

Celebrating the contributions of Black nurses to nursing's history

Kandace Chimbiri, based in London, is the author of several Black history books for children (kandacechimbiri.com)

When my publisher asked if I'd be interested in writing a history book about Black nurses, I immediately said yes. I've been writing Black history books for children since 2009 and I was thrilled to write a book about the history of Black nursing. I had no idea that this would be the most challenging book I've ever had to research and write!

It would have been so much easier to write a book about Black nurses who have contributed to Britain since the formation of our NHS because there is now more evidence available. Since the use of technology to document oral history interviews gained popularity in the 1960s and Black History Month was established in the late 1980s, some of the more recent histories about Black nurses have been recorded. However, I was determined to write a book that would give readers information about some of the less-well-known earlier parts of Black nursing history.

Challenging research

The further back we go, into pre-colonial times, the harder it has been for me to find information. Since the autobiography *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* was reprinted in 1984, Mary Seacole has been increasingly included in history books, articles, museum displays and more. There were other Black nurses in British history prior to the creation of the NHS but it's rare to find much, if any, mention of them.

“I was inspired as I discovered just how much sacrifice and struggle it has taken for Black nurses to be allowed to care for us today”

Another challenge was that, as I began thinking about who should be included in a history of Black British nursing, I realised that I could not concentrate solely on the British Isles. Britain was an empire and there are more than 30 countries today, most now independent, whose histories are a part of British nursing history. Most of these countries are in Africa and the Caribbean and, like other post-colonial societies, record keeping is not on par with the UK and is difficult to access from abroad (the Bahamas and Bermuda were two of the easier ones).

It wouldn't have been possible to visit all these countries but, fortunately, the Royal College of Nursing's library in London has a huge collection of books, nursing journals and articles that I was able to access. I also looked through every edition of the *British Journal of Nursing* from 1888 onwards. I found references there to some of the nurses, such as Sarah Woodbine (who was in Britain in 1898), Tsahai Selassie, Princess Adenrele Ademola and others, who I was able to include in the book.

The history of nursing is so intertwined with the history of medicine that it was often difficult for me, as a non-nurse, to separate the nursing components in the literature. I also had to take the hard decision to focus on the development from early times to modern times through general hospital nursing rather than try to include every specialism. Midwifery, district nursing and mental health nursing, for example, are all as important but I just did not have enough pages in the book to do them justice.

Inspiring stories

Despite these obstacles, I was inspired as I discovered just how much sacrifice and struggle it has taken for Black nurses to be allowed to care for us today. I was truly amazed by the determination of Sarah Woodbine, curious about the life of Asarto Ward and touched by the story of Eric Ferron (who came to Britain during the Second World War and later became, reluctantly, a male nurse).

I hope *The Story of Britain's Black Nurses* will contribute to the literature on the history of global nursing, increase knowledge of the legacy of Black nurses, educate and entertain children and, most importantly, inspire and motivate others to go even further than I have in documenting more of this amazing, yet overlooked, history. **BJN**

The Story of Britain's Black Nurses by KN Chimbiri is published by Scholastic. ISBN: 978-0702314452

Have an idea for BJN?

📞 020 7738 5454

✉️ bjn@markallengroup.com

🐦 @BJNursing