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Abstract

Personal journals have many attractions. The best of these texts detail everyday experience with an immediacy and purported veracity found wanting in narratives composed long after the event. Even more seductive, they are marked by a willingness to generalise about the components of a culture in ways that provide readymade models and assessments for an interpretative historiography. Compared to the barren records of financial history or the turgidity of legal documentation, journals are more likely to deliver the apposite aphorism and candid confession that can be immediately deployed in a telling turn of phrase. Although historians readily recognise the anecdotal hazards of such sources — coming as they do from a privileged literate class and often the creations of casual visitors — the temptations are too great for most to resist (Woodfine 185).

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Eight Iterations of Lady Nugent's Jamaica Journal

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In the social history of the Anglophone Caribbean, one personal journal has long reigned supreme as a historical source. Best known as *Lady Nugent's Journal*, it is the record kept by Maria Nugent, wife of a governor of Jamaica, for the years 1801 to 1805. Her account gained its visibility through an initial private printing in 1839, followed by the publication of a series of editions and reprintings that began in 1907 and ensured the book's availability throughout the twentieth century. The vitality of Nugent's descriptive account quickly made it one of the most frequently cited sources for studies of colonial society during slavery, and it became a popular choice for anthologies of travel writing and of diarising.¹ The journal's importance lies in its detailed impressions of creole life and manners, its contribution to a picturesque aesthetic, and the simple rarity of personal accounts of Jamaica written by members of the governing class and by women (Brereton 64). It was in this way that her lively style was married to the confidence with which she offered broad generalisations on the island's society and culture.

Two examples suffice to illustrate Nugent's style and its attractions as a source. These are among the most frequently quoted of Nugent's remarks and both of them were recorded in the course of her first tour of the island, together with her husband and entourage, commenced in early March 1802 when she had been in Jamaica for seven months. Halfway through the seven-week tour and overwhelmed by the groaning tables of the planters, Nugent declared: 'I am not astonished at the general ill health of the men in this country; for they really eat like cormorants and drink like porpoises' (Nugent 1839a 195–96). At the end of

the tour, Nugent felt ready to generalise more broadly about the society. She told her journal that the 'Creole language' was shared by black and white women, and as proof recorded with disgust that 'I stood next to a lady one night, near a window, and, by way of saying something, remarked that the air was much cooler than usual; to which she answered, "Yes, ma-am, *him rail-ly too fra-ish*"' (Nugent 1839a 236). These two observations have become influential perennials in modern narratives of eighteenth-century Jamaica, quoted time after time in varied degrees of fullness in popular as well as academic texts. They have provided starting points for a series of debates about the consequences of conspicuous consumption and, more recently, the character of creolisation.²

Nugent's journal has also attracted the attention of literary scholars, not so much as a text in its own right but rather as a vital contributor to English fiction of the early nineteenth century. Brontë scholars have argued that *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, both published in 1847, draw not only on contemporary narratives of (white) creole degeneracy in West Indian slave society but also refer to the intimate history of a particular Jamaican plantation. Nugent's *Journal* is viewed not only as the potential source of elements of the critique of creole degeneracy but perhaps also even the names of characters in *Jane Eyre*, the congruencies leading Sue Thomas to speculate that '[Charlotte] Brontë may well have read, or had read to her, Nugent's *A Journal of a Voyage* ... issued for private circulation in 1839' (Thomas 1999 4). Thomas quotes Nugent on the creoles' indolence, their indulgence in eating and drinking, their lack of sexual propriety, and broad disregard of religion and morality.³

In spite of the role played by *Lady Nugent's Journal* in the historiography and literature of empire and slavery, scholars have paid little attention to the provenance and status of the text. They have cited varied editions and reprintings, without wondering much about differences and possible editorial pruning and interference. There are in fact eight known versions of the journal, the most complete of which has been largely neglected by scholars. The eight iterations of the journal were, in summary: (1) the manuscript text written by Nugent between 1801 and 1811 and possibly later edited by her; (2) a two-volume edition privately printed in 1839; (3) *Lady Nugent's Journal* edited by Frank Cundall in a single volume in 1907; (4) a second edition of 1934; (5) a third edition of 1939; (6) a new edition edited by Philip Wright in 1966; (7) a reprint of Wright's edition with a foreword by Verene A. Shepherd in 2002; and (8) the 2006 British and Irish Women's Letters and Diaries electronic transcription of the journal as printed in 1839. Some of these were truly iterations, reproducing more or less exactly the text of earlier versions, whereas others made substantial deletions and restorations. With the exception of its most recent — electronic — transformation, production and publication of the Journal was shared between Jamaica and Britain.

Nugent presented herself as British, and the wife of the British governor of a British colony. Her attitudes to things creole and colonial were however

complicated by the fact of her own colonial American origins. Born in the colony of New Jersey in 1770 or 1771, she was one of twelve children of Cortlandt Skinner (1727–1799) and Elizabeth Kearney (1731–1810). Maria's father was also American-born, the son of a Scottish father and Dutch-American mother, while Maria's mother was of Irish-American ancestry. Cortlandt Skinner played a significant role in the Revolution, as a prominent Loyalist. On the declaration of the peace in 1783, Skinner took his family to Britain, probably living between the west of England and Ireland. He was compensated for the loss of his American property, being one of the largest landowners of New Jersey. In 1797, two years before the death of her father, Maria married, in Belfast, General George Nugent (1757–1849), the illegitimate but wealthy and well-connected son of an Irish peer. George had joined the British Army as a young man and fought in the American War, including service in the Jerseys. His service and his family's political connections brought him appointment as Lieutenant-Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Jamaica and he and Maria arrived in the island in July 1801, soon after her thirtieth birthday.⁴

The Governorship of Jamaica was one of the most important and best-paid in the British Empire. During the Nugents' time in the island, the Atlantic slave trade ran at a high rate; sugar production peaked in 1805, when Jamaica was briefly the world's leading exporter, creating great wealth for Britain; war with France ebbed and flowed; trade with the United States remained severely limited; and Haiti declared independence in 1804. It was the Governor's responsibility to ensure the security of this system and to oversee the smooth flow of trade and profits. The difficulty of his task was to satisfy both the British Government and the planter-dominated Jamaican Assembly. The Governor's official residence was the opulent King's House in the capital Spanish Town but the Nugents also enjoyed extended periods at the Government Pen, towards the coast, and at Port Henderson. They made a long journey through the Jamaican countryside in March and April 1802 and shorter visits to other sites. While in Jamaica, they had two children, George born October 1802 and Louisa September 1803. Maria and the two children left for England in June 1805 and George in February 1806. They stayed for some years in England, during which time George was elected to Parliament and in 1811 made a Baronet and appointed Commander-in-Chief in India. It was then that Maria became Lady Nugent though the title has been bestowed freely to her time in Jamaica. She was in India until 1815, then spent the remainder of her life in England, dying in 1834 the year of the formal British abolition of slavery.⁵ The manuscripts of her Jamaican and Indian journals soon came to light.

Without presenting too many statistics or trivial variations, it is worthwhile setting out the major differences between the eight iterations of *Lady Nugent's Journal*. The most important comparison is that between the 1966/2002 text as edited by Wright and the first published text of 1839/2006. Most of these differences were generated by Cundall rather than Wright but it is the Wright

edition that is most used and most readily available. Full and correct citations of the 1839 first printing of Nugent's Jamaican journal are rare and even those aware of its existence typically reference the 1966 edition. Only occasionally have recent commentators used Cundall's 1907 edition, or its 1934 and 1939 versions, rather than Wright's 1966 edition.⁶

Not counting the preliminary pages, the 1839 printing of *Lady Nugent's Journal* contained approximately 192,000 words, Cundall's edition 130,000 (142,000 if the Indian sections are included), and Wright's edition 135,000 words. Cundall deleted almost one-third of the text. The impact of these excisions is, however, less dramatic if the Jamaican entries are regarded as the vital ones. Most of the 57,000 words missing from Wright's edition came from the period of Nugent's return to England but even for the time spent in Jamaica 18,000 words were omitted — roughly 14 percent of the total.

Wright's edition added 4,000 words to Cundall's 110,000 for the Jamaican period of the journal. Wright's claim that he had followed the editing of Cundall was broadly correct but as well as restoring entries omitted by Cundall some of the material included by Cundall was deleted. Most of these changes come in the second half of the journal, commencing in the middle of 1803. Wright restored sixteen whole days but deleted even more (eighteen); he also expanded ten of Cundall's entries but reduced twelve. The reasons for these counter-balancing changes, which overall added 4,000 words to the text, are not always apparent. Only one of Cundall's excisions, restored by Wright, had to do with gossip and scandal regarding the philandering of the aristocracy that offended Nugent.⁷

Nugent wrote in her journal almost every day while in Jamaica. She spent 47 months in the island but missed daily entries for only 26 days. Of these missed days all but four occurred in a single block at the time of the birth of her first child. On the voyage to Jamaica, Nugent missed sixteen days and her return to England ten; once back in England she resumed her regular daily pattern. Wright's edition of 1966, however, omitted the equivalent of a whole year (368 days) from her time in Jamaica. Wright's omissions were relatively few for the first eighteen months down to January 1803, never exceeding five days in any one month, but regularly exceeded ten from February 1804. His omissions peaked at 24 in January 1805 a month when Nugent had written in her journal every day.

To some extent, the omissions match the declining fullness of Nugent's writing. Her entries peaked in March 1802, when she had commenced her grand tour of the island, filling 46 pages in the 1839 edition; and reached their minimum in January and February 1805 at five pages for each of those months. Thus some of the entries omitted by Wright were brief and lacking in detail. On the other hand, the stark difference between 1803 and 1804 in the rate of deletions by Wright did not match the length of the entries; the year 1803 covered 147 pages in the 1839 edition, and 1804 occupied 133 pages. The text for both of these years was substantially less than the 234 pages devoted to 1802. Probably, the very high rate

of deletions for 1804 represented not only a lack of originality in the material but also editorial fatigue and the desire to get the final volume down to an affordable size.

As well as omitting entire days Wright (following Cundall) pruned words, phrases and sentences from the 1839 version of *Lady Nugent's Journal*. A large number of these excisions were indeed of the 'trivial' variety identified by Cundall and Wright, having to do with health, times of rising and retiring, things being 'as usual' and going for a drive, and these deletions were spread erratically but fairly broadly across the text. But Cundall and Wright also removed many references to religious activities — prayers, church attendance, reading the scriptures, and thanks to God for blessings received — and many references to the playing of games. Less consistent was the removal of the names of persons who visited or joined the family at table; these deletions became common only in 1804. For example, the 1839 version of the journal included the following entry for 2 February 1804: 'Mr. Duckworth off, at daylight, to fish. — General N. at 8, in Spanish Town. My morning alone. Duckworth brought home a shoal of fish of all sorts. Only Dr. Adolphus at dinner. All prosperous in the evening'. Cundall and Wright reduced this to: 'Mr. Duckworth off, at daylight, to fish. — Brought home a shoal of fish of all sorts'.

Overall, the excisions of Cundall and Wright left largely intact Nugent's descriptive observations and her broad generalisations about Jamaican society. Most of what the editors removed seems unlikely to have been preferred by the twentieth-century historians who used her commentary in constructing historical narratives and interpretive models. On the other hand, the excisions of Cundall and Wright certainly do make it more difficult to construct the pattern of Nugent's daily life, her preoccupation with the life of the healthy/unhealthy body, the life of the soul, the nurture of her children, the good nights and the bad. Insofar as these trivial events of daily life affected how other aspects of the life were lived, their editorial reduction impoverishes the possibilities of modern understanding. The nature of the trivial is itself subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. An appreciation of the richness of Nugent's text in its 1839 iteration opens up a whole new range of investigation that connects with recent interest in, inter alia, diurnal rhythms, the history of food and consumption, social networks, familial affection, church attendance and the saying of prayers. The ability to search the electronic version — to analyse vocabulary, to identify collocations and contexts, and quantify behaviour — makes this not only possible but easy and opens up prospects for comparison and content analysis.

For instance, it is striking that Nugent, like the slave-owners around her, referred to 'Negroes' much more often than she used 'slave'. The word 'slavery' appears just once in the whole journal, a week after her arrival in Jamaica, and serving as an explanation for 'the want of exertion in the blackies'. Nugent used 'Negro/es' 86 times, 'slave/s' 21 times, 'blacks' 4 times and 'blackies' 24 times, but 'poor blackies' just twice. Male slaveholders such as Thomas Thistlewood and

Simon Taylor similarly avoided 'slave' — let alone 'slavery' — and commonly employed 'Negro' as synonym for enslaved persons. These findings provide a context for analysis of Brereton's observation that Nugent had 'little to say about slavery as an institution, though a degree of sympathy for the slaves might be deduced from her constant use of the term "poor blackies" and (perhaps) from her kindness to the King's House domestics and her concern for their spiritual welfare'.⁸

Although born in colonial America, Nugent presented herself as thoroughly British and modern scholars have regarded her in this light.⁹ She offered no clear concept of a Creole America to which she might owe some allegiance. Nugent used the word 'creole' 22 times in her *Journal*, referring to people, things and attitudes, and adopted 'creolise', 'creolised' and 'creolising' (4 times in total), to identify afternoon leisure and idleness. Only one of these occurrences, cited above, refers to language or speech. The word 'America' appeared only three times in her journal (New Jersey never). The first two occurrences simply referred to people 'from America', but the third, from 1803, reported 'A second breakfast, Madame la Marquise de Piquieres and her daughter. The latter was brought up in America, and speaks sad English!' This is tantalising but the Marquise was among French prisoners of war and emigrés from St Domingue, so Nugent's offence at the speech of Mademoiselle Piquieres was probably a reaction to its polyglot character and in any case the meaning of 'America' is at least ambiguous. In view of her colonial New Jersey youth, it would be interesting to know exactly how Nugent sounded to Jamaican creoles and what she remembered of American speech, but Nugent rarely attempted to report remembered words and even the complete text of her journal seems unlikely to prove a rich source for interpretation of the colonial origins of American speech. As well as disparaging (Jamaican) creole voices, Nugent complained occasionally of the accents of Irish, Scots and Welsh churchmen.¹⁰

Nugent thought of herself as an oasis of dignity and decorum, in the midst of an island of degeneracy and indecency. She catechised and lectured those few to whom she had immediate access, tutoring them in private. In the public sphere she averted her gaze, hoping not to pass in her carriage by the heads of executed black men stuck on poles or through surprise visits to uncover the exotic household arrangements of notables. She told herself privately that she detested all of these things that underpinned Jamaican creole society but neither argued for the abolition of slavery or the slave trade nor developed a proslavery defence.

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NOTES

- ¹ See Arthur Ponsonby, *English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century with an Introduction on Diary Writing*, 328–31; Roger Abrahams & John Szwed, *After Africa: Extracts from British Travel Accounts and Journals of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries Concerning the Slaves, Their Manners, and Customs in the British West Indies*, 235; Elizabeth Bohls & Ian Duncan, *Travel Writing 1700–1830: An Anthology*, 325–33.
- ² See for example, on consumption, F.C. [Frank Cundall], ‘Institute of Jamaica: Notes on Some Recent Additions to the Library’; Winifred James, *The Mulberry Tree*, 127; Sir Alan Burns, *History of the British West Indies*, 512 n.6; Sylvia Wynter, ‘Lady Nugent’s Journal’, 26–27; Karina Williamson, ‘Introduction’, to *Marly: or, A Planter’s Life in Jamaica*, xxxi; and on creole speech: Brathwaite, *Creole Society*, 302; Wynter, ‘Lady Nugent’s Journal’, 28; Bohls and Duncan, *Travel Writing*, 331; 68; Patricia Mohammed, ‘Nuancing the Feminist Discourse in the Caribbean’, 157.
- ³ See also Christopher Heywood, ‘Yorkshire Slavery in *Wuthering Heights*’, and Sue Thomas, ‘Christianity and the State in Jane Eyre’.
- ⁴ See Rosemary Cargill Raza, ‘Nugent, Maria, Lady Nugent (1770/1-1834)’; Thomas Purvis, ‘Skinner, Cortlandt (1727–1799), politician and army officer in America’; Wallace Brown, *The King’s Friends: The Composition and Motives of the American Loyalist Claimants*, 118–20; North Callahan, *Flight from the Republic: The Tories of the American Revolution*, 46, 121; Catherine Crary, *The Price of Loyalty: Tory Writings from the Revolutionary Era, 114–16*, 362–63; Mary Beth Norton, *The British-Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England 1774–1789*, 37; Judith Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York*, 62; Peter Boyden, ‘Nugent [formerly Fennings], Sir George, first baronet (1757–1849), army officer’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- ⁵ Raza, ‘Nugent’; Maria, Lady Nugent, *A Journal from the Year 1811 till the Year 1815, including a Voyage to and Residence in India, with a Tour to the North-Western Parts of the British Possessions in that Country, under the Bengal Government*.
- ⁶ Susan Klepp & Roderick McDonald, ‘Inscribing Experience: An American Working Woman and an English Gentlewoman Encounter Jamaica’s Slave Society, 1801–1805’, 637, refer to the ‘1838’ edition; Mary Manning Carley, *Jamaica: The Old and the New*, 205; Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770–1820*, 350; Richard Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*, 35; Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713–1833*, 236; Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century*, 255; Henrice Altink, ‘Deviant and Dangerous: Pro-Slavery Representations of Jamaican Slave Women’s Sexuality, c. 1780–1834’, 271–88; Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760–1890*, 253; Sarah Yeh, ‘“A Sink of All Filthiness”: Gender, Family, and Identity in the British Atlantic, 1688–1763’, 81.
- ⁷ Nugent, *Journal*, 1839a, II: 278; Nugent, *Journal*, 1907, 326; Nugent, *Journal*, 1966, 257.
- ⁸ Nugent, *Journal*, 1839a, I: 30; Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*, 130–31; B.W. Higman, *Plantation Jamaica 1750–1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy*, 203; Brereton, ‘Text, Testimony and Gender’, 75.
- ⁹ Brereton, ‘Text, Testimony and Gender’, 64; Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The*

Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism, 145; Sean X. Goudie, *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic*, 97; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, 134–45; Brathwaite, *Creole Society*, 100–101; Jack Greene, 'Liberty, Slavery, and the Transformation of British Identity in the Eighteenth-Century West Indies', 27–28.

- ¹⁰ Nugent, Journal, 1839a, I: 104, 424, 471; Paul K. Longmore, "'Good English without Idiom or Tone": The Colonial Origins of American Speech', 513–2.

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