

The Narrative of Ann Pratt: Life-Writing, Genre, and Bureaucracy in a Postemancipation Scandal

by Christienna Fryar

‘The next morning’, Ann Pratt, a former patient in Kingston’s Lunatic Asylum, wrote, ‘Louise Cochran was again “tanked”.’ Describing her frantic and unsuccessful attempts to intervene on Cochran’s behalf, Pratt continued:

Horried and frightened at the terrible repetition of the scenes of yesterday, I rushed from the yard of the Lunatic Asylum into the yard of the Public Hospital, which is divided by a party wall. There I saw Dr. Keech under the arches of the buildings. I cried out Doctor! Doctor! being pursued. I ran up the stairs that lead to the Fever Wards, and grasped the railings, when I was seized by Antoinette, Julian, and a male labourer of the name of Thomas. Dr. Keech ordered them to take me back to the Asylum; they accordingly tore me from the hand rail of the stairs, and carried me back to Mrs. Ryan....Immediately, on returning, I was confronted with Mrs. Ryan, who, with great indignation, ordered me to be ‘tanked’. I was forthwith seized by Antoinette, Julian Burge, assisted by Lunatics.... I was stripped; my arms held behind me; my legs extended and forcibly separated from each other; I was plunged into the tank, and kept under the water till all resistance, on my part, ceased; their grasp was then relaxed; I rose to the surface and breathed as if it were my last. Scarcely, however, had I drawn my breath when I was again subjected to the same horrible treatment, with the addition of having my head hurt against the sides of the tank, and my poor body beaten and contused with blows, till the fear of murder prompted them to desist.¹

Pratt’s depiction of her own punishment as she begged for the authorities to help Louise Cochran was the kind of evocative description central to the pamphlet *Seven Months in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum, and What I saw There*, published in Jamaica in July 1860. *Seven Months* was written – in some fashion – by Ann Pratt, a mixed-race Jamaican woman who lived in the island’s northwest parish of Hanover. It charts the horrors that she experienced and witnessed

during her seven-month stay in the asylum and paints a devastating picture of an institution failing its mission to care for some of the island's most defenceless inhabitants.

Seven Months emerged at a critical juncture. By the summer of 1860 Kingston physician Lewis Quier Bowerbank had spent more than two years trying to convince Jamaican elites, local officials and Colonial Office bureaucrats that patient care in the asylum and the adjoining public hospital was compromised by the abhorrent physical conditions in both facilities; residents in the asylum were further threatened by the rampant abuse and neglect.² Familiar with the English state asylum system's aspirations to base treatments upon moral management principles, Bowerbank insisted that nothing less than imperial intervention could improve the quality of care. While the Colonial Office accepted the necessity of an investigation, they preferred if possible to leave that task to the governor of Jamaica. Yet the governor, Sir Charles Darling, vocally supported the head of both facilities, Dr James Scott, and was loath to criticize him or the asylum too harshly.

Seven Months transformed this local controversy into a much broader imperial scandal. Between Pratt's release in early July and the middle of the month, Pratt came into contact with Bowerbank, who presumably bankrolled her publication and may have helped her write it.³ By telling her story, Pratt cut through the personality conflicts that had slowed investigation into the asylum. Once colonial officials in London read the pamphlet, which Darling had enclosed in a formal dispatch to his superiors, they began asking informed questions about asylum practices, most notably tanking. They demanded investigations, upbraided Darling when the enquiries were not sufficiently penetrating, and then used the findings from a commissioned report as inspiration for an empire-wide questionnaire about colonial asylums.⁴ Clearly, this was a remarkable text, one woman's powerful and ultimately successful challenge to the medical authorities who abused their power over patients and to the imperial officials hiding behind administrative procedure and constitutional structures.

But it was also a text whose broader impact was made as much by the bureaucratic practices of British colonialism as by its content. To say this is not to minimize the power of Pratt's own words but is to recognize that, in an imperial context, the words of a woman whom authorities had deemed insane required help. It is also to account for the ways that bureaucratic practices produced knowledge. In the case of *Seven Months*, the procedures of communication between governor and metropole produced two 'editions' of the text. Pratt's original publication

was the first, which circulated around Jamaica. Yet that alone could not have influenced imperial policy so directly.

It was the second version, transformed into a Colonial Office file (CO 137/350 dispatch #118) by the conventions of administrative correspondence and collation, that had such impact. CO 137/350 dispatch #118 was a file eighty folios in length, all devoted to the publication of *Seven Months*. That pamphlet was enclosed, of course, but so was the governor's dispatch explaining the materials he was sending to the Colonial Office, and supplementary documents both supporting and challenging her narrative.

The rest of this essay first considers the importance of files as a site of imperial knowledge production and then examines this particular file, peeling back the layers of documentation that cocoon the original pamphlet. The text at the core remained the same, but in the file Pratt's narrative was shaped by the bureaucratic apparatus that surrounded it: the governor's dispatch that introduced and defined the text for its Colonial Office audience as well as the myriad enclosures, some of which were hostile toward Pratt and undermined her testimony while others corroborated her depictions of violence. For while the staple texts of imperial bureaucracy had the capacity to bring black voices to the attention of imperial officials, black testimony never emerged unfiltered or unmediated.

THE FILE AS GENRE

I first encountered *Seven Months* during a summer pre-dissertation research trip in 2007. Its significance immediately struck me, and given the recent explosion of historiographical interest in the asylum scandal and Pratt's narrative specifically, it had clearly already struck other scholars the same way. At the time, so early in my career, I also found its location surprising. Housed in the cavernous archival vaults of the British National Archives in an outer London suburb, tucked in with the formal and formulaic correspondence between governors on the ground and bureaucrats in the metropole, a copy of *Seven Months* rests in the Colonial Office files. Its presence there highlights the paradoxical nature of colonial bureaucratic texts, which though their conventions made them dry and abstract, could nonetheless occasionally convey the perspectives and testimonies of marginalized subjects.

In recent decades anthropologists and historians alike have examined paperwork as not merely a mechanism that delivers information but an object of study in its own right. The

bureaucratic practices of paperwork and recordkeeping do more than preserve knowledge; they produce it too. Furthermore, paperwork structures administrations, confers legitimacy and authority on systems of power, provides an arena for categorizing and classifying social groups, serves as an important point of encounter between citizens and their government, and, more elementally, determines legal personhood and access to the state.⁵ Some scholars of empire have been particularly attuned to the ways that paperwork itself – and by extension the archival practices that preserved paperwork for administrative use and, subsequently, for scholarly excavation – produced what Ann Laura Stoler calls ‘colonial common sense’: what was “unwritten” because it could go without saying and “everyone knew it”, what was unwritten because it could not yet be articulated, and what was unwritten because it could not be said’.⁶

Within the broader category of paperwork, however, files hold special significance. The file is the basic unit of paperwork, both mundane and essential. Indeed, its mundanity is what makes it essential. As Ilana Feldman notes, ‘[t]he accumulation and reiteration of mundane details in files help produce facticity and potency. Furthermore, the mechanisms of filing... are crucial to the process of authorization’.⁷ The bureaucratic archive of postemancipation Jamaica is no different. It is filled with minutia and mundanity, which obscure the power that these files had over the daily lives of black subjects. Moreover, direct testimonies from black Jamaicans are scarce in the imperial archive, as is evidence of the concerns of black subjects. During the early postemancipation period, black subjects most often appear in these sources as an undistinguished mass whose attempts to take control of their own labour and time had destroyed the Jamaican economy.⁸ In this sense, the texts of colonial bureaucracy are usually a more reliable guide to the developing racist ideologies that underpinned imperial rule.⁹

Yet crises like the Kingston lunatic-asylum scandal could compel black subjects’ testimonies to the fore. As Saidiya Hartman notes in her meditation on the impossible task of conjuring the full human lives of enslaved women from a compromised archive, ‘An act of chance or disaster produced a divergence or an aberration from the expected and usual course of invisibility and catapulted [Venus] from the underground to the surface of discourse’.¹⁰ To be sure, postemancipation archives are somewhat more informative than the archives of slavery, since legal personhood conferred the right for former slaves to engage with governments as subjects rather than chattel. Nevertheless, the slow and incomplete road to recognizing the full humanity of freedpeople limits the ability of the postemancipation archive to shed light on the

lives of individuals of African descent. Thus ‘exorbitant circumstances’ were still necessary to bring individual lives to ‘the surface of discourse’.¹¹ In the case of Ann Pratt, those circumstances were this scandal.

CO 137/350, DISPATCH #118, FOLS. 429–41: THE TESTIMONY OF ANN PRATT

The pamphlet *Seven Months* begins with a quick sketch of Pratt’s personal history, one that suggests that she was born into enslavement.

I Was [*sic*] born in the parish of Hanover, on Paradise Estate, in the year 1830. I was the daughter of John Pratt, long and well known as a grocery storekeeper, in the town of Lucea. I was placed, when about six years of age, under the care of Joshua Heywood, Esquire, a late magistrate of Hanover – while under his care, I attended the Mico School, then under the care of Edmond Wilson, teacher in the town of Lucea.¹²

Born on an estate during the final years of slavery, which ended in Jamaica in 1834, Pratt was likely the daughter of an enslaved woman. In the text, she distances herself from both of her parents, though in different and revealing ways. John Pratt, the Lucea shopkeeper, is mentioned only this once, and she does not call him her father. She also only once refers to her mother, describing her as ‘my mother’, though without giving her name. Her mother was a continuing presence in her life. As she wrote, ‘After some years’ residence with Mr. Heywood, I went home to my mother, with whom I resided for some time. After which, in 1859, I left her, and went to live at Barbary Hill’. The text gives no indication of a sustained relationship with John Pratt. Magistrate Heywood’s appearance also suggests an enslaved birth. Pratt would have been six in 1836, which was in the middle of the apprenticeship period. Created as part of Parliament’s 1833 Abolition Act, apprenticeship was designed as a four- to six-year transitional labor system that would train masters to become employers, former enslaved people to become wage labourers, by forcing formerly enslaved people—now apprentices—to continue working on the plantations of their masters. For the first 40.5 hours in a given week, an apprentice received no payment for work; any subsequent work after the 40.5 hours was, in theory, to be paid. Children under six were not apprentices because the Abolition Act freed them immediately in 1833, but there was no provision for their care. For this reason, many parents sent their children to live in towns with

friends or relatives.¹³ It is possible that Heywood took in Pratt while her mother remained an apprentice until 1838, when the system was abolished two years early. Finally, Pratt attended a Mico School. Since the Mico Schools were set up to educate emancipated children, this is the strongest indication that she had once been enslaved.¹⁴

As detailed by *Seven Months*, Pratt experienced a convoluted path to the asylum, though one perhaps fairly common for colonial asylums.¹⁵ Her travails began with her being the victim of a crime: in November 1859, John Davis, George McKenzie, and John Morris broke into her home. During this invasion, she reported, John Davis ‘assaulted me personally, and was guilty of a felonious act – I being alone, an unprotected female’. In the subsequent trial, initiated by Pratt ‘appeal[ing] to the magistrates of Hanover’, one of the defendants turned proceedings by pressing charges against her. ‘After hearing a large amount of false evidence’, the court fined her £1 for abusive language. (While Pratt did not specify in the pamphlet the nature of the charges against her, Hanover officials subsequently – and eagerly – supplied that information.)¹⁶

The night after the unexpected judgement, Pratt experienced convulsing fits and was briefly ‘deprived of [her] senses’. Police took her to Hanover’s Female Prison. In prison, she was cared for by the matron, Mrs Crooks, who first asked her ‘if [she] should like to go to Kingston for change of air’. A Miss Hillman ‘asked [her] the same question’. Unaware that the trip to Kingston meant her commitment to the Kingston asylum, she agreed, believing that ‘a little change would do me some good’. One of the local physicians, Dr Brebner, admitted her to the Kingston facility. A few days later, on January 5, 1860, her caretakers took Pratt to the *Maria Louisa*, the schooner helmed by a Captain Symmonette that would take her from Lucea to Kingston. During the four-day sail, she socialized with other passengers, and the ship’s captain consoled her as she worried about leaving behind her children. (This is the first time she mentions them in the narrative.) Upon arrival in Kingston, she spent the night at the captain’s home before going to the asylum the next morning. Her mistreatment began immediately. After registration, two women began dragging her by the wrist into the facility, but she resisted and walked in herself. Early in her stay, Pratt resolved that she would make public her dire treatment, so she ‘[kept] in [her] memory, dates, events, persons, names, particulars, and treatment’ by scratching notes onto a board with a pin. These memory techniques allowed Pratt to prepare the pamphlet immediately after her release in early July 1860.¹⁷

The narrative unfolds as a loosely chronological account of Pratt’s experiences and

presents vivid scenes of the cruelty common to asylum life. Confined to their cells at night, patients were stripped of almost all of their clothes, save undergarments, and they slept on ‘an iron stretcher with a canvas bottom, but no mattress’.¹⁸ During the day, the nursing staff and helpers teased, insulted, beat, dragged and otherwise humiliated patients. Presiding over the violence was Matron Judith Ryan, who shielded it from her superiors’ view. Whenever Pratt begged for help from asylum doctors and officials, they believed Ryan’s explanations instead of the patient’s.¹⁹ *Seven Months* also depicted in gruesome detail the practice of tanking, described in the opening quotation of this essay. When nurses tanked patients, they put them in the bathing tanks, which usually still held dirty water from other patients’ baths. Victims were held underwater for several seconds and were repeatedly thrust back under.²⁰ No one was protected from this treatment. Although staff members tried to justify tanking as merely bathing, it was used strategically to punish patients.²¹ Pratt insisted that, far from curing mental illness, it was the asylum that had driven her to ‘mental distraction’.²²

Seven Months itself was powerful. It gained its force both from its emphasis on the torture and suffering of women and from the way it potently combined and adapted the conventions of two genres of life-writing: the asylum patient’s narrative and the slave narrative. First, Pratt’s gender – and that of the female victims she listed – gave her narrative more heft. *Seven Months* drew on the abolitionist and humanitarian acceptance that the torture of women was a particularly heinous violation of decency. Emphasis on women’s suffering had long given humanitarian activists more political traction. Abolitionist rhetoric about flogging frequently focused on the whipping of women, which became a powerful emblem of slavery’s evils. For abolitionists, since flogging women meant exposing their naked bodies, it brought shame both on them and on the men who flogged them or watched their degradation. The act coarsened both victim and perpetrator, because it celebrated men’s basest instincts at the same time that it forced indecency upon women.²³ To be sure, sentimental and humanitarian literature revelled in the details of torture against all enslaved people. Yet within this propaganda, violence against enslaved women carried additional weight.²⁴ *Seven Months* – and indeed the entire asylum scandal – operated in a similar register, plumbing this specific vein of outrage against cruel physical punishments of women.

Second, the pamphlet combined familiar genres of Victorian life-writing. *Seven Months* is most clearly an example of an asylum patient’s narrative and is listed as such in Gail Hornstein’s

*Bibliography of First-Person Narratives of Madness in English.*²⁵ Stints in asylum did not preclude creative production by patients, and although we typically associate this type of life-writing with the twentieth century, it first emerged earlier. Nineteenth-century patients produced newspapers, poems, and their own narratives. While much of this literature was produced inside the asylum, some patients like Pratt published memoirs after their release.²⁶ Interpreting the political weight of these texts poses a challenge. On one hand, the power that those running asylums had over most aspects of patient life has made many scholars hesitate to claim that patient narratives, by their very existence, were always strong challenges to the asylum system. On the other, scholars like Jann Matlock insist that the extraordinary surveillance of writing within asylums is what makes ‘[w]riting in the asylum... always transgression’. As she continues, ‘It is always an attempt to get beyond the asylum... to reclaim an identity other than the one conferred by the system’.²⁷ Pratt’s determination to remember her ordeal by scratching notes to herself would seem to confirm Matlock’s conviction that writing in the asylum – or even the act of remembering so that one could write at a later moment – was transgressive and thus politically significant. Similarly, Sara Newman notes that those who published memoirs after their release often had political motives. They often ‘advocate[d] for reforming [the asylum] system’, and in the process ‘turn[ed] the tables on their oppressors and portray[ed] the system... as the cause of their legal, medical, and personal misfortune’.²⁸ Under the right circumstances, these texts could be politically effective, particularly since they countered institutional narratives.²⁹

The more politically-minded patients’ narratives also in some ways resembled narratives of enslavement: they had political objectives, and they often featured descriptions of capture and escape. A few scholars have noted this parallel, including Gail Hornstein, who suggests that ‘[I]ike slave narratives, patients’ accounts of mental illness pit the experience of one person against a broader social structure perceived as oppressive and unjust’.³⁰ Moreover, patients similarly devoted energy and space to proving their credibility. Yet as Sara Newman has pointed out, this parallel has not yet been explored sufficiently, perhaps because few texts exist that were written by individuals who experienced both.³¹ Here too, if we accept that Pratt was born into enslavement, *Seven Months* stands out as a rare narrative of a woman of African descent who experienced both enslavement and committal.

To be sure, *Seven Months* was not a slave narrative, since at the time of Pratt’s

confinement in the asylum, she was a free person. Moreover, standard genre definitions of slave narratives suggest that such texts were published before the legal end of slavery and, in the case of the British Empire, apprenticeship.³² Yet it is worth noting that *Seven Months* was the narrative of a woman who had escaped the confinement of her early childhood but later found herself in another kind of confinement, one that was in certain ways tied to her identity as a woman of African descent and her proximity to blackness. In that way, this text, like the apprenticeship narrative of James Williams, highlights the contradictory nature of emancipation in which legal freedom was nonetheless limited and constrained.³³

Moreover, the text functioned in very similar ways to a slave narrative, possibly because its patron, Bowerbank, was familiar with the tropes of that genre. *Seven Months* conformed to many of the genre's conventions. It featured a similar plot structure, from the onset of confinement to its deplorable conditions, followed by the final escape.³⁴ It had the political urgency common to slave narratives. Moreover, it featured many of the textual hallmarks of that genre. Literary scholar James Olney identified something of a template that slave narratives seemed to follow, one that covered everything from the title, the prefatory material, and the opening line of the narrative itself, to the extended appendices at the end. *Seven Months* featured or inverted a striking number of these conventions. Its title emphasized Pratt's own witnessing of the events described – '... And What I Saw There'. Her preface insisted that the information in the pamphlet was unvarnished – 'by [God's] help and blessing I will now faithfully and truthfully relate all that befel me'. It had a 'poetic epigraph', a few lines from Richard Lovelace's 'To Althea, from Prison'. The text itself began in similar fashion to many narratives of enslavement: with the sentence "'I was born...'", then specifying a place but not date of birth', followed by 'a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father'.³⁵ Together, the combination of familiar and politically potent genres, as well as the centring of women victims, gave the text an unusual force and legibility as a form of Victorian life-writing.

CO 137/350, DISPATCH #118, FOLIOS 442–468: *OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS ON THE CASE OF ANN PRATT*

As powerful as *Seven Months* was, it came under immediate and severe scrutiny in Jamaica after its publication. Jamaican authorities questioned whether Pratt, deemed insane by a justice of the peace, could become a trusted witness only months later. Both Darling and asylum director

Daniel Trench viewed the tract with scepticism, even though they knew about recent incidents of abuse.³⁶ Trench's concerns led him to interrogate some of the people named in *Seven Months*, after which he compiled the evidence into a published rebuttal of his own (*Official Documents on the Case of Ann Pratt*).³⁷ Darling submitted this second pamphlet along with *Seven Months* in his dispatch, so that Pratt's testimony was immediately undermined by the supposedly more official narrative.

Official Documents tried to discredit Pratt by questioning her mental state and moral character. Hanover County officials were especially pointed in this regard. For example, William Browne, the justice of the peace who had committed Pratt, believed she was incapable of producing such a text in either written or oral form. As various authorities who had encountered her agreed, 'Ann Pratt was mad, and dangerously mad too, while in the Female Prison at Lucea, and for two days before she was committed there; and a Lady, who was one of her fellow-passengers on board the Marie Louise, declared that, on two occasions, she was seized with fits of madness'. Even Pratt's own mother had reportedly confirmed her daughter's continued struggles with insanity.³⁸ William Brebner, medical attendant at Hanover Jail, agreed with Browne's assessment. He classified her problems as "'mania", alternating with "melancholia"; during the paroxysm of the former, she would utter the most indecent language, strip herself naked – eat her own excrement, and rub her body over with her "fœces"'. These fits required she be confined in a straitjacket.³⁹ If Pratt had indeed been insane, these men wondered, how had she produced the pamphlet? At least two Hanover officials identified 'sinister' motives in her amanuensis. Browne argued that whoever helped her, the 'kind friend' she mentioned in the text, 'ha[d], for some sinister purpose of his own, exaggerated the complaints she has been induced to make'.⁴⁰ J. S. Trench, clerk of the Hanover Peace Office, thought the same. Her helper must have been acting 'for the purposes of "revenge"'.⁴¹

Concerns about Pratt's reliability extended beyond her mental state, as officials pointed to the supposed poverty of her moral character – indicated in part by her consorting with black men – and poked holes in her biography. 'Ann Pratt is the mother of two children for a man named Levi, who was living with, or married to another woman', Browne reported.⁴² "'Miss Pratt" has, for years past,' Trench wrote, 'born the character of a prostitute, has had connection with black men, and had children, the result of promiscuous intercourse, two of whom are now alive.' Nor did she attend church as regularly as she claimed, he charged.⁴³ Hanover officials also saw

Pratt's sullied character as sufficient proof to challenge her admission narrative, the critical section in which Pratt asserted her sanity. While the bare outlines of their accounts varied little from hers, they supplied damning details. Pratt had been living with McKenzie, who himself was with another woman, one suggested. Another insisted that 'a familiarity' had developed between Pratt and 'a libertine, named John Davis'. Both accounts emphasized that Pratt's charges – against McKenzie or Davis, depending on which official's version one believed – were the results of lovers' tiffs and jealousy.⁴⁴

These severe critiques carried much weight with Jamaican administrators, but surprisingly they seem to have failed to persuade metropolitan bureaucrats. Part of that was no doubt the strength of *Seven Months*, its recognizably Victorian generic form, and its clearly legible humanitarian stakes. But part of it may also have been that what Colonial officials read first, if in fact they read the file in the order that Darling compiled it, was voluminous corroboration of her story.

CO 137/350, DISPATCH #118, FOLS. 390-428: THE CORROBORATION

In James Olney's schema of the characteristics of slave narratives, he notes that they frequently came with 'a bewildering variety of documents... that appear before the text, in the text itself, in footnotes, and in appendices'.⁴⁵ Here the file – which is in effect a second edition of the pamphlet – inverts the genre convention. The prefatory and supplemental documents come not in the original version published in Jamaica but in the politically important version that arrived in London. Moreover, while the *Official Documents* supplement attempted to undermine Pratt's credibility, the rest of the addenda corroborated her testimony: letters from Pratt and her solicitor to the governor's office; documents outlining initial legal proceedings against Matron Ryan, who had recently been dismissed from her post; letters from asylum officials reporting abuses they had witnessed; and transcripts of interviews with nurses and the matron.

Pratt had of course defended her text. Like Mary Prince had before her, she began *Seven Months* with a vigorous, faith-based defence of her credibility. She described herself as a Christian woman 'sustained' by God's 'supporting hand' during her time of abandonment, and she listed men who would vouch for her credibility.⁴⁶ She also insisted that she had remained sane throughout her entire ordeal, even though her story suggests that she suffered at least temporary spells of mental distress and disorientation. She herself categorized a moment when

she ‘began to sing a melancholy song, in a low mournful voice’ on the voyage to Kingston as ‘the only slight exception’ to her sustained sanity.⁴⁷

But the mountains of corroborating evidence no doubt legitimized her complaints to Colonial Office bureaucrats. Pratt’s pamphlet emerged mere weeks after Jamaican administrators had investigated another report of patient abuse from a source they trusted more. Asylum purveyor Caleb Hall saw a patient – whom others would name as Deborah Lloyd – dragged down an asylum corridor by a nurse in late June 1860. After pulling Lloyd ‘along towards the Bath in a most unceremonious manner’, the nurse, Nancy Lloyd, shoved Deborah down on the ground and punched her twice. Matron Ryan insisted that the patient had run away from the bath naked and had fallen when the nurse ran to cover her. Nancy Lloyd agreed with this account. But Hall insisted on what he had witnessed. Asylum director Daniel Trench believed Hall and reported the incident to Darling, who dismissed Ryan and Nurse Lloyd.⁴⁸ Hall faced none of the hostility that Pratt would. And because Darling submitted his report and the accompanying correspondence alongside *Seven Months* in the file – and indeed placed it all before the pamphlet – it primed Colonial Office staff reading the file to believe her narrative by providing critical proof of the rampant abuse in the asylum.

It is unlikely that this was Darling’s intention. By this point, he had spent two years defending Dr James Scott, the head of both facilities, and trying to minimize the scope of the scandal. He believed that Bowerbank was primarily motivated by revenge after being turned down for the position of consulting surgeon at the Kingston Public Hospital. By the summer of 1860, communication had so thoroughly broken down between him and Bowerbank that he had formally cut off communication with the doctor, save passing the doctor’s letters to the Colonial Office, as he was required to do.⁴⁹ Indeed, from his own dispatch, it seems likely that he only sent the pamphlet to London because Pratt specifically requested that he do so.⁵⁰ But if in fact it was not Darling’s intention to validate *Seven Months*, that only underscores the role of bureaucratic practices in making and shaping the way that text was understood in the place where its impact mattered most. Darling likely placed these materials before the pamphlet because they were produced chronologically before the text was published. Those texts that undermined her testimony – and with which Darling may have personally agreed with more – came after because they were produced in response to *Seven Months*. Thus, the conventions of bureaucracy, those banal ways of ordering knowledge, worked in Ann Pratt’s favour – and

indeed in the favour of all trapped in the asylum hellscape – regardless of Darling’s intentions or beliefs.

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By way of conclusion, a counterpoint. *Seven Months* was not the only pamphlet about abuses in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum published in 1860. Later that year came *New Lights on Dark Deeds*, a posthumous compilation of the diary entries of Richard Rouse, the asylum’s former warden. Rouse, who was black, had begun working in the asylum in April 1854 and remained warden until he was fired in December 1858. He died shortly after. During these four years, he witnessed rampant abuse, careless treatment of patients, insubordination among lower-level staff, and vulgar speech. Rouse’s diary not only corroborated Pratt’s account, it added to it as well. Whereas Pratt had referred to patients being left in charge of their fellow inmates, Rouse offered more chilling detail: Nicholas Steele, a man prone to ‘severe fits’, whipped and beat patients, at times with a cat-o-nine-tails. Steele also pulled women violently out of the privy and once broke the ribs of a patient in front of the head physician, who looked on unperturbed.⁵¹

New Lights shared other similarities with *Seven Months*: it was evocative, it emphasized the extraordinary violence inflicted upon female asylum patients, and it had the strong imprint of Bowerbank’s influence. Moreover, it was published in direct response to Pratt’s critics. Rouse’s son, known as only R.B.R. in the text, published his late father’s writings to combat those who ‘[had] declared [Pratt’s] narrative to be the illusions of a maniac’.⁵² Yet *New Lights* had a much smaller footprint than *Seven Months*. To my knowledge, there is no copy of it in the Colonial Office files, nor even any mention. Indeed, Rouse himself hardly figures there. Guided by my encounter with Pratt’s pamphlet, I stumbled on *New Lights* several months later in the National Library of Jamaica. Perhaps the text never made it to London. Its impact remained mostly local, but perhaps its fate was the standard career for these kinds of texts. *Seven Months* was the outlier.

Perhaps *Seven Months* survived the scrutiny – and the forces arrayed against it that successfully diminished the testimony of Rouse – and made it to London for two reasons: strategy and luck. It was strategy, probably Bowerbank’s, that had Ann Pratt send her pamphlet to Darling with the request that he forward it to the Colonial Office. Though *Seven Months* never

referenced Britain, Pratt nonetheless positioned her story as one that would horrify a reading public that expected better. And as her request that Darling forward the pamphlet to the ‘Colonial Minister’ suggests, she clearly intended to have a British audience.⁵³ In a subtle way, this strategy was also the assertion of colonial subjecthood – and more importantly, an assertion of the rights possessed by colonial subjects. Rouse’s son deployed the same strategy, only more boldly.⁵⁴ But as much as it was strategy, luck was also involved. For ultimately it was luck both that Darling enclosed the Deborah Lloyd correspondence at all and that because bureaucratic conventions demanded that he place the file’s enclosures in chronological order, Ann Pratt’s story was first proven before it was undermined.

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1 Ann Pratt, *Seven Months in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum, and What I Saw There* George Henderson, Savage, & Co., Kingston, 1860, enclosed in dispatch #118, 21 Aug. 1860: British National Archives, Colonial Office (CO) 137/350, fol. 434.

2 There were no reports of abuse in the public hospital.

3 Pratt, *Seven Months*, fol. 431v.

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12 Pratt, *Seven Months*, fol. 432r.

13 Holt, *Problem of Freedom*, pp. 56, 151.

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16 Pratt, *Seven Months*, fol. 431v; J. S. Trench to Daniel Trench, *Official Documents on the Case of Ann Pratt, the Reputed Authoress of a Certain Pamphlet, Entitled ‘Seven Months in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum, and What I Saw There’*, enclosed in CO 137/350, dispatch #118, fol. 466.

17 Pratt, *Seven Months*, fols 431v–433r.

18 Pratt, *Seven Months*, fol. 433v.

19 Pratt, *Seven Months*, throughout.

20 Tanking is described in detail across five volumes of testimony gathered by a commission that eventually investigated asylum conditions. See CO 137/359–363 (1861).

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28 Sara Newman, 'Disability and Life Writing', p. 263.

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31 See especially, Newman, 'Disability and Life Writing', pp. 273–4.

32 See the definition offered in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Oxford and New York, 1985, pp. xii, xvi, xxii. Nicole N. Aljoe makes a similar point for Caribbean slave narratives, extending the time frame to the end of apprenticeship in keeping with the widespread agreement that legal bondage ended after apprenticeship in the Caribbean, not after slavery. See Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709–1838*, New York, 2012, introduction.

33 *A Narrative of Events, Since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica*, ed. Diana Paton, Durham, 2001.

34 In this respect, *Seven Months* resembled slave narratives from the United States more than those from the Caribbean. As Nicole Aljoe points out, Caribbean slave narratives rarely ended with full freedom for the narrator: Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*, pp. 13–14.

35 Here, I draw on James Olney, “‘I was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature”, in *The Slave’s Narrative*, ed. Davis and Gates, pp. 152–3; the examples from *Seven Months* come from fol. 429r, 431–2.

36 For Darling’s scepticism, see Hugh Austin to Edward Kemble, acting attorney general, 26 July 1860 and Daniel Trench to Austin, 8 Aug. 1860, both printed in *Official Documents on the Case of Ann Pratt, the Reputed Authoress of a Certain Pamphlet, Entitled ‘Seven Months in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum, and What I Saw There’*, enclosed in CO 137/350, dispatch #118, fols 405, 453r.

37 Trench to Austin, 8 Aug. 1860, *Official Documents*, fol. 452a.

38 Extract from William Browne letter “addressed to a Gentleman in this city”, 30 July 1860, *Official Documents*, fol. 463v.

39 William Brebner statement, enclosed in J. S. Trench to Daniel Trench, *Official Documents*, fol. 467r.

40 Browne, 30 July 1860, *Official Documents*, fol. 463v.

41 J. S. Trench to Daniel Trench, 6 Aug. 1860, *Official Documents*, fol. 467r.

42 Browne, 30 July 1860, *Official Documents*, fol. 464r.

43 J. S. Trench to Daniel Trench, 6 Aug. 1860, *Official Documents*, fol. 465r.

44 Browne letter, 30 July 1860, *Official Documents*, fol. 464r; J. S. Trench to Daniel Trench, 6 Aug. 1860, *Official Documents*, fols 465–66r.

45 Olney, “‘I was Born’”, pp. 151–2.

46 Pratt, *Seven Months*, enclosed in CO 137/350, fols 429v, 431. For more on religious invocation as narrative validation, see Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*, pp. 121, 124–5.

47 Pratt, *Seven Months*, fol. 432v.

48 Hall never named Deborah Lloyd, but her name comes from the recollections of Judith Ryan, Antoinette Burrie and Nancy Lloyd. In her pamphlet, Pratt recounted a scene that is likely to be the same incident since she reports it as the reason that Ryan was fired. She named the patient as Emma Steele, but otherwise her story matched Hall’s. Ryan told her version of events twice, once in a letter to Trench and then in an oral statement Trench took two days later. See the

following from CO 137/350, dispatch #118: two letters from Caleb Hall to Trench, both 26 June 1860, fols 412–14; interrogations of Judith Ryan, Antoinette Burrie, and Nancy Lloyd, fols 417v, 419–420v; Pratt, *Seven Months*, fol. 437r; Judith Ryan letter to Trench, 26 June 1850, fol. 415; interrogation of Judith Ryan, 416v–417r; interrogation of Nancy Lloyd, fol. 420; Hall to Trench, 29 June 1860, fol. 425; Trench to Austin, 29 June 1860, 410–11; Austin to Trench, 4 July 1860, 427–428r.

49 Austin to Bowerbank, 27 Dec. 1858, CO 137/343/367r. For more on how the animosity between Darling and Bowerbank shaped the scandal, see Fryar, ‘Imperfect Models’, pp. 714–21.

50 Darling to Duke of Newcastle, 21 Aug. 1860, CO 137/350, dispatch #118, fols 390v–391r; Pratt to Austin, 23 July 1860, enclosed in CO 137/350, dispatch #118, fol. 395r.

51 Rouse, *New Lights on Dark Deeds: being Jottings from the Diary of Richard Rouse, Late Warden of the Lunatic Asylum of Kingston*, pp. 5, 9–12, 18, 20, 25, 27: National Library of Jamaica, ref. 362 Ja Rou,

52 *New Lights*, 6.

53 Pratt to Austin, 23 July 1860, enclosed in CO 137/350, dispatch #118, fol. 395r.

54 He concluded *New Lights* with a bold indictment of the British Empire. ‘How long’, he wrote, ‘shall such a state of things be allowed to continue with impunity, nay, be fostered and encouraged by the ruling authorities of a Colony under the British Flag?’: Rouse, *New Lights*, p. 37.

ABSTRACT:

The pamphlet *Seven Months in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum, and What I Saw There* detailed the experiences of Ann Pratt, a mixed-race Jamaican woman, during her months-long commitment to the facility. *Seven Months* portrayed the asylum as an institution failing its mission to care for some of the island’s most vulnerable inhabitants. A text produced in colonial Jamaica by a woman most likely born in enslavement, the pamphlet had an unusual career, moving from local island circuits to limited circulation within London’s political and philanthropic elite. There, in the metropole, it transformed Colonial Office bureaucrats’ understanding of a local scandal that had been brewing in Jamaica for two years over conditions in the asylum and adjoining hospital. Once they had read it, metropolitan officials demanded investigations into asylum conditions in Jamaica and, more broadly, across the empire. That *Seven Months* transformed imperial opinion

to this degree was testament both to its fusion of life-writing genres and to the bureaucratic practices that elevated a specific version of this text to the attention of the Colonial Office. *Seven Months* was thus a bureaucratic artifact as much as a literary text. Drawing on historical and anthropological studies of paperwork, especially ‘the file’, and on literary analyses of nineteenth-century life-writing, this essay argues that the bureaucratic practices of collating and filing that colonial governors used produced a more powerful edition of the pamphlet, one that primed the Colonial Office for a positive reception of Ann Pratt’s claims.