ARTICLE

Drinking on the Job: Liquor and Labour in the Staples Trades

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Abstract: This article examines the role of alcohol, specifically rum, in labour relations in the early staples trades. In the 18th-century colonies that would later form Canada, labour was generally scarce and therefore expensive. Employers had to offer high wages as they struggled to recruit and retain workers, but because their enterprises were typically undercapitalized and vulnerable to market fluctuations, they could not afford to pay the salaries in full at the end of the contracted period. Focusing on the fishing servants of Newfoundland and the voyageurs of the North West Company, the article shows how wages were systematically clawed back through the workings of a version of "truck." Payment was deferred to the end of the season, and in the interim, employers would supply their men with goods at inflated prices, ensuring that many ended up indebted beyond the value of their nominal wages and had to sign on for a further term to pay off their debts. Rum was a crucial element in this system, its addictive qualities making it the ideal instrument for absorbing earnings. Many fishing masters and fur traders actively encouraged consumption; drinking on the job, then, was not only allowed but, in some cases, practically mandatory.

Keywords: staples thesis; fishery; fur trade; North West Company; labour; voyageurs; rum; history of alcohol; history of Canada

Résumé : Cet article examine le rôle de l'alcool, et plus particulièrement du rhum, dans les relations de travail dans les premiers commerces de matières premieres. Dans les colonies du 18e siècle qui allaient former le Canada, la main-d'œuvre était généralement rare et donc chère. Les employeurs devaient offrir des salaires élevés pour recruter et retenir leurs travailleurs, mais leurs entreprises étant généralement sous-capitalisées et vulnérables aux fluctuations du marché, ils ne pouvaient pas payer l'intégralité des salaires à la fin de la période contractuelle. En se concentrant sur les pêcheurs de Terre-Neuve et les voyageurs de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest, l'article montre comment les salaires étaient systématiquement récupérés par le biais d'une sorte de « troc ». Le paiement était reporté à la fin de la saison et, entre-temps, les employeurs fournissaient à leurs hommes des marchandises à des prix gonflés, ce qui faisait que beaucoup se retrouvaient endettés au-delà de leur salaire nominal et devaient s'engager pour une durée supplémentaire afin de rembourser leurs dettes. Le rhum était un élément crucial de ce système, son caractère addictif en faisant l'instrument idéal pour absorber les gains. De nombreux maîtres de pêche et commerçants de fourrures encourageaient activement la consommation; boire au travail était donc non seulement autorisé mais, dans certains cas, pratiquement obligatoire.

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Mots clefs : théorie des ressources principales; pêches; commerce de la fourrure; Compagnie du Nord-Ouest; travail et syndicalisme; voyageurs; rhum; histoire de l'alcool; histoire du Canada

Distilled alcohol played a major role in the first capitalist globalization. It was one of the "drugs" – habit-forming, mind-altering substances – that Europeans introduced across Africa, Asia, North America, and the Pacific islands. These included opium and tobacco as well as alcohol, and milder substances such as tea, coffee, and chocolate. In the early modern period, these and other goods helped to force open non-capitalist and often resistant societies and induce them to trade and keep trading their native products. The pleasant effects of these substances created a demand for more and more, and so artificially stimulated human desire served to propel commercial expansion. This was certainly the case in the North American fur trade, where liquor and tobacco were deployed to try to get Indigenous people to organize their hunting around the requirements of the market, but that case was not unique. According to William Jankowiak and Daniel Bradburd, "drugs were a common feature of European expansion because their characteristics made them a particularly effective means of propagating trade or increasing the extent and intensity of labor."[1]

The global liquor and drug trade of the time was important not only in fostering commercial exchange; as Jankowiak and Bradburd, along with others, have observed, it also entered into the realm of production. Even though alcohol, marijuana, and opium are thought of as depressants, they can actually stimulate activity in some situations. They also act as analgesics, suppressing pain, fatigue, and loneliness, which allows workers to press on and remain productive under adverse conditions. Workers valued these effects, but the real beneficiaries were their employers. Entrepreneurs had an additional motive for pushing alcohol specifically: like almost everyone in that period, they

1. William R. Jankowiak and Daniel Bradburd, "Introduction," in Jankowiak and Bradburd, eds., *Drugs, Labor, and Colonial Expansion* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 3. See also Rudi Matthee, "Exotic Substances: The Introduction and Global Spread of Tobacco, Coffee, Cocoa, Tea, and Distilled Liquor, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in Roy Porter and M. Teich, eds., *Drugs and Narcotics in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24–51; James H. Mills and Patricia Barton, eds., *Drugs and Empires: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication, c.1500–c.1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Gina Hames, "Colonizers and the Colonized: Alcohol in the Fifteenth through the Nineteenth Centuries," in *Alcohol in World History* (London: Routledge, 2012), chap. 4; Paul Nugent, "Modernity, Tradition, and Intoxication: Comparative Lessons from South Africa and West Africa," *Past & Present* 222, supplement 9 (2014): 126–145; David Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001); Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 82–83; Lila O'Leary Chambers, "Alcohol Diplomacy, Gender and Power in the Late Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast Slaving Complex," *Past & Present* 20 (2024): 48–83; Amitav Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023).

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believed (wrongly) that it was a health-giving tonic that warmed and fortified the body. It was considered particularly appropriate for outdoor work in cold or wet climates, which is why the British navy issued "grog" to all personnel venturing out on the high seas. In fact, soldiers and sailors of all European countries received liquor rations, and of course, once hooked, they often went on drunken binges in their off-duty hours.

In addition to their supposed health benefits, alcohol and other drugs recommended themselves to employers because of the way they could be used to recruit, retain, and manipulate workers. Today we associate liquor with the sphere of leisure, but that was not always where it was situated. We swallow down coffee to get us going before and during the workday, and we imbibe alcoholic beverages after quitting time, either in a bar or at home. In the early modern period, by way of contrast, not only was the boundary between work time and leisure time (and workplace and domestic space) less pronounced, but alcohol and other stimulants were frequently consumed on the job.[2] And typically, it was the employer who supplied the booze, docking workers' wages accordingly. Writes David Courtwright, "the utility of drugs in acquiring, pacifying, and fleecing workers proved to be their greatest advantage to elites."[3] This was the case in all-male work gangs, common in European construction, shipbuilding, and other industries; in early "Canada" (meaning the colonies that would later form the nation-state of Canada), it was a central feature of labour relations in the staple trades. Indeed, for reasons that will soon become apparent, it is unlikely that these extractive enterprises could ever have been viable without liquor to mediate relations between workers and employers.

This article focuses on two occupational groups during the long 18th century: Newfoundland fishing hands and North West Company voyageurs. It derives from a larger research project on rum in early Canadian history. While the larger project considers rum's relevance to other staple industries, including timber and agriculture, and separately considers the experience of Indigenous people with this liquor in their dealings with fur traders as well as with the state and the military, these topics will be placed to one side here in favour of a more thorough examination of the place of rum in the lives of fishermen and voyageurs.[4] The argument will be that rum, supplied by employers on credit and at inflated prices, served the purposes of exploitation, clawing back wages and keeping men tied to their jobs. Several labour historians have touched on alcohol and working-class drinking, but their focus is mainly on tavern life and on the rough and rowdy masculine culture of the 19th-century workingman. The implication is that, in defying bourgeois norms,

2. Something noted in Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003), 17–50. (The title of my article is borrowed from this work.)

3. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*, 135.

4. Allan Greer, *Canada in the Age of Rum* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming).

these drinkers were expressing a kind of incipient class consciousness.[5] The conditions of drinking were very different for the voyageurs, fishermen, and lumberjacks of the 18th and early 19th centuries, however. These workers had no access to taverns during their active seasons. When released from their labours, they might descend on urban bars for their annual blowout, to the great distress of respectable townsfolk, but at the trading post or the fishing camp, there was no polite society to shock. Instead, their superiors were happy to see them drinking away their wages.

Colonial goods – extracted, processed, and transported for commercial exchange by underpaid and frequently coerced workers – are what made the world of early modern capitalism go round. Unfortunately, the people involved and the conditions under which they laboured do not always receive the attention they deserve from historians of the first globalization, preoccupied as they tend to be with the circulation of products and the accumulation of capital. This tendency was quite pronounced in Canadian historiography, long dominated by the staples thesis. Through his monumental studies, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1929) and *The Cod Fisheries* (1938), Harold Innis long ago demonstrated that Canada's economic development was shaped by reliance on a series of industries that took products out of nature and exported them, in raw or semi-processed form, to European markets.[6] Cod came first, followed by fur and then timber and wheat; since Innis' time, petroleum has emerged as the pre-eminent Canadian staple export. His was an ambitiously broad interpretation of history, aiming to explain not only the country's economic development but also its political, diplomatic, and military history. The pursuit of fish, fur, and timber had the effect, Innis maintained, of extending the reach of empire from Europe across the ocean to the coasts of Canada and thence up its river systems and across the continent, bringing immigration, sovereignty, and "civilization" in their wake. This view of history involves economic determinism of a particular sort; Marx would have labelled it the "fetishism of commodities," for Innis tended to focus on the products rather than their producers, with the result that his readers learned little about the fishers, the fur trade voyageurs, and the Indigenous hunters and how their energies were harnessed into systems that benefitted others.[7]

5. Michael S. Cross, "The Shiners' War: Social Violence in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830s," *Canadian Historical Review* 54 (1973): 1–26; Peter DeLottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working-Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869–1889," *Labour/Le Travail* 8/9 (1981–82): 9–40; Heron, *Booze*.

6. Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1929); Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954). See also M. H. Watkins, "A Staple Theory of Economic Growth," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 29 (1963): 141–158; Mel Watkins, "The Staple Theory Revisited," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 12 (1977): 83–95.

7. David McNally, "Staple Theory as Commodity Fetishism: Marx, Innis and Canadian

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In more recent times, many scholars have helped to fill in Innis' blind spot by contributing to the labour history of the staple trades.[8] However, alcohol is rarely mentioned in this literature, in spite of what we know about the role of "drugs" in regulating work relations in colonial environments around the early modern world.[9] In colonial-era Canada, the problem of labour was particularly acute. Fur and fish were not as profitable as the sugar and tobacco staples, meaning that entrepreneurs could not afford to buy an enslaved labour force, and of course, it would not have been practical to keep people in bondage in the remote and isolated workplaces of these northern industries. The kind of coercive recruitment for gang labour that the Spanish imposed on the subject peoples of their American empire was also out of the question, since colonizers here lacked that sort of power over Indigenous people. Indentured servants from Europe filled the labour gap to some extent in the 17th century, but that institution had largely collapsed by the 1700s. Consequently, entrepreneurs in the staples trades had to hire from settler and immigrant populations in a nominally free labour market. Since that settler population was small, and because many of its members were self-employed farmers (except in Newfoundland), wages should have been high. And they were – at least in theory, as the remuneration listed when men signed on at the beginning of each season did look quite generous. However, because these enterprises were chronically undercapitalized, payment was always deferred until the end of the productive season. In the meantime, employers provided men with any supplies they wanted, notably alcohol, charging the inflated cost to their salary accounts.

In 18th-century Canada (except pre-conquest New France, where brandy reigned supreme), the drug of choice was rum. This by-product of the Caribbean sugar-slave plantation regime proved to be the secret weapon that allowed fur traders and fishing skippers to attach men to their enterprises without ever having to pay the salaries they promised. Colossal amounts of rum were imported from New England and the Caribbean, supplemented in

Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy* 6 (1981): 35–63.

8. Some examples include Glen Makahonuk, "Wage-Labour in the Northwest Fur Trade Economy, 1760–1849," *Saskatchewan History* 41 (1988): 1–17; Edith I. Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline, and Conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770–1879* (Toronto: Oxford University Press 1997); Carolyn Podruchny, "Unfair Masters and Rascally Servants? Labour Relations among Bourgeois, Clerks and Voyageurs in the Montréal Fur Trade, 1780–1821," *Labour/Le travail* 43 (1999): 43–70; Sean T. Cadigan, "Merchant Capital, the State, and Labour in a British Colony: Servant-Master Relations and Capital Accumulation in Newfoundland's Northeast-Coast Fishery, 1775–1799," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 2 (1991): 17–42.

9. Labour historian Craig Heron touches on the use of liquor in remunerating staples industry workers but says little about its role as an instrument of exploitation, while H. C. Pentland discusses the North West Company's use of "truck" to lower wage costs without ever mentioning the rum that was central to this system of payment-in-kind. Heron, *Booze*, 32–35; H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650–1860* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1981), 30–31.

the second half of the century by supplies from distilleries in Halifax, Québec, and Montréal. In Newfoundland, per capita consumption of rum alone in 1770 has been estimated at fifteen times the rate of all spirits combined in 2019 Canada.[10] "Rum is a spirit much used in America," wrote a British visitor in 1787, "particularly in those places that lie contiguous to, or are employed upon the fisheries. It was formerly manufactured to an immense extent in Boston, and other places, now under the dominion of the United States … and the rum thus made, though of a very bad quality, was mostly consumed by the fisheries, carried on from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Canada to the amount of 600,000 gallons annually."[11]

In earlier centuries, fishers who came annually to the waters of northeastern North America drank wine or brandy, using it to ward off the weather and to freshen the contents of a ship's water casks. The "intolerable Cold," one observer opined, "… would make it hard liveing with out Strong drink."[12] Rum began to appear here in the last third of the 17th century, when merchants in North America and the Caribbean began to get involved in supplying the Atlantic fisheries. Stimulated by export opportunities in Newfoundland, the New England distilling industry grew rapidly, producing cheap liquor in plentiful quantities. It flooded the fisheries market and, by the beginning of the 18th century, had established itself as the predominant form of alcohol. More was involved in the triumph of rum, however, than the simple substitution of one imported commodity for another; the advent of sugar-based liquor was closely associated with a major reorientation of the English Newfoundland cod fishery.

Up until then, the cod fishery had been an entirely European affair, with each ship carrying its own crew, together with the salt, tackle, and other supplies it needed on the outward voyage, returning with the salt cod it had produced during a summer camped out on North American shores.[13] Though

10. Greer, introduction to *Canada in the Age of Rum*.

11. S. Hollingsworth, *An Account of the Present State of Nova Scotia: With a Brief Account of Canada, and the British Islands on the Coast of North America* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1787), 144–145.

12. As quoted in Peter Pope, "Historical Archaeology and the Demand for Alcohol in 17th Century Newfoundland," *Acadiensis* 19 (1989): 90.

13. On the history of the North Atlantic cod fishery, see Ralph G. Lounsbury, *The British Fishery at Newfoundland, 1634–1763* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934); Innis, *Cod Fisheries*; Charles de la Morandière, *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique septentrionale*, 3 vols. (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962); R. Cole Harris, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada*, vol. 1: *From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), plates 21–28; Peter E. Pope, *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Laurier Turgeon, "Le temps des pêches lointaines: permanences et transformations," in Michel Mollat, ed., *Histoire des pêches maritimes en France* (Toulouse: Privat, 1987), 133–181; Peter Pope, "Transformations of the Maritime Cultural Landscape of Atlantic Canada by Migratory

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they visited the edge of a distant continent, these largely self-contained annual expeditions were entirely maritime, hardly different from fishing in other sectors of the ocean, such as the coasts of Saharan Africa and Iceland. Fishermen were recruited in the vicinity of port towns and remained firmly anchored to their respective local labour markets. They received their pay upon returning in the fall, either as a fractional share of the season's profits or as a salary set in advance on a scale of skill and experience. The remuneration in either case was modest, reflecting the low-wage economy of early modern Europe. This was the essence of the so-called migratory or "ship fishery," a Europe-based system that continued in some places from the early 16th century into the 20th century. The French were very attached to the ship fishery, partly because so many of their Atlantic ports depended on it economically and partly because the government valued its strategic value as a "nursery of seamen" that produced experienced mariners to be conscripted into naval service in times of war. The English state valued the migratory fishery for the same reasons the French did, and this led it at different times to discourage settlement in Newfoundland. Furthermore, it provided very little in the way of institutions of government. There was no colonial legislature until the 19th century and only "rudimentary" law courts, presided over mainly by officers of the Royal Navy squadron present during the summer months only.[14] The project of treating Newfoundland more as a fishing station than a real colony

European Fishermen, 1500–1800," in Louis Sicking and Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, eds., *Beyond the Catch: Fisheries of the North Atlantic, the North Sea and the Baltic, 900–1850* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 123–154; David J. Starkey, Jón Th. Thór, and Ingo Heidbrink, *A History of the North Atlantic Fisheries*, vol. 1, *From Early Times to the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Bremen: Verlag H. M. Hauschild, 2009); Starkey, "Fish and Fisheries in the Atlantic World," in D'Maris Coffman, Adrian Leonard, and William O'Reilly, eds., *The Atlantic World* (London: Routledge, 2015), 55–75; Jack Bouchard, "The Newfoundland Fisheries in an Early Atlantic World, 1400–1550," in Allan Greer, ed., *Before Canada: Northern North America in a Connected World* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024), 81–108.

14. G. D. Rothney, *Newfoundland: A History* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1973); Sean Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 45–71. On law and legal institutions, the fundamental work is Jerry Bannister, *The Rule of the Admirals: Law, Custom, and Naval Government in Newfoundland, 1699–1832* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Bannister (and Cadigan) are participants in a revisionist current in Newfoundland history in reaction to the exaggerations of an older historiography that had portrayed early modern Newfoundland as a lawless place, neglected by England and oppressed by the capricious tyranny of fishing admirals. Bannister emphasizes the efficacy of naval justice instituted under King William's Act of 1699. My characterization (quoting Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador*, 69) of Newfoundland's 18th-century institutions of law and administration as "rudimentary" must therefore be nuanced in light of Bannister's findings. Yet the fact remains that in the context of Britain's 18th-century empire, Newfoundland still stands out as exceptionally undeveloped where the institutions of governance are concerned. This was surely connected to the imperial centre's opposition to, or at least ambivalence about, settlement.

was only partially successful, and so more and more fishermen, together with a few women, made homes for themselves along its eastern shores.

Hence the gradual emergence of a "settler fishery" alongside the ship fishery. Independent resident fishers were known as "planters," and from the start, they had to operate as small-scale capitalist entrepreneurs, for the cod fishery could never be a solitary activity like farming. A viable operation required two boats, shore facilities, and a crew of five or six skilled men to catch the fish, clean them, and preserve them. The planter also needed supplies of food and drink for the crew as well as salt, nets, rigging, and so on, and in Newfoundland, where everything had to be imported, all of this required substantial expenditures at the opening of every season. Lacking capital, planters relied on credit, either from the captains of passing supply ships that would return to take payment in salt cod or from one of the local merchants who were beginning to establish themselves in St. John's and the larger outports. Chronically indebted planter-fishers found themselves at the mercy of suppliers who paid them whatever they liked for their catches. Their situation was highly precarious, and desperate planters were always looking for ways to cut costs, especially labour costs.[15]

Meanwhile, other small-scale fishing entrepreneurs were coming over in the ships from England as "bye-boat keepers."

> Besides the inhabitants [planters] and adventurers [masters in the ship fishery], there are other persons that not being willing or able to buy a share in the fishing ships hire servants in the West of England and carry them as passengers to Newfoundland where they employ them in private boats to catch and cure fish, and after the season is over bring them back to England, or permit them to take service with the planters or on board the ships.[16]

Bye-boat keepers brought along "servants" (i.e. waged workers) from England or Ireland, and some of these decided to remain in Newfoundland at the end of the season. Others were abandoned there by bye-boat keepers who had gone broke or who simply wished to save the cost of the passage home. Whether they stayed on voluntarily or against their will, these servants formed the island's original working class, a fisheries proletariat available for hire to bye-boat keepers and planters alike.

Yet there were never enough qualified fishermen to crew all the planters' boats, and since fishing is a seasonal occupation, there was a desperate rush every spring to sign up crewmen. Some used rum as a recruiting enticement, but in this New World setting, there was no getting around the need to offer top wages – far more generous than the remuneration accorded to recruits who

15. In addition to the works cited in note 13, see Gerald Sider, *Between History and Tomorrow: Making and Breaking Everyday Life in Rural Newfoundland* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003), 71–97.

16. "An Account of the Colony and fishery of Newfoundland and the present state therof with a Mapp of the whole Island," undated memo, Colonial Office (hereafter C.O.) 199, vol. 16, p. 29, National Archives (UK).

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signed on in England. Referring to nominal salaries rather than take-home pay, historian Peter Pope estimates that "crewmen might make in the order of £10 to £20 in a good six-month season, as opposed to something under £10 per annum at home." Getting, retaining, and paying a crew in such a labour market strained the very limited resources of fishing masters to the breaking point. The commander of the naval squadron, who in the 18th century filled the functions of a governor during the fishing season, made this observation in 1720:

> The scarcity of men very much enhances the wages insomuch that a boat's wages for five men during the fishing season will amount to seventy pounds, the charge of the boat, craft, salt and provisions for more; all which charge is to be paid out of the fish…. For several years last past, very few, if any of the inhabitants has taken so much fish as would alone pay men's wages and charges of the boats, allowing the provisions entirely cash.[17]

In other words, depending on the vagaries of the catch, it could be almost impossible to break even in this ostensibly high-wage economy, which raises the question of how the industry could be viable.

Enter rum. "The general wages allowed servants are from four to twenty-five pounds according to their skill in the fishery," noted the naval commander/governor in 1732. "They [planters and bye-boat keepers] supply their servants with what they desire which to[o] often is rum and strong liquors at exorbitant prices and for their remainder the[y] have bills payable in England." When planters acted as both employers and suppliers, they could offer relatively high nominal wages and then claw them back by selling goods to their men at inflated prices. The penniless fishermen had few options, since no one but an employer would advance them credit.[18] They had to turn to the latter for boots, food, and tobacco, but only so many of these goods would be needed in a given season, whereas the demand for alcoholic beverages was marvellously elastic – in some cases, virtually limitless. The more the men drank, the less their labour cost the planter. Rum also played a role in recruiting fishers and in retaining their services; many a servant found himself in debt at the end of the season and forced to stay on another year to work off what he owed. As early as 1700, captains of migrant fishery vessels were complaining of the disruption to their operations caused by rum-facilitated poaching of their crew members. They placed the blame squarely on interlopers from the New England colonies: "Considerable quantity's of rumm and molasses are brought hither from New-England, with which the fishers grow debauch't and run in debt, so that they are oblig'd to hire themselves to the planters, for payment thereof."[19]

Rum was central to the American campaign to secure a foothold in Newfoundland's lucrative cod fishery. One historian even suggests that the

17. Commodore Pevey, Heads of Enquiry, 13 October 1720, C.O. 194, vol. 7, p. 6v.

18. Governor Medley to Newcastle, 30 March 1740, C.O. 199, vol. 17, p. 116.

19. Capt. Stafford Fairbourne quoted in Pope, *Fish into Wine*, 404.

distilling industry got its start in New England as part of the effort to supply the fishery in the 17th century.[20] A British official sent out to investigate the fishery in 1701 heard objections from the merchants of St. John's and from captains in the migrant ship fishery about the way the Americans undermined established credit relations and disrupted the labour market, all the while diverting trade away from the mother country.

> The great complaint is against the New England men and some merchants of that country that for these seaven or eight yeares last past have resorted to the place during the fishing season. That they have their agents in most harbours in the land by means whereof they know what is brought to every place, and to drive an indirect trade and supply the Plantations with severall commodities which they ought to have directly from England. That their vessells generally make two or three trips in a yeare with bread, flower, porke, tobacco, molasses, suggar, lime juice and rum, that they sell their provisions some small matter cheaper to the Inhabitants but then they oblige them to take a quantity of rum. This rum the inhabitants sell to the fishermen which encourages them to stay behind and leave their familyes in England, which oftentimes become burthensome to their respective parishes to which they belong. That the Inhabitants sell rum to their servants who run in debt and are forced to hire themselves for payment thereof. One month's profuse living and a pair of shoes leaves them in bondage for a whole yeare, and tho as good fishermen as any in the land and may deserve fifteen or twenty pounds p. annum, they make them serve for seaven.[21]

Since rum manufactured in New England was a particularly profitable commodity, the traders foisted it upon planters and bye-boatmen, refusing them other needed supplies unless they purchased a hogshead or two of liquor.[22]

It seems clear that rum played an outsize role in the reorganization of the British Atlantic fishery around the turn of the 18th century. As the monopoly of a ship fishery, supplied and crewed every year in England, was broken, and as small-scale fishing enterprises took root on the island, new channels of supply opened up, much to the benefit of New England traders who knew how to use cheap rum as a competitive instrument. At the same time, the development of a planter fishery implied the emergence of a labour market in Newfoundland, and rum entered the employers' repertoire of strategies to recruit workers and suppress their wages.

Rum came to 18th-century Newfoundland from both New England and the British West Indies (much of the latter transported in American vessels), but until the American Revolution it was the low-cost North American liquor that predominated. For several decades, Newfoundland remained the number one export market for New England rum. Some 59,640 gallons (225,737 litres) of American rum, mostly shipped from Boston, arrived in 1731 and 128,000

20. Sean M. Kelley, *American Slavers: Merchants, Mariners, and the Transatlantic Commerce in Captives, 1644–1865* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 88.

21. Larkin to Board of Trade, St. John's, 20 August 1701, C.O. 194, vol. 2, p. 131.

22. Commodore Graydon's answer to the heads of enquiries, 13 March 1700/01, C.O. 194, vol. 2, p. 176–178; John Reeves, *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland* (London: J. Sewell, 1793), 37.

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gallons (484,480 litres) in 1763. Around 1770, the port of St. John's alone was receiving 125,000 gallons (473,125 litres).[23] By mid-century, the island had been overtaken by a new market, West Africa, where the merchant community of Newport, Rhode Island threw itself into a rum-fuelled assault on the slave trade. Even so, Newfoundland remained a large and growing outlet for New England's distilleries. In an average year between 1768 and 1772, the continental colonies sent 232,086 gallons (878,445 litres) of its own liquor to the island, in addition to 39,789 gallons (150,601 litres) of West Indian rum. United States independence largely ended this trade, but Newfoundland had become hooked on rum by that time, and so merchants turned to Caribbean suppliers, while American merchants and diplomats bewailed the loss of such an important outlet for their product. Indeed, the New England distilling industry went into decline about this time.[24]

Important though the Newfoundland rum trade may have been for New England, its impact on the island itself was much more significant. In the 18th century, Newfoundland had a small and disproportionately male population, which fluctuated with the seasons as the fishing ships and their crews came and went, making it difficult to calculate per capita consumption. Taking these conditions into account, my best estimate suggests that adults drank an average of 34.6 litres of rum in 1770.[25] Any way we look at the numbers, this fishing colony absorbed an enormous quantity of alcohol, almost all of it in the form of rum. Even in the context of the Atlantic World's "age of rum," these figures are off the charts. Why so much? Partly it had to do with the proportion of young, single men in its mobile population, and partly it reflected the belief that alcohol fortified the human body exposed to the cold and damp of the sea. Mostly, however, the explanation lies in the way rum became entrenched within the Newfoundland fishery's involuted economy of chronic debt and brutal employment relations.

Over the course of the 18th century, planters and bye-boat keepers were increasingly caught in the toils of what became known as the "truck system," an arrangement under which a merchant advanced them the salt, tackle, sails, and provisions needed at the beginning of each season and, in return, required

23. C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographer's Perspective* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 117–119; Innis, *Cod Fisheries*, 146.

24. Figures are from John J. McCusker, "The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Continental Colonies, 1650–1775," *Journal of Economic History* 30 (1970): 246. On post-revolutionary concerns about the Newfoundland rum market, see Stephen Higginson to John Jay, 8 August 1785, and John Adams to John Jay, London, 25 October 1785, in Gregg L. Lint, ed., *Papers of John Adams*, 21 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977–), vol. 17; Jordan B. Smith, "The Invention of Rum," PhD thesis, Georgetown University, 2018, 336–338.

25. For the data behind this estimate, see Greer, *Canada in the Age of Rum*.

masters to turn over all their salt cod in payment at the end of the season.[26] "It is in vain," wrote naval governor Molyneux Shuldham in 1772, "that he labours with unwearied assiduity to extricate himself from debt; it is impossible, his creditor charges whatever he pleases for his commodities, and endeavours to keep him as long as possible his debtor, without driving him to desperation."[27] Hopelessly indebted, these small-scale fishing entrepreneurs were forced to cut corners; paying their servants' salaries in full was out of the question.

And so, they engaged in the same sort of truck system as the merchants inflicted on them, acting as both supplier and employer to their crews. The fishermen might be promised as much as twenty pounds for the season, but "this agreement is most scandalously abused by these overbearing avaricious tyrants, their masters, taking advantage of the ignorance and necessities of these poor wretches, and supplying them with everything their art can persuade them to take, at the most exorbitant and extortionate prices." Rum was the most lucrative of these supplies, "bought at twenty pence a gallon, charged at six and eight shillings," which means a markup of 360 to 480 per cent.[28] Governor Shuldham summed up the plight of the servant-fisherman in these terms:

> The poor wretches whose lot it is to become servants to the inhabitants and merchants have no other employment during the fishing season than catching and curing of fish, and this, night and day, almost without recess; oppressed, beat and ill-treated as they are; stinted in their provisions as much as in their rest, it is no wonder if they become idle and careless in their duty, and watchful of every opportunity to deceive and counteract their tyrannical masters, nor that they should take out the greatest part of their wages in rum to debauch their senses that they may forget their slavery.[29]

Eighteenth-century writers loved to invoke the metaphor of "slavery," oblivious to the affront such language constituted to the situation of genuinely enslaved people toiling on plantations, but in this case the term is almost justified. Servants were worked very hard during the season, and they were subject

26. On the truck system, see Innis, *Cod Fisheries*; Rosemary E. Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Acadiensis Press, 1990); Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Cod Fishery, 1767–1886* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991); Pope, "Transformations of the Maritime Cultural Landscape." The overarching thrust of this specialized literature is to insist on the functionality of truck, its contribution to making the fishing economy work. Without calling into question the rigorous research underlying these publications, I simply note that the system was nevertheless exploitive.

27. "Governor Shuldham's remarks on the trade and fishery of Newfoundland in the years 1772 and 1773," C.O. 199, vol. 17, as quoted in John E. Crowley, "Empire versus Truck: The Official Interpretation of Debt and Labour in the Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland Fishery," *Canadian Historical Review* 70 (1989): 327.

28. "Governor Shuldham's remarks," 72.

29. Quoted in Crowley, "Empire versus Truck," 328.

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to a quasi-naval discipline featuring flogging as the favoured sanction for negligence or disobedience.[30]

To make matters worse, fishers had great difficulty escaping. Many indebted fishing hands were forced to stay on for another season, as mentioned earlier, but other servants found themselves left behind over a Newfoundland winter as well. For some, the planter who employed them finally went broke, while others were abandoned by an unscrupulous bye-boat keeper to save the cost of their return passage to England. "Destitute of master as well as provisions for the winter, in travelling from one Harbour to another in search of Employment, they have been known to Perish in the Woods by cold and Famine," Shuldman reported.[31] Seasonal unemployment, Newfoundland's age-old curse, appeared in the 18th century in an extreme, and occasionally deadly, form. Fishermen whom employers had competed for with offers of high salaries at the beginning of the summer were later fleeced of their wages and then shunned and abandoned in the off-season. And of course, there was no exit from the island once the shipping season ended. When the scientist Joseph Banks visited Newfoundland in 1766, he expressed his hope that the governor, Hugh Palliser, would "probably in a very short time put an end to the tricks by which the People are Kept here such as paying in bills which they discount greatly or they are not changd at all and masters supplying their servants with liquor."[32] A parliamentary act in 1775, known in Newfoundland as "Palliser's Act," did introduce reforms, forbidding masters to advance more than half a fisherman's wages in supplies and giving crewmen a lien on a planter's catch to secure their salaries.[33] Though not perfectly enforced, this legislation did provide some relief from gouging and wage theft.

A prolonged transition from a predominantly England-based seasonal ship fishery to a Newfoundland-based fishery operated on a small scale by planters and bye-boat keepers began to transform the English Newfoundland fishery in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Changes occurred at several levels, especially where employment relations are concerned. In the traditional ship fishery (which continued to expand through most of the 18th century, though not as fast as the shore-based fishery), crews were recruited in the

30. Jerry Bannister, "Law and Labor in Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland," in Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, eds., *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 153–174; Sider, *Between History and Tomorrow*, 125–127.

31. "Governor Shuldham's remarks," 74.

32. Joseph Banks, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766: His Diary, Manuscripts and Collections*, ed. A. M. Lysaght (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 151.

33. "Palliser's Act, 1775," Silk Robes and Sou'westers: History of the Law and the Courts, n.d., accessed 13 July 2025, section 14, https://www.heritage.nf.ca/lawfoundation/articles/doc4_1775palliser.html; Crowley, "Empire versus Truck," 330–331; Cadigan, "Merchant Capital, the State, and Labour."

well-established labour markets of southwest England and southeast Ireland. They went home at the end of the summer to their homes and families, and when the salt cod had been sold, they received a share of the profits, which helped them make ends meet. Hiring workers in Newfoundland was a very different matter. The island's climate and topography, unsuitable for agriculture, provided hardly any options for supporting oneself outside the cod fishery. Fishermen recently arrived from Britain as passengers or as crewmen poached from the ship fishery were the main source of labour, and at the beginning of the season there was a strong demand for their services. A chaotic and exploitive version of a free labour market emerged, one that combined high nominal wages with ruthless clawbacks. Planters and bye-boat keepers offered attractive salaries when they competed every spring for the limited supply of qualified fishermen, but at the end of the season they could not afford to pay what had been promised. Payment in kind ("truck"), on credit and at inflated prices, provided the solution to the problem of securing workers in this high-wage, undercapitalized industry, and rum proved to be a crucial element in the equation because of its unrivalled ability to create and expand its own demand.

Restricted by the terms of the Peace of Utrecht (1713) to seasonal access to a portion of Newfoundland's coast, the French maintained a thriving ship fishery without having to indulge in the exploitive practices characteristic of the British fishery. However, a French settler fishery did develop after Utrecht in the new colony of Île Royale (Cape Breton Island) on the other side of Cabot Strait. At the capital, Louisbourg, and at various other villages that grew up along the island's coast, a version of the planter/bye-boat keeper fishery took root, and as in English Newfoundland, the colonial fishing masters of Île Royale used rum as a central part of their personnel management strategy. Acting as employer, supplier, and creditor to their respective crews, they plied the men with alcohol to keep them impoverished and indebted. In this endeavour, they were aided by an elaborate colonial state apparatus, something that was missing in 18th-century Newfoundland. Shortly after the founding of Louisbourg, the colony's main court issued an order specifying that "only master fishers may sell liquor to their crews," a regulation that was repeated at regular intervals. The 1734 version of this rule states, "Similarly, no one may at any time provide drink to sailors and fishing crewmen in the service of colonists [*habitants*]; every colonist/master should in this case give his fishermen whatever they need." Even if these orders were not always enforced – and the fact that they were reiterated at intervals suggests that was the case – they do signal the colonial government's commitment to a system of truck that made fishermen fully dependent on their masters. Rum was as crucial to this exploitive regime as it was in British Newfoundland.[34]

34. Gilles Proulx, *Aubergistes et cabaretiers de Louisbourg, 1713–1758* (Ottawa: Parcs Canada, 1972), 35, 75.

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A similar system developed in the Canadian fur trade, particularly in the post-conquest trade operated by the North West Company (NWC), its predecessors, and its rivals. For a time, the NWC ran its own distillery, and it also imported boatloads of West Indian rum. From the start, it was reliant on rum, both to induce Indigenous hunters to participate in the fur trade and to manage its own workforce consisting of over a thousand French-Canadian voyageurs. The company also purveyed a rot-gut rum variant known as "high wines." Double-distilled and unaged, this molasses-based liquor was rough-edged and potent; as concentrated alcohol, it could be transported efficiently and then watered down for Indigenous customers. An amazing number of kegs and barrels moved along the NWC's extended supply lines, its birchbark canoes carrying an average of 266,336 litres of rum and high wines per year between 1781 and 1790.[35]

Voyageurs were allowed, indeed encouraged, to dip into the liquor supply, especially during the long winter stay at inland trading posts. Like the Indigenous people who frequented the posts, NWC personnel often became drunk and rowdy. The voyageurs fought among themselves, they fought with the men of the rival XY Company, and some of them abused their Indigenous spouses mercilessly. The journals of Alexander Henry the Younger, a trader and eventually a partner in the firm, recount innumerable incidents of drunken violence. For New Year's Day 1802, Henry bestowed the customary keg of high wines on his crew at a post on the Red River; he then complained that they all became roaring drunk and "more troublesome than double their number of Saulteaux."[36] Holidays were an occasion for celebrations and brawling, and so too was the annual "settling of accounts." Henry's journal entry for 6 May 1804 describes such an event: "Engaged my men, settled their accounts, and gave them a treat of High wines &c. They were soon merry, then quarrelled and fought. I saw five battles at the same moment in the Fort, and soon after nothing was to be seen, but bloody noses, Bruised faces, Black Eyes, and torn Jackets and Shirts."[37] Since NWC bourgeois like Alexander Henry distributed

35. On the NWC distillery and the quantities of rum shipped to the northwest, see Greer, *Canada in the Age of Rum*. Other historians have noted the prevalence of drinking in the NWC trade. The most thorough and thoughtful treatment of the subject appears in Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 181–184. Podruchny emphasizes the bourgeois' concern to limit alcohol consumption to particular times and locations. I do not disagree with her contention that bosses tried to contain the destructive effects of drunkenness; they had a delicate line to walk as they tried to get their men to buy enough rum to nullify their wages while preventing the worst effects of inebriation. However, my emphasis is on the primary drive to encourage consumption rather than on the secondary impulse to limit the resulting damage.

36. Alexander Henry, *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799–1814*, 2 vols., ed. Barry M. Gough (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1988), 1:125, 1:140, 1:151, 2:424; on spousal abuse, see 1:165.

37. Henry, *Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger*, 1:159; see also 1:137, 140, 142, 146. In

rum to their men with such a free hand – for the *régales* that marked a brigade's departure, for holidays such as Christmas and New Year's Eve, to reward extra work, as a commodity for sale, and, in this case, as an inducement to extend their terms of service – he should not have been surprised by the drunken escapades that ensued.

Henry's journal alludes occasionally to the annual settling of employee accounts but provides few details. We know that voyageurs were normally recruited in Lower Canada with notarized *engagements* (employment contracts) that specified an annual salary, payable at the end of the period of service. Men hired for the summer run from Lachine to Grand Portage or Fort William earned 300 to 360 *livres* (NWC accounts used French currency for this purpose, the livre pegged at one shilling Halifax currency),[38] while "northmen" who worked beyond Lake Superior normally signed on for three-year terms at annual salaries ranging from 350 to 500 livres for a *milieu* (ordinary voyageur) to 800 livres for a *gouvernail* (steersman) and 1,000 or more for a guide. With over a thousand northmen in the northwest and another 350 "pork eaters" plying the Ottawa River supply route, the company faced a staggering wage bill. Keeping the enterprise profitable required it to ensure that it never paid the full amount. The aristocratic French traveller La Rochefoucauld Liancourt discerned the secret of the North West Company's success during a brief visit to Grand Portage in 1791: "As the employees are paid in merchandise, it is apparent from the prodigious profit that the company makes on their sale, how little salaries cost it.... These employees are generally libertine, drunk and spendthrift; and the company wants none but that type." He claimed that voyageurs who refused liquor were given all the hardest tasks until they were literally driven to drink.[39] The planters and bye-boat keepers of the Newfoundland cod fishery faced a similar challenge to make their operations viable in a high-nominal-wage colonial setting, and their solution had been much the same. The fishing masters also had to deal with the related problem of how to recruit and retain their labour force even as they undercut workers' incomes. Similarly, the NWC made great efforts to keep experienced *hommes du nord* on the job while reinforcing their ranks with new men recruited from among the pork eaters who arrived every summer at Grand Portage. Recruitment, retention, and underpayment were all closely connected, which is why Alexander

addition, see Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum Press, 2016), 257–259; Duncan M'Gillivray, *The Journal of Duncan M'Gillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794–5*, ed. Arthur S. Morton (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), 48. On labour relations in the Northwest trade generally, see Podruchny, "Unfair Masters and Rascally Servants?"

38. Lawrence Ermatinger engagement book, MG19, A2, series 1, vol. 2, Library and Archives Canada.

39. François-Alexandre-Frédéric de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Voyage dans les États-Unis d'Amérique, fait en 1795, 1796 et 1797*, vol. 2 (Paris: Du Pont, Buisson, Pougens, 1798), 225–26; my translation.

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Henry refers to "engaging" his men and "settling their accounts" as though it were a single process. Need I add that in the fur trade as in the cod fishery, rum featured prominently in personnel and payroll strategies?

Surviving account books tend to record all such supplies as "sundries," and so we cannot be precise about the contribution of alcohol to employee charges, but reports suggest that it was a large and elastic proportion of the whole. George Nelson, a clerk with the rival XY Company, was one fur trade bourgeois who expressed moral qualms about this practice. He recounts a conversation at the beginning of his career with his boss, the famous trader and explorer Sir Alexander Mackenzie:

> When he took the opportunity of telling me that whatever men were to come with me that I should not mind giving them what things they might ask for, as it was for his interest that they should take up their wages & even more in Goods liquor, tobacco or any other such articles as we had on board our Canoes. I was sensible that this mode of dealing was for his interest, but I thought at the same time that I seen something that was not quite honest in this manner of dealing …; for thought I what is there more unnatural, than to try to get the wages [of] a poor man for a few quarts of rum, some flour & sugar, a few half fathoms of tobacco, & but very little Goods who comes to pass a few of his best years in this rascally & unnatural Country to try to get a little money so as to settle himself happily among the rest of his friends & relations; particularly as we come upon the same errand ourselves.[40]

Many experienced traders, far from being troubled by such scruples, boasted openly about their tactics for increasing rum consumption, even if it put their men out of commission for days at a time. Ferdinand Wenzel, at a remote post on the Mackenzie River, recorded the following on 7 June 1806, in the midst of "engagement" season: "Grand River full of Ice - Gave as a right to the men 1 Quart of rum - hoping to make them Buy a little - which did not fail - 2 Quarts was taken upon their respective Accounts." His colleague George Keith, on the Liard River, reported on Christmas Day, 1806, "I gave a little Flour & a dram to the Men adding 1½ pints of private property, in expectation of bringing about another drinking Match." On another occasion, Keith proudly noted that in the course of a drinking match he had encouraged, his men "expended 2½ Quarts Rum besides 1½ Pints for Engagements." Gifts of free liquor, it seems clear, intentionally primed the pump for drunken sprees that would cost the voyageurs dearly and would ultimately force them to sign on for another three-year term.[41]

40. George Nelson, *My First Years in the Fur Trade: The Journals of 1802–1804*, ed. Laura L. Peers and Theresa M. Schenck (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 97–98.

41. "W. F. Wentzel's Journals and 'Account of Mackenzies River,' 1805–21," in Lloyd Keith, ed., *North of Athabasca: Slave Lake and Mackenzie River Documents of the North West Company, 1800–1821* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 298; "George Keith's Journals of 1805–6 and 1806–7," in Keith, ed., *North of Athabasca*, 279–280. See also Henry, *Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger*, 2:473; Alexander McKenzie, "Journal of Great Bear Lake, 1805–1806," MFTP 0006, p. 31, McGill University Archives.

Were these strategies effective in reducing the real cost of labour? Three surviving employee account books provide us with some hard data on voyageur earnings and debts. The earliest of these accounts covered what was called the "English River District" (meaning the Athabasca region, together with the Churchill River of northern Saskatchewan) in 1787.[42] The other two were compiled in 1805 when the XY Company concluded operations and remerged with the North West Company; both parties took the occasion to update the accounts of their employees in the northwest and record them in a single register.[43] Table 1, compiled from these sources, shows quite clearly that a substantial majority of the men were in debt to the company. (Note that all these data concern "northmen" only; pork eaters employed on the summer run from Montréal were more likely to return with money in their pockets.)[44] The incidence of debt among ordinary voyageurs was actually higher than the table suggests because it includes clerks and apprentices ("bourgeois" in the language of the fur trade), who were better paid and far less likely to fall into debt than the rank-and-file canoemen; in the 1805 NWC ledger, 76 per cent of voyageurs were indebted, but only 37 per cent of clerks, interpreters, and guides. Moreover, voyageurs who did manage to maintain a positive balance had quite modest ones, usually a small fraction of their annual salaries, whereas many bourgeois boasted substantial credits.

The 1787 accounts for the English River District provide more information than the later documents, though none of them indicates precisely how much debt was attributable to alcohol. Charges for some items – clothing, hardware, tobacco, but never rum – are specified, but the great bulk of charges are vaguely labelled "sundries." That category obviously included liquor; the term "sundries" may indeed have functioned as a euphemism for alcohol. Consider the entry for Pierre Duval, a "*devant*" (bowman) and therefore a skilled and experienced voyageur, whose salary was recorded as 800 livres per year. On the other side of the ledger, Duval was charged for debts totalling 1,511 livres; of these, the only specific charges were for two fathoms of tobacco (tobacco

42. "North West Company English River District Journal and Account Book, 1785–1787," Hudson's Bay Company Archives, accessed through A. Matthew Global Commodities online collection, https://www.globalcommodities.amdigital.co.uk/. This document is transcribed in Harry W. Duckworth, ed., *The English River Book: The North West Company Journal and Account Book of 1786* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 22–115.

43. "North West Company. Men's Names at the Athabasca River Department [*sic*], 1805," MFTP 0031, McGill University Archives; "Lists of Men in the Upper Posts, Giving Their Wages and Salaries," Grand Portage, 1805, P0058/G1, 088, Baby Collection, Université de Montréal. As far as I can tell, these two documents, together with the one listed in the previous note, are the only comprehensive employee accounts that the North West Company has left us.

44. Allan Greer, "Fur Trade Labour and Lower Canadian Agrarian Structures," *Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers* 16 (1981): 197–214; Mark Humphries, "Working the Short-Haul Fur Trade: Voyageurs and the Family Economy at St-Benoît, 1796–1821," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 54 (2021): 17–41.

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Table 1. Debts of North West Company Employees Wintering in the Northwest, 1787, 1805

	NWC, English River, 1787	NWC, 1805	XY Co., 1805
Total employee entries	97	804	227
Employees whose debts/ credits are recorded	92	677	227
In debt to the company	61	559	186
proportion of entries with full data	66%	83%	82%
Positive balance with the company	25	118	41
proportion of entries with full data	26%	17%	18%
Debt=credit: balance of zero	6 (7%)	0	0

Sources: "North West Company English River District Journal and Account Book, 1785–1787," Hudson's Bay Company Archives; "North West Company. Men's Names at the Athabasca River Department [*sic*; the ledger seems to cover the entire northwest, not just the Athabasca], 1805," McGill University Archives; "Lists of Men in the Upper Posts, Giving Their Wages and Salaries," Grand Portage, 1805, Université de Montréal.

came in long, coiled cords) and a large knife – the rest of his debt fell under the heading of "sundries." Duval had been re-engaged by bourgeois Peter Pond in the Athabasca country, and 300 livres of his debt had been forgiven as a signing bonus, though he was still indebted even after that break. He was among ten voyageurs whose debt exceeded their annual wages. Six other men had balances of exactly zero, suggesting that they had been rewarded for re-enlisting by having their debts wiped clean.

The 1805 accounts of the XY Company list 227 employees, 82 per cent of them charged for debts that exceeded, mostly by a wide margin, the wages promised in their contracts. Only 41 men boasted a positive balance, though in most cases it still only accounted for a small fraction of their nominal salaries; only a handful of bourgeois clerks and apprentices were entitled to substantial payments. In aggregate, the men of the XY Company owed the enterprise 93,578 livres, whereas the company owed them only 9,135 livres, with four clerks and apprentices claiming more than a third of that amount. The company's payroll charges, like those of the NWC, were close to zero at the

time of settling accounts. We know that some of the voyageurs' debts were for cash advances received when they first signed on in Lower Canada and, in a few cases, for funds transmitted to their families back home. However, these remittances were rare and meagre; only two are recorded in the English River accounts, one for 47 livres "paid his mother" and one of 28 livres "to his wife."[45] And of course, the fur trade enterprises bore the cost of food and of all the free "drams" they gave out. Nevertheless, it remains true that most voyageurs ended up with nothing or less than nothing to show for their efforts at the end of three years of dawn-to-dusk toil at the risk of life and limb. Many re-engaged for additional two- or three-year terms, either because they loved life in the west and had married Indigenous women or because they had no other choice. Voyageurs who managed to avoid going into the red and who wished to resign were labelled "free," a term that does seem to imply that the others were anything but.

Everything changed in the fur trade after 1821 when the NWC was absorbed into the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). As a cost-cutting measure made possible by the end of competition, liquor supplies to voyageurs and Indigenous hunters were severely curtailed. The amalgamated company began employing Métis and First Nations workers in its transport system, as well as recruits from Britain, reducing the demand for voyageurs from French-speaking Lower Canada. No longer under the same pressures around recruiting and retaining workers that the NWC had felt, the new HBC could dispense with the technique of offering high wages and then clawing them back through rum supplies; instead, it could depend on the discipline of a labour market now tilted in the employer's favour to moderate personnel costs.[46] The company's motives were mainly economic, but this move was also partly inspired by the influence of a nascent temperance movement.

Drinking on the job also declined in the Atlantic fishery around this time. Palliser's Act of 1775 marked the beginning of the end for the master-servant organization of cod fishing, while the Napoleonic Wars and the disturbance they brought to transatlantic shipping put the nail in the coffin of the seasonal ship fishery. From the early 19th century, a family-based fishery prevailed in Newfoundland and the Maritimes. Henceforth, the ties of kin and neighbourhood would structure crews; consequently, there was no need for rum to recruit

45. On the practice of remitting money to family in Lower Canada, see Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 39–40; Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal, on the River St. Laurence, through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans, in the Years 1789 and 1793* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1802), xlv.

46. On HBC governor George Simpson and his new regime of economic rationality and abstinence, see Innis, *Fur Trade in Canada*, 306–307; Arthur J. Ray, *I Have Lived Here Since the World Began: An Illustrated History of Canada's Native People* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1996), 161–165; George Colpitts, "Accounting for Environmental Degradation in Hudson's Bay Company Fur Trade Journals and Account Books," *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 19 (2006): 1–32.

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and retain hands. Nor did skippers feel obliged to gouge on wages, for under the new system all shared in the proceeds of the catch. This transformation did not end exploitation; rather, it shifted its location from the employment relationship of master and servant to the commercial relationship between fishers and merchants. The "truck system" of monopoly supply and debt continued, but now the local merchant was the beneficiary, and he had little direct interest in the recruitment of fishing crews. Instead, a well-established resident population spontaneously organized itself into self-managed production units. Merchants might derive a profit from selling liquor, but it was not an economic necessity, and indeed, many probably preferred sober fisherfolk as customers and suppliers. Rum drinking did not disappear (to this day, rum remains much more popular in the Atlantic region than in other parts of Canada), but it lost its central role in managing the world of work, and that change opened up opportunities for the temperance movement in its campaign to curtail drinking.[47]

Temperance swept across the British Empire and the United States in the first half of the 19th century as part of a broad effort to reform society and suppress vice.[48] This kind of "reform" was closely associated with a new stage of capitalism, one that looked to the factory as the model of labour relations. Emergent industrialization called for a clear division between work and leisure, with steady exertion and regular hours required on the job, together with responsible self-management at home. Workers in the fishery, the fur trade, and the timber industry had been expected to withstand danger, discomfort, and periodically intense labour interspersed with long periods of downtime and drinking. Employers counted on their men's macho bravado to get the job done and on their taste for alcohol-fuelled recreation to keep them underpaid and compliant. But increasingly in the 19th century, a different kind of work regime was required. Self-control and sobriety came to be prized more than heroic efforts punctuated by drunken brawls. Capitalist transformation and religious idealism joined forces in an attempt to mould a different kind of worker, sober and regular in every respect.

Of course, drinking on the job still occurs, especially in resource extraction settings – something that is more common in Canada than in most other countries. Employers are hardly to blame, however. For reasons of safety and efficiency, they prefer personnel unaffected by drugs and liquor, though that is not necessarily what they get. Work camps in the mining, forestry, and

47. Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, 217–242; Sider, *Between History and Tomorrow*; Sean T. Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785–1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). The transition to a family fishery occurred at an uneven pace across Newfoundland, as Patricia Thornton points out in "The Transition from the Migratory to the Resident Fishery in the Strait of Belle-Isle," in Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies*, 138–166.

48. Janet Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

petroleum sectors tend to be populated with a young, male, and highly mobile workforce that is susceptible to the lure of intoxicants. Though well paid, workers in these industries tend to live in isolated locations where boredom and depression are rife, making the promise of mental oblivion hard for many to resist.[49] Employers would like to see drugs and alcohol eliminated from the workplace and safely confined to times and places dedicated to leisure. Rum no longer functions as an instrument of personnel management, as it certainly did in the 18th-century fur trade and cod fishery.

49. "The Oilpatch Offers a Big Pay Out, but for Workers Who Struggle with Addiction, It Can Come with a Cost," *Toronto Star*, 21 April 2019.

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