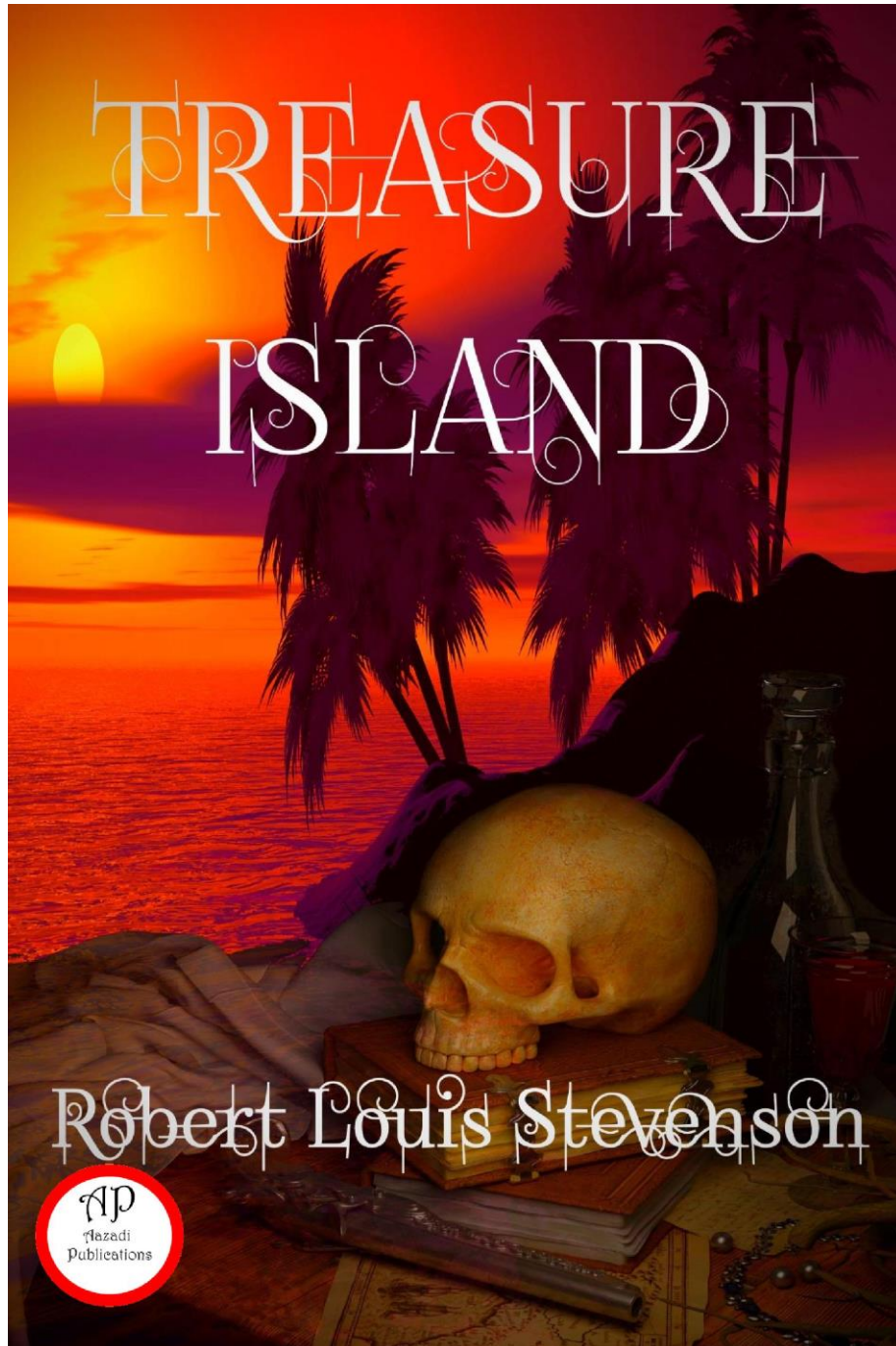


Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island



An Essay by Garry Victor Hill

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Plate 1 Public Domain

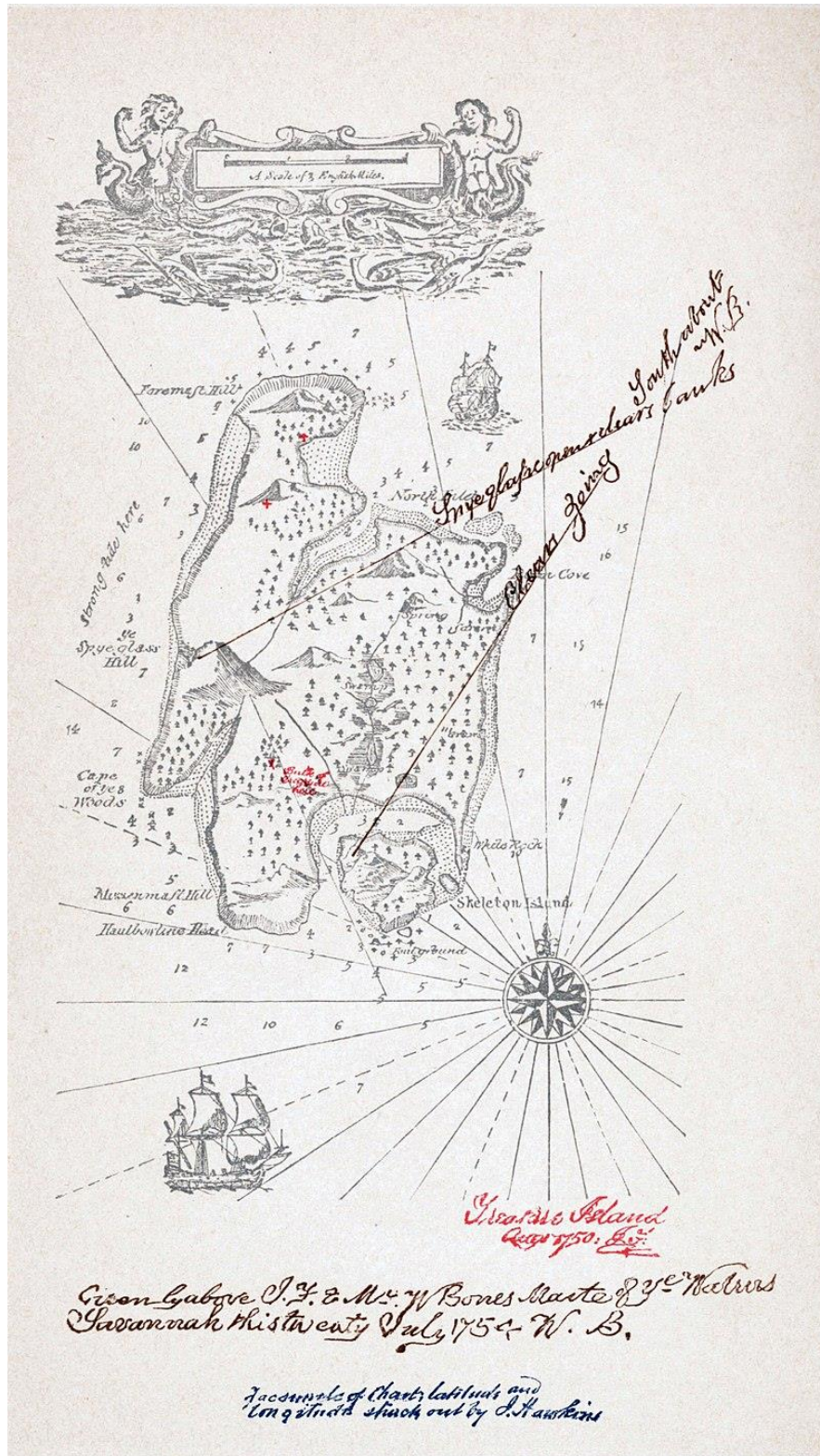


Plate 2. This was the original *Treasure Island* map drawn by Robert Louis Stevenson for the 1883 edition, which was the first publication of the story in book form.

Essay

What a masterly storyteller Robert Louis Stevenson was! With so many things he wrote, just start reading his first few sentences and then try to put the story down. He had two problems; one was his weak health. This led to his death at barely forty-four, when most consider him to be at the height of his literary powers as shown by his two unfinished novels, *Saint Ives* and *The Weir of Hermiston*. The second problem was his greatest success early in his career with *Treasure Island*.

Initially serialized in 1881/1882 it proved so popular that it was republished in book form in 1883 and has never gone out of print since. *Treasure Island* has become more of a major industry than a single book. Bowdlerized, heavily illustrated children's versions and film adaptations which omit subtleties in the original text abound. Derived novels have been done by others decades after Stevenson died. Television series, assorted and continual comic book retellings, several stage plays, musical versions for stage and television, computer games and board games continue to fill a need. This novel also inspired American artists Howard Pyle, Louis Rhead and N.C. Wyeth to paint some of their most remarkable pictures. In 1885 Rider Haggard wrote his first great success *King Solomons' Mines* to win a bet with his brother that he could write a novel as good as *Treasure Island*.¹ This huge success for Stevenson overshadowed and still overshadows everything else he wrote and condemned everything he did write after it to be considered the output of a writer who was at his best when writing for boys. This is to an extent his fault as he first published it in a children's magazine named *Young Folks* and once described it as a book for boys.² His other popular works for children in poetry reinforces the impression.

¹ Lillias Rider Haggard, *The Cloak that I left: A Biography of the Author Henry Rider Haggard* K.B.E. London; 1950. pp. 121-122.

² 'Treasure Island.' Wikipedia. Accessed 6th June 2020. Stevenson is quoted.

The general public perceive him this way and so do many critics. Not even *The Strange Case Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1886) which also rapidly became a phenomenally popular upon publication, extremely influential and was an adult's book if ever there was one, could change that widespread perception. The same could be said about several other works by Stevenson. *The Master of Ballantyre* (1889) reverses the usual pattern of children's books. Here instead of the young hero going through a series of adventures and challenges where he succeeds through his astuteness, good character and luck, and so benefits his society, he goes on a hero journey in reverse. Already a flawed character due to the influence or the genes of his father, he worsens under pressure and the lure of striving for easy riches, bringing destruction on himself and trouble to almost all. In 'The Body Snatcher' (1884) Stevenson focuses on the morbid and sinister world of Scottish grave robbers who are after loot and corpses to sell for medical experiments. In 'A Lodging for the Night' (1877) a charismatic and talented but poor young troubadour resides in a den of thieves. When one murders another he flees into the snowed out streets of Paris in 1456 where he attempts to find shelter. First he loots a corpse for its money and eventually he does find shelter with a wealthy old aristocrat. Their unfolding discussion on good and evil, expediency and honour, has no clear result, but it is as if other versions of Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver have sat down and defended their worldviews. The difference is that the older now defines goodness and the younger represents evil – who survives and after being described that way and thrown out, ponders the value of the dinner table objects he should have stolen. In "The Suicide Club' (1878) morality again comes under question and what is good or evil blurs. Sadism, conceit and obsessive morbidity permeate this work, where only some of the malevolent people are punished.

These works previously mentioned works come from a children's writer? Some critics and admiring writers as diverse as Grahame Green, Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Conrad, Jack London, John Masefield, Vladimir Nabokov, Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry James, C.K. Chesterton, Rudyard Kipling, Martin Seymour Smith, Ernest Hemingway and Rider

Haggard could see much more in his work.³ On Stevenson's suggestion he nearly wrote in collaboration with Haggard, but went to Samoa instead.⁴ Very little of what Stevenson did write could be accurately described as for children. Two of his best known, still popular poems, celebrate the sweet delight in childhood imagination 'The Land of Counterpane' and the whimsical and witty 'The Shadow' are, but much of Stevenson's prose is characterized by sinister moods and extremely dangerous threats which the hero sometimes survives. When he does this comes by sheer luck, not the obviously contrived, unconvincing luck of so many children's stories. Instead of such contrivances the random accidents that sometimes are salvation, sometimes damnation, befall the unsuspecting hero. come. Both are common in his stories.

His young central characters are often menaced by figures whom he places where heroes are, but are soon revealed as really villains. Richard III functions this way in *The Black Arrow* (1888) and David Balfour runs a gamut of such characters in *Kidnapped* (1886) and its sequel *Catriona* (1893). Long John Silver of *Treasure Island* fits into this same villainous mold.

When Stevenson started *Treasure Island* as an effort for his stepson Lloyd Osborne he stated that it would be free of psychology, not have any females and be an adventure story for boys.⁵ Fortunately he got all three intentions wrong. Jim Hawkins's mother appears in the first chapters, every novel has some level of psychology and there are more complexities, gritty realism, menace and violence than in most boys' stories, especially British imperial era examples.

From the start this sense of menace and mystery pervades *Treasure Island*: equally evident is Stevenson's ability to draw reader into this world:

Squire Trelawney, Doctor Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about

³ 'Robert Louis Stevenson,' *Wikipedia*. Accessed June 8th 2020; Masefield and Green are mention in the entry on Stevenson by Martin Seymour Smith in his *Novels and Novelists: A Guide to the World of Fiction*. London 1980. p. 222; Lillias Haggard recalls the relationship by letter between her father and Stevenson, they never met. Pp.121-125

⁴ Lillias Haggard, p. 124.

⁵ 'Treasure Island.' *Wikipedia*.

Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen in the year of grace 17—, and go back to the time when my father kept the "Admiral Benbow" Inn, and the brown old seaman, with the saber cut, first took up his lodging under our roof.

I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea-chest following behind him in a hand-barrow; a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man; his tarry pig-tail falling over the shoulders of his soiled blue coat; his hands ragged and scarred, with black, broken nails, and the saber cut across one cheek, a dirty, livid white. I remember him looking round the cove and whistling to himself as he did so, and then breaking out in that old sea-song that he sang so often afterwards:

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest, Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!"

in the high, old tottering voice that seemed to have been tuned and broken at the capstan bars. Then he rapped on the door with a bit of stick like a handspike that he carried, and when my father appeared, called roughly for a glass of rum. This, when it was brought to him, he drank slowly, like a connoisseur, lingering on the taste, and still looking about him at the cliffs and up at our signboard...

So what has actually happened? Stripped of Stevenson's abilities all that has clearly unfolded is that a dirty, loud, old drunkard has turned up at a remote inn on England's south-west coast and asked for and got a glass of rum.

Even so, the second paragraph makes him somebody who will be important and connects to the first. Mentioning treasure of some kind just waiting to be found lures people in regardless of situation.

"I remember him as if it were yesterday" has become a cliché, but like all clichés the words are now outworn because they were once so successful: in this work they still are. What has developed this passage is the tone, the sense of stillness that overrides and contrasts with the chanting and his described loudness, to create foreboding. What appears as evident in these first lines builds up with further descriptions of this character, Billy Bones, who waiting in fear for someone, uses his money to virtually take over the inn and worry Jim's father to death.

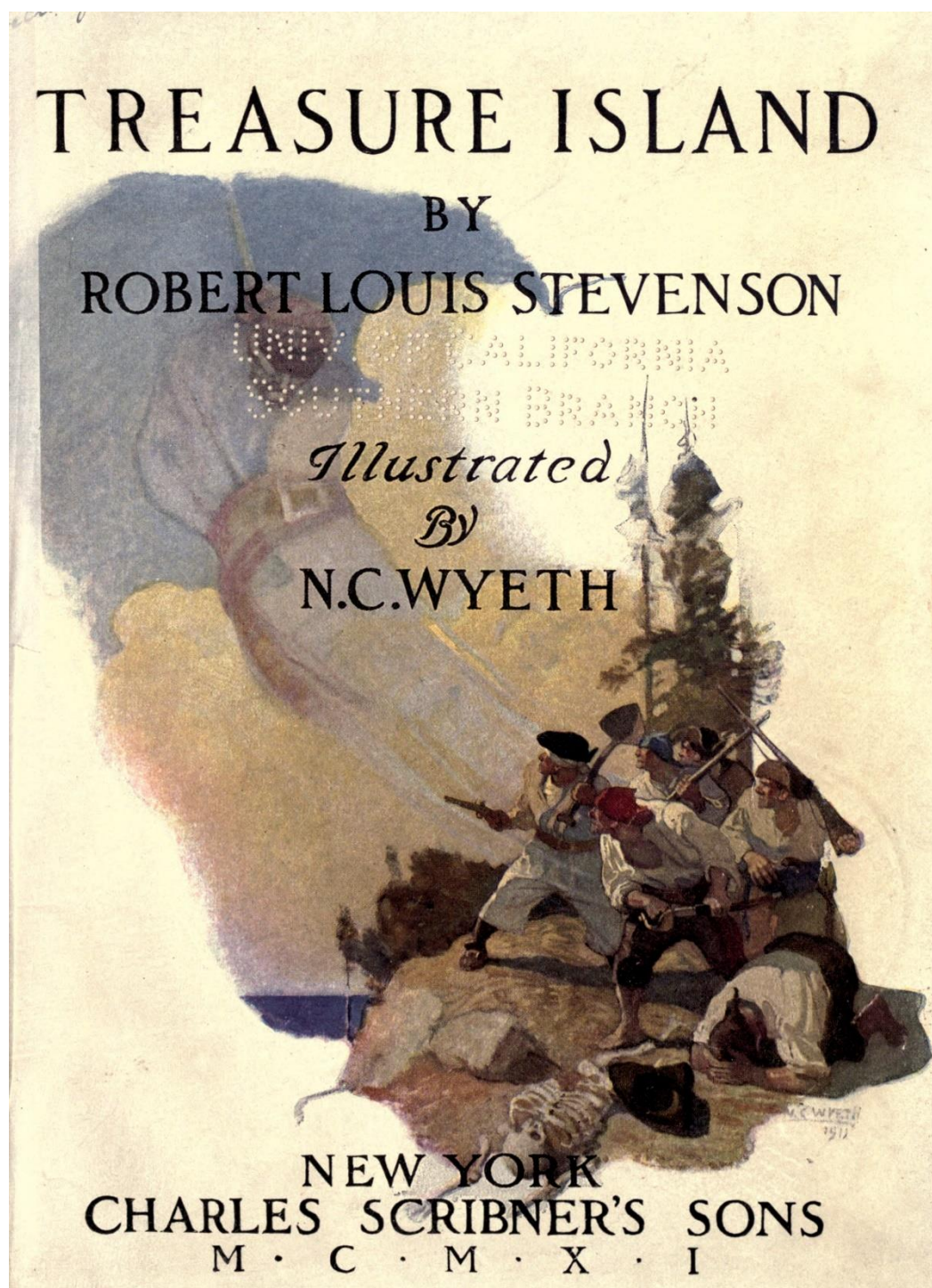


Plate 3 The 1911 Scribner's Edition

After former compatriots from his pirate past arrive, Bones dies and his rivals are killed or dispersed by authorities. It is Jim who finds Bones's treasure map. This is what the other pirates were after – and some still are. Bones and his rivals were once part of the pirate crew of the notorious Captain Flint, who plundered much of the Caribbean and

had six crewmen bury his loot somewhere, and then murdered those six men. Flint drank himself to death in Savannah, leaving only one indication of where the treasure was, his 1754 map of Treasure Island which had the burial site marked. Local authorities Squire Trelawney and Doctor Livesy launch an expedition to find the treasure with the squire being the main financier. Under Captain Smollett, commander of the expeditionary ship *Hispaniola*, preparations begin.

Until this stage Jim who has appeared as a reliable and astute narrator: like many an adolescent, reveals himself to be one who tells more than he knows. For with the appearance of Long John Silver, Jim shows us what unfolds beneath surface appearances. From his first appearance as a Bristol innkeeper Long John Silver appears as false to the reader. He works hard on his relentlessly hearty, somewhat servile, sometimes even obsequious flattery, declarations and opinions. This gives some characters an impression of ability, trustworthiness and loyalty. Jim is taken in and so is Squire Trelawney, who against Captain Smollett's wise advice, signs on Silver as the ship's cook and lets him find other crewmen for the *Hispaniola*.

While Jim visits Silver in his inn, he recognizes Black Dog as he quickly flees to evade being identified. He was one of the escaped attackers who were after Bones. He tells Silver, who gets his compatriots to supposedly chase after him and does an overly loud, overly outraged pantomime about regretting having such a blackard in his inn and drinking his rum. What becomes clear to the reader here is that Silver and his compatriots are now connected to Flint's crew and that his selection of many of the *Hispaniola's* crew may well be to take over the ship and get the treasure, presumably after murdering Jim, Trelawney, Smollett, Livesey and any crewmen remaining loyal to them. Stevenson does not spell out that Trelawney must be at best naïve, at worst blind not to already see through Silver and his compatriots. Even though they are together on a long voyage in the close quarters of a small ship, he remains unseeing. His blindness reflects his well off, aristocratic background, far removed from the vicious struggle for existence of the poor and desperate. He sees the roughness of the sailors, but believes them to be good-hearted patriots. He has got subservience, obedience and life support from underlings all his life and so does not find it suspicious or even suspects that people might have concealed self-

interests or resent inequalities. His own letter to Livesey, written during the expedition, preparations unintentionally reveals his gullibility. He praises “his old friend” Blandly, who sold him the schooner *Hispaniola*. He sees Blandly as an “an admirable fellow” who “literally slaved in my interest.” Why anybody would do this for another without reward becomes an immediate question. This “honest creature” supposedly procured the ship to Trelawney for “the merest trifle” despite warnings from several in Bristol that Blandly really owned the ship and sold it to Trelawney for much more than its worth. After unintentionally revealing that he has been taken on the ship sale he then heaps calumnies on those who tried to warn him. When the shrewder Doctor Livesey says that Trelawney is the only man he fears because he cannot be quiet we have the truth. This letter was meant for Doctor Livesey, but on the envelope he has written that if the Doctor is absent it is to be opened by Jim Hawkins (a boy) or Tom Redruth (a nearly illiterate gardener). Jim can see that the doctor will not like this and that Trelawney has been talking after all. That talk or perhaps Blandly trading favours with Long John Silver, apparently leads to Trelawney meeting Long John Silver at the docks. He believes that this old pirate was there just to take the sea air and coincidentally wants to go on a voyage again. Trelawney signs him on and also Silver’s friend Arrow.

Captain Smollett, who has seen the rougher side of life through long years of sea faring, instinctively knows people better, even if he does not have full knowledge of who they really are. He distrusts Arrow, forced on him as his second in command by Trelawney, but he can do little against his financier. He complains because Trelawney has allowed the weapons, ammunition and gunpowder to be stored under the crews’ quarters where they can easily get them, but the officers cannot. He suggests that it would be safer under the officer’s quarters, but Trelawney gives no such order. In bowdlerized or edited down versions (usually for children) and in cinematic versions all of these negative aspects concerning Trelawney’s character are removed. They leave a simplistic cardboard cutout of a good man, not Stevenson’s ambivalence about goodness.

Even Jim senses something wrong with the crew, especially when the usually drunken First Mate Arrow mysteriously disappears. He has

supposedly fallen overboard during a storm, but did the conspirators toss him over, because they thought in his drunkenness that he would blab?

As the voyage progresses Jim's narration gives an increasing sense of unease. While searching for an apple he remains hidden and so overhears Silver beguiling one of the last remaining loyal crewmen into joining the approaching mutiny. He also realizes that Silver intrigues as an extremely dangerous manipulator who combines immense ambition with ruthlessness, charm and flattery, all designed by an extremely calculating and astute mind. Like most flatterers, Silver really holds those he flatters into joining him in contempt. Events prove his opinion essentially right about his fellow mutineers, who unthinkingly waste what they have and only live for immediate self-gratification with rum and fights. Their hunger for immediate self-gratification will lead them into killing each other off or they will end up being executed. In direct contrast, he plans to invest his share of the loot in safe banks and eventually end up an aristocrat in England's parliament.

When Jim reveals what he has heard to Smollett and the others, the story has reached the point where confrontations, betrayals, self-destruction, alliances of convenience and violence will unfold.

Stevenson depicts this without either glossing over realities or indulging in prolonged bloodthirsty depictions, although bizarre elements sometimes appear. When Israel Hands climbs up the netting to kill Jim, thinking that Jim bluffs with his threats to shoot, the scene has become so terrifying because it appears so real, written in unadorned brisk dialogue and description. When Hands's knife cuts Jim he shoots him dead: we are outside children's stories. How many child heroes really kill anybody? Even the bizarre way Hands's corpse lies on its back on the clear tropical ocean floor with fish moving over it, with the waters' motions give a fluttering impression of life, as dead eyes stare up, cannot detract from the reality of this conflict.

This mixture of the bizarre and unvarnished reality appears again when the surviving pirates and captured Jim follow the map they find "a compass" pointing to the treasure. This is the stretched out straight skeleton of Allardyce, one of the six killed by Flint. Apart from

showing Flint's macabre and sadistic sense of humour, this works as irony and a warning, for while Allardyce's fingers literally point to the treasure, the skeleton also points to the fate of most of the treasure hunters, who like Allardyce, will also go on to their fate as skeletons on Treasure Island if they continue to pursue the treasure.

When Silver has Jim tied to him as they tromp across the island to the treasure Jim knows that he will also end up this way. He has already witnessed the murder of an honest sailor by Silver and senses Silver will kill him once they have found the riches.



Plate 4 *'One more step'* N. C. Wyeth (1882-1945) Public domain



Plate 5 *Long John Silver* by *Louis Rhead* (1857-1926)

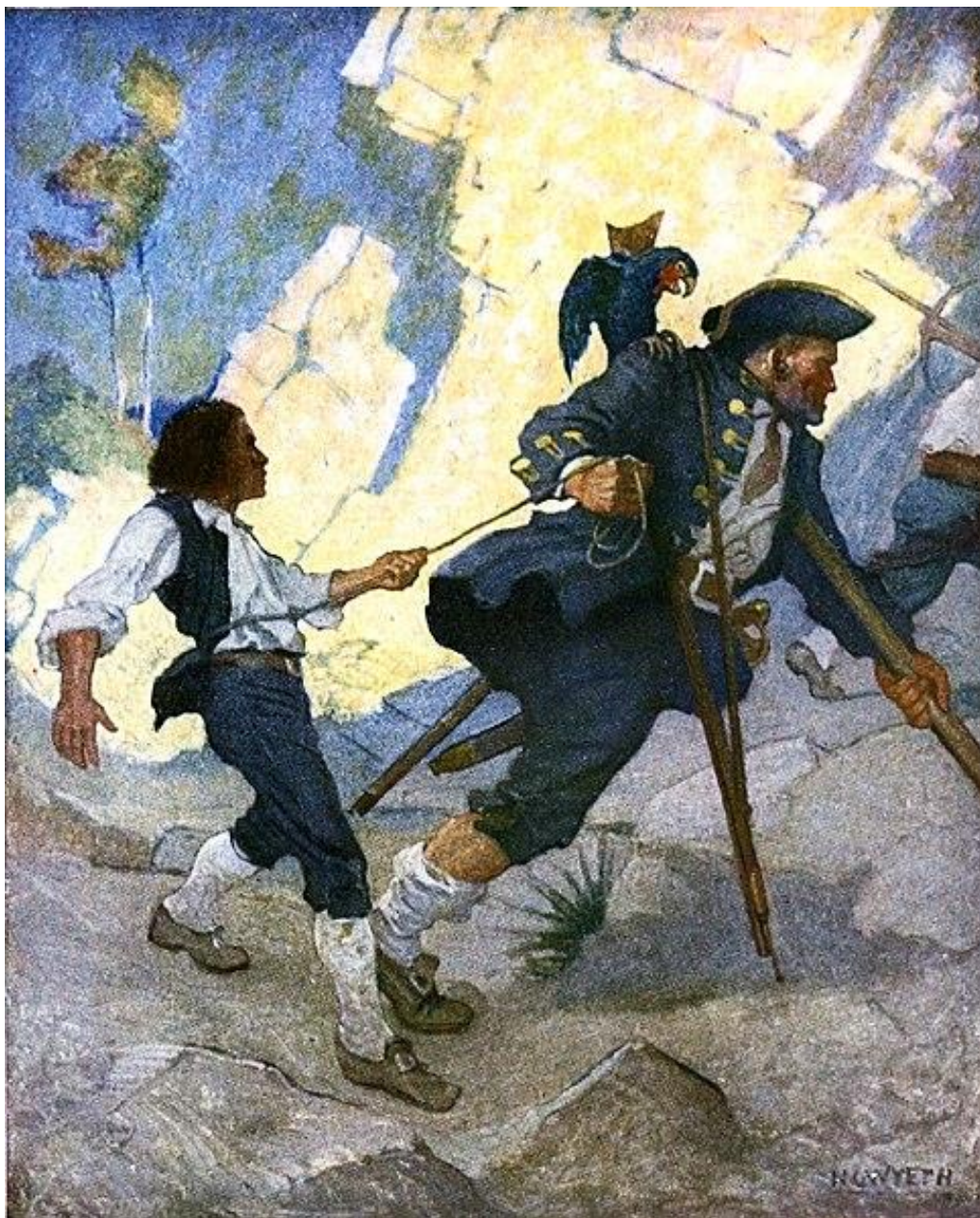


Plate 6 *Silver with Jim as his hostage* N.C. Wyeth. 1911 edition

Jim, by understanding what remains unsaid, that Silver intends to kill him as soon as he is no longer of use gains another insight into adult realities. These started when he first overheard Silver conspiring. Hands telling him that from his life's experiences attempts at goodness only led to trouble and then the killing of Hands and the deaths of loyal crewmen reinforce this and have an effect on his character evident in the last pages. These aspects of the story usually do not appear in bowdlerised screen or printed versions.

Despite the way the pirate crew ends up either dying or marooned Stevenson avoids the usual contrived awards for goodness and punishments for badness. Just before Jim shoots him he tells Israel Hands to “go to his prayers like a Christian man.” And when Hands asks why Jim tells him that he should repent because Hands has “lived in sin and lies and blood.” Hands responds with experiences and observations which test the idea of goodness. Based on his thirty years experience of seafaring and Hands has “seen good and bad, better and worse, fair weather and foul... I never seen good come of goodness yet.” Considering where Trelawney’s ideas of goodness in people leads, evil Israel has a point. Ironically he prove his next comment wrong by his death: “Him as strikes first is my fancy; dead men don’t bite: them’s my views – amen, so be it.” He strikes first when he tosses the knife and dies for it by Jim’s shot which comes second, Amen is said at funerals and within minutes of this declaration Hands has a funeral of a kind when he sinks to the ocean floor and as Jim states he will be “food for fish” so dead men do not bite indeed, but in this case at least are the bitten.

Not only beliefs in goodness take an ironic wallop in *Treasure Island*. The irony within Hands’s declaration works as the most obvious. Others involve the murderous fights amongst the pirates because of their greed and penchant for violence. The way many fall sick because they impulsively camp in what must obviously be a wrong place because they reached it first, gives an implicit condemnation of laziness, thoughtlessness and expediency.

Even so, the good also meet fates that question goodness. Alan and Tom, honest sailors, are murdered for not joining the mutiny. John Hunter and Tom Redruth, loyal and brave servants of Trelawney, die in the battles with the pirates. Long John Silver with his conspiracy to murder and Trelawney with his blindness have led so many others to their deaths, yet both do more than survive. Because Silver’s wife sold his Bristol inn and will rejoin him, he will set up somewhere in the new world and be no worse off than before. Trelawney, despite bearing some responsibility for the deaths of four good men, prospers from his share of the treasure. So do the other survivors, Smollett, Livesey, Gunn and Grey. Jim does not tell us what he does with his share.



Plate 7 Attack on a Galleon. Howard Pyle.

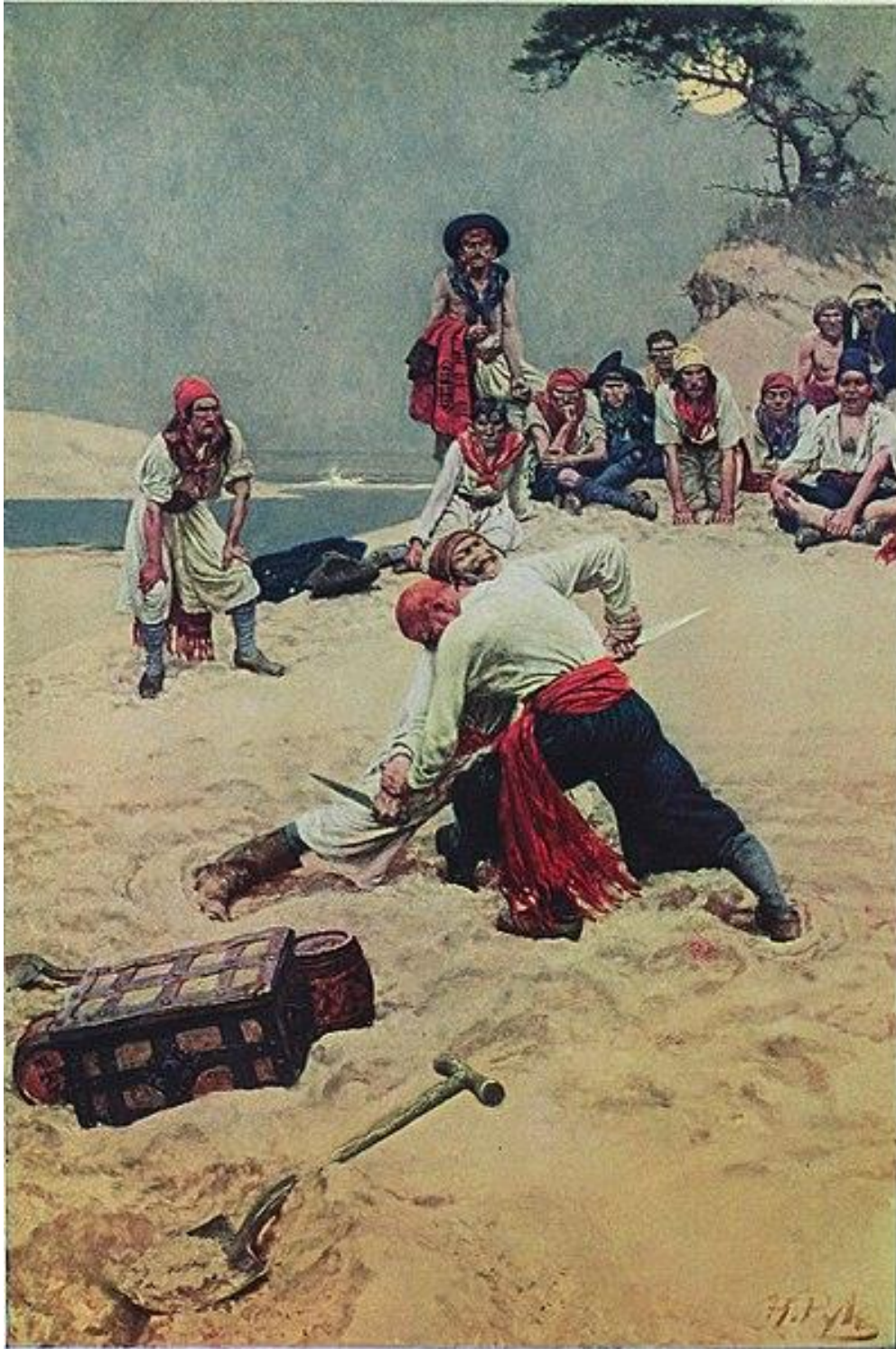


Plate 8 Pirates fighting to be captain. Howard Pyle

What he does tell us is that he has paid a high price for it, for long after returning to England he awakes upright in bed after recurrent nightmares about his time on Treasure Island. Once again this raises the question of how can this be, in its original form, a children's book? In

Britain's imperial era tales for boys (of all ages) the young hero returns to England richer, wiser and more popular: he is untroubled by his experiences and obviously has conquered, his enemies, his fears and the dangerous, usually exotic terrain. That only superficially happens here, for in this story as in usual realities, success comes at a cost.

Finally, after considering popularity and appeal, narrative structure, descriptive power, a mixture of realism and fantasy in style, random fates, revealed character, and rewards, punishments and the lack of both, setting remains.

Before going to Bristol Jim spends hours dreaming over the secret map of the island. He imagines the reality will be full of enjoyment with "the most wonderful and changing prospects." On Bristol's docks he delights in the sight at sailors at work, glad to be soon voyaging with them. All this changes when reality bites. Doctor Livesy warns him of how parts of the island are fetid and probably breeding grounds for fever and the infected amongst the mutineers prove him right. The stiflingly hot humid air, sudden changes in temperature and sense of claustrophobia are all true to the reality of the tropics once people are away from the waves and the beaches. Stevenson omits pestilential insects and venomous creatures, but otherwise has it right. Once again a reality gets bowdlerized and so Europeans and others outside the tropics keep their illusions about tropical paradises.

For Jim the sound of those tropical waves are part of his reoccurring nightmare, waking him in fear. Reality bites hard. For him there can be no happy closure where order is restored: wealth comes at the cost of innocence and the reluctant gain of unending fear.





Plate 9 Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

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Frontspiece

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Plate 1

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Plate 2

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Plate 3.

The 1911 Scribner's American edition with illustrations by N.C.Wyeth

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/77/Treasure_Island_title_1911.jpg

Plate 4

'One more step' N. C. Wyeth (1882-1945) Plate Public domain

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c8/One_More_Step%2C_Mr._Hands.jpg

Plate 5

Long John Silver by Louis Rhead (1857-1926) Project Gutenberg ebook edition.

Plate 6

Long John Silver and Jim as his hostage. For the 1911 edition by N.C. Wyeth
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/73/TL-parrot.jpg>

Plate 7 Attack on a Galleon. Howard Pyle.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bc/Attack_on_a_Galleon.jpg

Plate 8 Pirates fighting to be captain. Howard Pyle. From his 1921 compilation The Book of Pirates.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c2/Pyle_pirates_treasfight.jpg

Plate 9 Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

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