

# Trade and Nautical Tradition: The Rise and Fall of Rum

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**Abstract:** For an extended period, limited academics have focused on the depiction of rum culture within Treasure Island. Drawing upon the historical context of the Age of Navigation, this study identified Rum as a type of beverage of slave, originating from the colonial era. Furthermore, functioning as a symbol of nautical tradition, it fostered a connection between pirates and the Royal Navy, thereby promoting the maritime dominance of the British Empire.

**Keywords:** Rum; Trade; Nautical tradition

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## Introduction

Robert Louis Stevenson, a renowned Scottish novelist and travel writer from the 19th century, gained prominence due to his captivating novel, *Treasure Island*, which was published in 1883. This literary work was inspired by a map of an island, also named *Treasure Island*, which Stevenson co-created with his adopted son. At first glance, the novel's characters, engaging plot, and vivid battle scenes appear to emphasize its status as an adventure novel. Consequently, some scholars categorize it as children's literature. Beneath the guise of children's literature, however, lies the hidden truth of the British Empire's maritime dominance. This article delves into the origins and evolution of rum, examining its transformation from a "slaves' drink" to the currency of the sea, and its role in facilitating Britain's maritime dominance.

### 1. Rum as a part of colonial trade

In the era preceding the Great Age of Navigation, the primary alcoholic beverages consumed by Europeans were wine and whiskey. Rum, however, had not yet gained prevalence in the European continent. At the onset of the novel, Captain Bill Bones got accommodation at the Admiral Benbow and sang an ancient sailor's ballad: "Fifteen men for the dead man's chest, Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum". The narrative was set in the year 17xx, indicating that by the 18th century, rum had become a vital commodity for pirates.

Rum, has its roots in the Caribbean and the American colonies of the 17th century. Officially, the term "rum" is spelled as "Rum, " "Rhum, " or "Ron, " with the commonality of these spellings indicating its origin from a shared geographical region. In 1493, Columbus introduced sugarcane to the Caribbean, which thrived in the region's hot and humid climate. However, most syrups(molasses) were not purchased, even though they were significantly cheaper than raw sugar. The molasses, a byproduct of the sugar production process containing significant amounts of unrefined sugar and impurities, was often discarded or given to slaves and laborers. These workers discovered that after boiling, fermenting, refining, and distilling the syrup, it could be transformed into a dark, pungent wine, which was initially difficult to consume. Consequently, it was colloquially referred to as "kill devil". After their arduous daily works, slaves would frequently gather to drink this self-made spirit. At that time, a gallon of rum commanded a price of two shillings and sixpence, quickly becoming a popular commodity.

The settlement yielded rum, which later served as the currency of the sea in the triangular trade. In the 17th century, the English Civil War erupted, leading to a large number of royalists fleeing to Barbados in the Caribbean, where they engaged in overseas colonial activities. Initially, the colonists hired a substantial number of white indentured workers to establish tobacco plantations in the Caribbean. However, they soon realized that tobacco was subject to a much higher tariff compared to colonies like Virginia. Consequently, they turned to sugar as a substitute for tobacco. European colonists cultivated sugarcane in the Caribbean, the East Indies, Louisiana, Mauritius, and surrounding islands. White indentured workers alone were unable to meet the plantation's demands in terms of both quantity and energy, leading to the incorporation of African slaves as an alternative labor source. In 1660, the Royal Company of African Trading Explorers was established, with its primary business being slave trade. In 1721, the acting president of the company informed the directors that rum had become "the principal barter" and could be exchanged not only for slaves but even for gold. Rum has progressively emerged as one of the crucial goods of the triangular trade, whether it is rum traded to Africa in exchange for slaves, or to America and Europe for money, goods, rum remains a significantly popular commodity with distinctive characteristics.

## 2. Rum as a nautical tradition

In the 18th century, maritime trade reached its zenith, heralding the rise of rum. Rum became a custom among pirates, seamen, and navies for several reasons. Firstly, rum served as a medium for pirates' emotions and a salve for their spirits. Despite significant advancements in navigation, shipbuilding, and marine technology during this time, the journey between Europe and America often lasted for months. In those days, lengthy voyages were arduous, and seafarers experienced chronic melancholy. They desperately needed a "pressure relief valve." Due to its high alcoholic strength, rum acted as a psychotropic drug for pirates, helping them to numb themselves and momentarily forget the prolonged, challenging, and tedious life at sea. The pirates of Treasure Island, were frequently depicted as inebriated, as if they cannot live without rum. Stevenson introduced the character of Pirate Bill as tall, unkempt, rugged, and weather-beaten. The harsh realities of life at sea were vividly portrayed, with rum being the sole means of escaping these hardships. When Bill Bones sought accommodation at the Admiral Benbow, his requests were minimal: a daily dose of rum, a few slices of bread, and a few eggs. Pirate Bill was a man of few words, spending each night by the fireplace, indulging in his rum habit, which served as a reminder of life at sea. To pirates, rum was even more significant than life itself, and Bill's excessive drinking eventually led to his demise. Despite Dr. Livesey's warnings, upon his recovery, he requested Jim to fetch him a small glass of rum.

Secondly, due to its high alcoholic strength, rum possesses certain medicinal benefits. During the Age of Navigation, it was challenging to maintain fresh fruits and vegetables on long sea voyages. At that time, chronic vitamin deficiency resulting from "scurvy" had been a dreadful occurrence on ocean trips. In the process of rum production, the nutrients within sugarcane, such as vitamins, iron, potassium, and magnesium, are dissolved into the wine, thereby rendering rum a safeguard against "scurvy". The preservation of fresh water supplies on ocean voyages has always been a difficult issue, as they often foster bacterial growth and cause deterioration. After consuming contaminated water, sailors experienced issues like stomachaches, dysentery, and rum served as a bactericide. It was common to encounter unfavorable weather on ocean voyages, which posed challenges for sea navigation. Pirates or sailors seeking to rest peacefully would drink rum, which, due to its power, would numb their brains and allow for a sound sleep. What Bill said in Treasure Island proves this.

"...I been in places hot as pitch, and mates dropping round with Yellow Jack, and the blessed land a-heaving like the sea with earthquakes—what to the doctor know of lands like that?—and I lived on rum, I tell you. It's been meat and drink, and man and wife, to me; and if I'm not to have my rum now I'm a poor old hulk on a lee shore, my blood'll be on you, Jim, and that doctor swab".

Thirdly, rum emerged as a symbol of the spirit of adventure gradually, embodying courage and strength. The origin of rum is intertwined with the colonial system, and it is maritime trade that enables its global dissemination. Europe, long regarded as the cradle of maritime civilization, fosters the spirit of adventure as an essential spiritual quality for every sailor, pirate, and explorer. In the stimulation of alcohol, their courage and determination are amplified, further fueling the spirit of adventure. The adage "wine strengthens the courage of heroes" seems to suggest that heroes cannot do without wine. This is attributed to the fact that alcohol can stimulate the central nervous system, temporarily exciting people, and mitigating their fears, thereby generating the courage and resolve to confront situations that might otherwise be daunting. However, this courage is not genuine bravery but a transient state of mind induced by the effects of alcohol. Consequently, these sailors and pirates have a persistent demand for rum.

"Heard of him!" cried the squire. "Heard of him, you say! He was the bloodthirstiest buccaneer that sailed. Blackbeard was a child to Flint. The Spaniards were so prodigiously afraid of him that, I tell you, sir, I was sometimes proud he was an Englishman. I've seen his top-sails with these eyes, off Trinidad, and the cowardly son of a rum-puncheon that I sailed with put back—put back, sir, into Port of Spain."

Edward Teach (1680-1718), better known by his nickname Blackbeard, was infamous for his brutality, excessive alcohol consumption, and nefarious activities. Due to the considerable danger he posed to the Royal Navy, in 1718, Virginia Navy Governor Alexander Spotswood decreed the elimination of the Blackbeard Pirate Regiment. Consequently, two gunboats led by Captain Robert Maynard targeted Teach. Teach had been indulging in drink the night prior, and in the early hours of the following morning, a hand-to-hand combat ensued between Blackbeard and Maynard, resulting in Teach's decapitation.

In Treasure Island, one significant aspect that merits attention is the absence of the enforcers of law and order. If pirates symbolize disorder and chaos, the Royal Navy serves as the guardian of order. However, the novel scarcely offers any description of the Royal Navy, leading to the impression that it is virtually nonexistent. To comprehend this phenomenon, one must delve into the history of the royal pirates. Also known as privateers, these maritime adventurers were granted licenses to plunder by the government. The license was first introduced in 1354, with Sir Francis Drake serving as the first English privateer captain. Privateering played a crucial role in generating income for the British Crown. During the age of discovery, the maritime powers of Europe sailed the vast ocean, engaging in colonial trade and establishing their colonies on a global scale. The colonial blocs were not unified in their objectives, and in pursuit of their own interests, they did not hesitate

to wage war and seize maritime dominance. During this conflict, the privateer served as an uninhibited weapon, plundering merchant ships from other countries and significantly disrupting the maritime trade of competitors. The late 17th and early 18th centuries were recognized by historians as the "golden age" of piracy. The reason behind Britain's victory over the Spanish Armada in the naval battle of 1588 was due to the valiant and formidable pirates, who contributed to Britain's rise as the maritime hegemony. The British government pursued mercantilism, vigorously developing overseas trade and encouraging people to engage in maritime business. All this aligned the interests of the pirate community and the state, posing no threat to the latter and being exploitable for its benefit. Consequently, the actions of pirates were legitimized and supported by the state. As technology advanced and the economy developed, the Royal Navy became increasingly robust, lessening its dependence on pirates. This led to pirate infighting, resulting in their diminished status and increased societal scorn.

As a nautical tradition, rum significantly impacted the Royal Navy. Since England's capture of Jamaica from Spain in 1655, rum has been inextricably linked with the British Navy. In 1655, Vice Admiral William Penn initially allocated rum as a ration for the Navy. Due to its low cost, accessibility, and robust taste, rum was ultimately embraced by the majority of the British Navy. It swiftly gained such popularity that rum replaced beer as the rationed beverage on Royal Navy vessels. However, rum, being a potent liquor, also posed challenges for the Navy. In the mid-18th century, rum had to be diluted with water, sugar, and lime juice before being distributed to the navy staff. On December 7, 1969, the Admiralty terminated the practice of rum rationing, thereby ending rum's three-century-long reign in the military. As a nautical tradition, rum is regarded as a symbol of disorder, violence, madness and darkness. It is used to construct the image of pirates as alcohol-dependent, ruthless, murderous, sinister, and mercenary. On the other hand, rum serves as a medicine for the arduous sea journey and is acknowledged by the British Royal Navy as a means to maintain order at sea.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, the ascendancy of rum corresponded with the era of colonization, and its luster waned with the desolation brought about by colonialism. Serving as the currency at sea, rum was instrumental in uniting the Royal Navy, pirates, and colonial trade, thereby establishing a nautical tradition. With the decline of rum, the grandeur of the Empire began to fade. As the colonies gained independence, rum gradually got rid of its "colonial" stigma and assumed a new identity globally. In contemporary times, communication, cooperation, peace, and development have emerged as the prevailing trends in world affairs. While gazing towards the future, it is equally imperative to recognize and remember history.

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