

The history of women in the West Indies has been neglected. There is a dearth of material on this subject, largely because West Indian women up until recently have been invisible.¹ Yet they never seem to fit the image of the delicate, diffident and unassuming female.

The few works on our women of the past have been general histories.² More recently there is a move towards biographies of free coloured men³ who excelled in their particular vocation but there is no corresponding move for women. Yet among them there were individuals who rejected conventions in order to achieve what they wished. Not all were faceless individuals - some emerged as stalwarts of their times and deserve more than a footnote in history.

Mary Seacole was one such woman. Seacole suffered all the customary and legal disabilities of her race and sex in the nineteenth century but with determination and courage manage to pull herself out of the faceless mass of West Indian coloured women. Though typical in many ways of coloured women then, she stands unique in her achievement as a nurse. Her early widowhood enabled her to challenge the Victorian concept of the woman being housebound, needing the protection of a man, whose ultimate vocation was marriage and motherhood. She asserted her independence but succeeded in maintaining her femininity. She considered it her duty to help those who needed her help and so fulfilled the philanthropic role⁴ ascribed to women of the age. She was one of the few women

who emancipated herself from the yoke of sovereign man, yet took pleasure in serving them as nurse and surrogate mother.