

Introduction to Andrea Levy's Selected Excerpts from *The Adventures of Mrs Seacole*

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In July 2012 Andrea Levy completed a screenplay based on Mary Seacole's 1857 autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*. In addition to using Seacole's own text, Levy also drew on Jane Robinson's 2005 biography of her as well as a number of other resources. At the time of writing, Levy's screenplay has been neither televised nor optioned, although this may yet change. Like Seacole herself, Levy's screenplay is full of warmth, energy, and wit; it offers a lively and insightful portrait of a woman who has been voted the "greatest black Briton" (Taylor) but who nevertheless remains unknown to many British people. Indeed, like other projects that Levy worked on in her final years, *The Adventures of Mrs Seacole* sought to increase public awareness of and interest in neglected aspects of British-Caribbean history.

Two excerpts from *The Adventures of Mrs Seacole* are reproduced below. The first is from the beginning of the screenplay. These opening scenes cover Seacole's arrival at the British military hospital at Scutari, near Istanbul, in 1855. Having applied at the War Office in London to join the nursing contingent famously led by Florence Nightingale, and having been rejected, Seacole has made her own way to the military hospital. At Scutari she encounters Nightingale, who receives Seacole frostily. The second excerpt features scenes from much later in Levy's screenplay. They find Seacole back in London, in 1856. Despite her enormously heroic exploits in the Crimea, Seacole faces obscurity and destitution—until, that is, she encounters some of the veterans who she nursed on the battlefields. As is clear from these excerpts, Levy's screenplay takes issue with Seacole being a frequently overlooked figure and,

in particular, one overshadowed by Nightingale—not just in the mid-nineteenth century but in the contemporary moment, too.

Bill Mayblin and I have selected and edited these excerpts for posthumous publication. For a more detailed discussion of these excerpts in particular, the screenplay as a whole, and Levy's late unpublished work more generally, see my article in this special issue.

Works Cited

Robinson, Jane. *Mary Seacole: The Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea*. 2005. Constable and Robinson, 2006.

Seacole, Mary. *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*. 1857. Edited by Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee, Falling Wall, 1984.

Taylor, Matthew. "Nurse Is Greatest Black Briton." *The Guardian*, 10 Feb. 2004, theguardian.com/uk/2004/feb/10/britishidentity.artsandhumanities#:~:text=A%20little%2Dknown%20nurse%20who,voted%20the%20greatest%20black%20Briton. Accessed 14 June 2020.