind is a paler grey bronze. This bronze disc reproduces an impression of the ground in the Crimea at the site where Seacole ministered to the British soldiers during the war of 1853-1856. The sculpture is raised on a concrete base topped with black Cumbrian slate which is inscribed by Jennings with the words of Seacole herself 'Wherever the need arises on whatever distant shore I ask no higher or greater privilege than to minister to it.' Set in the paving behind the disc is another slate inscription bearing the words of

Sir William Howard Russell 'I trust that England will 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.'

PMSA talked to sculptor, Martin Jennings about the challenges he faced in creating this exciting new public sculpture.

How did you approach this important historical commission?

The problem with monumentalising figures from long ago is that you can easily fall into historical pastiche. I thought only with a new kind of monument could I avoid this. By framing Seacole against a backdrop of the land she once trod, I could make a sculpture that was about history, rather than overwhelmed by history. However, though I came up with what I thought was a fertile idea, it meant making a hybrid of a traditional statue and a piece of land art. I didn't know whether combining these two very different sculptural genres would work and it wasn't until we finally installed the two elements that I was relieved to find that it did. This was not just because at night-time they are bound together by the shadow of one falling on the other, it is because visually the surfaces are similar, right up from the flame-textured slate we used for the base to the hand-modelled surface of the statue and the painterly rockiness of the disc behind.

You too trod this ground with your team, researching the history behind Seacole and trying to find the exact area where she had made her base outside Balaclava, so that you could translate the ground there into your sculpture. How did you go about this?

Yes a team from Pangolin Editions foundry came to Crimea with me. We found the correct site of Seacole's base not only by reference to historical maps but by the presence in the undergrowth of broken shards of glass from her hotel bottle store. The Pangolin team scanned the face of a quarry that stood next to the site – the quarry had been mined during the war for stone for the military road to the front. From their digital scan of the rockface Pangolin was able to 3D-print the disc for casting in bronze. The disc even reproduces a detonation mark from a WW2 shell. So I think of this as a very collaborative project by Jennings and Pangolin – I've carved their name on the step behind the disc with mine.

Can you explain the symbolism of the disc?

My notion of what the disc might stand for shifts: there seem to be many possibilities, from an image of the earth over which Seacole travelled so extensively, to her own determined adamantine nature, to the context of the masculine world in which she operated, to various kinds of battlefield. Not only was she specifically a battlefield nurse in Crimea, but her whole life's enterprise had taken place against a cultural battlefield in which being a mixed-race woman made everything a great deal harder. In microcosm, the project to erect the monument had been against a similar battlefield, if you can call it that – it took seven years to raise the funds, where one might normally have expected it to be completed in about two. I did wonder whether that was partly because of the subject's gender and ethnicity.

I'd encourage people to come and see the statue at dusk, when it is illuminated and the circle of the bronze disc behind her echoes the circle of the clock on Big Ben. After all, this statue is a monument about time and history.

You say Seacole was 'adamantine'. Is this how you wanted to portray her and what sources did you use to help you create the likeness?

Her expression is determined and energetic. She seemed unbreakable. She was a strong person and I wanted to express that in her statue.

The source for the portrait was one photograph, which was only discovered in Winchester College's archives in 2009. Seacole had the physiognomy of her Scottish father and the dark skin and curly hair of her Jamaican mother. I had to make an informed guess about her profile, as there were no photographic images of this.

To what extent did you consider the other sculptures outside St Thomas's when designing the statue and the broader context of the site's location? How did this influence you?

The siting was very important. Not only did I want Seacole marching towards Parliament (and a week after Brexit that seemed to be making an urgent political point about multiculturalism), but I wanted the monument to mirror the round clock face of Big Ben opposite, thereby prompting further thoughts about time and history.

The disc also not only echoes the horizontal disc of the pool round Naum Gabo's fountain in front of it, but also the huge vertical disc of the London Eye, the other side of County Hall. It seems to me that making these visual links can help a sculpture to tie into its location. A good public sculpture should allow its environment to influence its design, and in turn, it should comment on that environment.

Did you encounter any technical problems?

Some with the structural engineering – I wanted the disc to look like it floated almost unsupported, just lightly touching the slate base. That involved a huge amount of careful structural engineering, but I was delighted to see that we pulled it off. Not bad when the disc weighs over 5 tons!

A small group has been vociferous in opposing this statue of Seacole, what was your reaction?

A new organisation was set up by one fervent supporter of Florence Nightingale specifically to oppose the Seacole Monument. It all seemed a bit of a storm in a bedpan to me! They even complained about the size of the monument, which I had very carefully worked out so that it wasn't overwhelmed by the surrounding buildings. It wasn't bigger overall than monuments to other nurses in London – Frampton's *Edith Cavell* in St Martin's Lane or *Florence Nightingale* against the Crimean War Memorial in Wellington Place. I think the scale is just right so it can be seen from Westminster Bridge and as a small beacon over the river from the Palace of Westminster.

There have been a series of moves over recent years to raise the profile of women by creating more monuments to them. Public statues of men vastly outnumber those to women and this is a campaign which PMSA strongly supports. How do you feel your statue of Seacole fits into this?

I hope the monument will be seen to take its place in the current surge of interest in commemorating women. I also erected another statue in June to the Women of Steel in Sheffield (fig.7). The Women's Equality Party and Caroline Criado-Perez are currently campaigning for a statue of a woman in Parliament Square and Manchester City Council is seeking to redress a huge imbalance in its statues, where 15 out of 16 are to men – Queen Victoria being the only woman represented, by finding a sculptor to make one of Emmeline Pankhurst.