

# Women and the West Indian Soldier

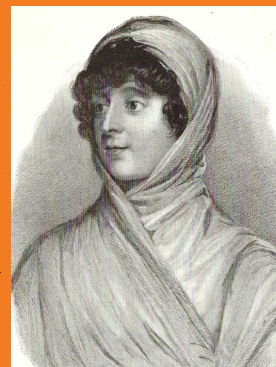
By Alice Howey

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the West Indies were a massive outpost of the British Empire with sixty-nine line infantry regiments serving there between 1793 and 1815. Historically, the lives of those serving within these regiments have been studied from their formation, through their postings to the demobilisation of the male soldiers within their ranks. This approach has seldom afforded an insight into the intricacies of the day-to-day lives of those women occupying the periphery of the narratives on the West Indian soldier. Women enter historical records in a multitude of ways during this period, but equally stark is their blatant absence from the military perspective.

In past centuries, it was usual for women to follow European armies on campaign, sharing inhospitable living conditions with the soldiers. Although often discouraged by the officers from accompanying the regiment, as they were regarded as an unwelcome distraction, women did fulfil some useful auxiliary roles: nursing, mending uniforms, cooking, doing laundry, cleaning, and as sutlers, acquiring and selling necessary supplies to soldiers, whilst some, to sustain themselves, entered prostitution. It was a harsh life, but was a preferable alternative to being abandoned to destitution. Officers' wives, however, enjoyed a better existence and were treated with deference to their higher status.

## Lady Maria Nugent

Lady Nugent was the wife of General Sir George Nugent, the Governor of Jamaica (1801-1805). She accompanied her husband during his tenure and her diaries provide an important insight into Jamaican life, including not only military life, such as recruits to the West India Regiments and the health of soldiers, but the nature of Creole society and how it compared to British society.



The wife who did not follow her Army husband often disappeared into the historical ether, whilst little has been recorded about those women who were camp followers. It was not uncommon for unaccompanied soldiers, both officers and the rank and file, to seek feminine company amongst the local population and indeed it is the black women who struggle most to be heard within historical narratives. Military couples travelling from Britain always differed from their civilian counterparts in that they were subject to the culture and the policies of the British Army. The eighteenth century saw a vastly diminished role for women within the British Army. More sophisticated supply networks, combined with Enlightenment ideals of women meant that a white woman's role within the Army increasingly diminished within this period.

The Caribbean climate and its deadly diseases are a well-documented factor to have impacted the West Indian Regiments. Just over half of the European redcoats who served in the British West Indies died in service, mostly due to a new and deadly strain of yellow fever. As a result, many soldiers chose to stay at the same rank back in Britain rather than be promoted and serve in the West Indies, with George Pinkard stating that the very mention of the West Indies was synonymous with fear. As stated by historian Roger Buckley, most officers' wives completely refused to accompany their husbands to the Caribbean. However, he nuances that the wives of low ranking soldiers, with permission granted, would accompany their husbands to the West Indies, despite the harsh climate. This class differentiation is significant in that it demonstrates lack of historical sources pertaining to lower social classes; poor white women literally disappear from abolition-era and post emancipation gender histories, even though they represented a numerically sizeable demographic on some islands, such as Barbados.

The officer class were able to employ servants during their posting in the West Indies. In fact, most officers in service had considerable amounts of free time and were generally stationed without their wives, so black mistresses were not uncommon. Enslaved women did have some influence as mistresses to Army officers, such as through their occupation as doctresses, but this was likely a method of ensuring their position and security rather than a way of actively exerting their own agency. Lt. Thomas Staunton St. Clair gives us an insight into how British soldiers vindicated their immorality of having mistresses by citing black women's general usefulness during their time in the Caribbean. Whilst St Clair conveys his "*outrage on common decency and propriety*" towards having a mistress, he also claims that they are "*faithful and constant to the protectors*"

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by whom they are chosen”, thus constituting “a lawful marriage for the time it lasts”. He praises their ability to perform the duties of a wife except from “presiding at the table”, making apparent both the physical and metaphorical extent to which black women could integrate into the Eurocentric household.

British military commanders in the Caribbean told officials in London that black soldiers were absolutely necessary for the security of the British islands, complaining they had so few healthy white troops, that by 1795 they could not have prevented the French from capturing British colonies. Whilst the formation of the West India Regiments are well documented, there are far fewer discussions concerning the Corps of Military Labourers of the Eastern Caribbean. Drafted from the late 8<sup>th</sup> West India Regiment, these African men might have been in bondage when they entered the corps, but were considered free men when they were released from their service in the Army. Working in occupations such as joinery, masonry, carpentry and engineering, other non-military individuals were attached to each garrison. In 1808 at Fort Amsterdam, 26 black women and 51 children were attached to the engineering department of the corps. As analysed by René Chartrand, relationships between black men and women were not frowned upon, indeed, they may have been tacitly encouraged, as women were considered to have brought social stability and would also become caregivers to raise the next generation of artisans for the British Army. Details of these African-West Indian corps were obviously concealed by bureaucrats into budgets of other government corps, not recorded in War Office documents. The discovery of memoirs and manuscript correspondence dealing with these military organisations importantly gives a wider sense of a whole set of social circumstances that were purposely concealed by the British Army: if politics and law could afford to exclude and ignore familial groups and communities from African descent, it appears they succeeded in doing so.

Female household slaves provided nursing care to Army officers stationed in the Caribbean. Evidence of this comes from an account of the surgeon William Fergusson on his visit to the West Indies, who remarked, “*the colonial women of every class, whether blacks, mulattoes, or mustees [of mixed ancestry] make the best sick nurses in the world*”. Female doctoring skills were well respected in the Caribbean, as they seemed to work better in fighting enteric diseases than standard methods. In fact, historian Jane Robinson stresses that on no other subject related to the West Indian campaign is there so much unanimity than in the eyewitness accounts of black caregiving.



Mary Seacole

Mary Seacole’s skills as a caregiver certainly define her, in our modern-day terms, as a nurse; her autobiographical account of her travels published in 1857 provide historians with the fullest picture of the type of care received by soldiers of the West Indian Regiments. However, the skills that she documented have a direct link to the African tradition of Obeah – benign witch doctoring; Seacole herself states, “*The officers were glad of me as a doctress and nurse may be easily understood*”. The British Army dismissed Obeah doctoring skills as a form of voodoo but they became well known amongst those on the ground as being very effective. These doctresses based their treatments on decoctions of essential barks, roots and fruits. Our greatest insight into the attitudes towards this form of doctoring comes from the Great Exhibition of 1851 held in Hyde Park. ‘Charms and implements’ seized from Obeahmen in Jamaica were displayed with ‘African fetish charms’ taken from Sierra Leone, framing Obeah as being a mere discussion of its origins. Furthermore, the Jamaican objects were purposely chosen to appear inferior to the African artifacts in order to show how the cult of Obeah had deteriorated on Jamaican soil. Thus, we see evidence of female doctoring as a subject fraught with contradictions, manipulated within a complex colonial narrative of progress and modernity that oppresses occupations of the black woman.

Beyond an analysis of the set role of women as wives and caregivers in the Caribbean, it is of course important to highlight the black woman as a transient figure, hard to trace within historical sources. They owned lodging houses, ran restaurants frequented by soldiers and assisted doctors and surgeons within an ever-changing political and social landscape, directly impacted by the movements of the West India Regiments and the British Army at large. However, these findings are not to say that they didn’t have access, nor were a part of functioning family units beyond their enslavement. More so, that there is so much left to discover. In doing so, this chapter has sought to embrace specific enquiries into the lives of women as part of wider issues of identity and power.