

This bit of doggerel started out as a poem, but I subsequently set it to music, as a ballad. It involves a chapter in American history that most Americans know very little about, when the nation in the world that was most involved in large-scale international smuggling of narcotics was the United States. See Layton, Thomas N., "The Voyage of the 'Frolic': New England Merchants and the Opium Trade", 1997, Stanford University Press.

THE BALLAD OF THE FROLIC
Jay Reynolds Freeman

There's a tale that I must tell, of how a doom on China fell,
Though her scholars and her leaders all were struggling;
How the final, crushing blow, that laid a mighty people low,
Was the tide of foreign drugs that came by smuggling.

What's a million dead Chinese, when there are British palms to grease,
And when Americans in shipping want a killing?
Or when China's goods are made to flood the world with foreign trade,
So Chinese coffers fill with silver till they're spilling?

Let no scruple make you pause, when trade and commerce are the cause,
Running opium to China for the death of Chinamen,
Running opium to China in a clipper.

Though by treaty it's forbidden, in the fine print there was hidden
No request for laws to make the terms prevail,
And the Senate and the House were just as quiet as a mouse
To keep their backers -- wealthy backers -- out of jail.

So men of business and of trade, with status proved and fortunes made,
The very pillars of their own community,
Pursued careers without a taint, yet faced no justice or restraint,
When they robbed and pushed and smuggled, oversea.

Let our images be varnished by the lucre we have garnished,
Running opium to China for the death of Chinamen,
Running opium to China in a clipper.

From the yards of Baltimore, unto the distant Asian shore,

Sails the Frolic, new-commissioned for the route.
From October through to May, thrice a year she makes her way:
Off to China, home to Bombay, hauling loot.

Packed with death for old Canton, in the amount of fifty ton,
Past Malacca to the bay of Cumsingmoon,
Where they pay with twelve ton weight of silver species, bar, or plate;
Then she's off to fetch another cargo, soon.

For the task can't be so bad, where there is profit to be had,
Running opium to China for the death of Chinamen,
Running opium to China in a clipper.

Though the form the builder gave her might have made a proper slaver,
Dying cargoes can't sustain the bottom lines...
There are proceeds vastly higher pushing drugs, and as supplier,
We can let the Chinese dealers pay the fines.

And if pirates in their junks would have the opium in her trunks,
Spread the canvas wide and leave them far a-lee.
Though the Maylays want to get her, pure Caucasians do it better:
For the world has seen no pirates such as we!

Morals need not be displayed, for there is money to be made,
Running opium to China for the death of Chinamen,
Running opium to China in a clipper.

She might have made that run forever, but the crew and captain never
Knew what lay in their accountant's greedy dream:
For the blowing wind may fail, and cause the loss of ships of sail,
So insurance is less dear when there is steam.

Faster vessels, and more certain, knelled the end and drew the curtain
On the voyages the Frolic made of old,
But before she ceased to roam, they packed and loaded her for home,
Bringing goods to forty-niners seeking gold.

Let your conscience not outmeasure such a chance to earn a treasure,
Running opium to China for the death of Chinamen,
Running opium to China in a clipper.

With the coast in sight at last, she struck right hard, and foundered fast,
And lies beneath a rocky Mendocino bay.
Though no one knows, perhaps the cause was that the trip obeyed the laws:
She could not haul an honest cargo, so they say.

So the Pomo of the west were left to try to make the best
Of the ship that smuggled death to old Canton.
To balance all those Chinese dead -- ceramic beads, glass arrowheads --
And now the Pomo, too, are all but gone.

A sunken ship can never tell how our accounts increased so well,
Running opium to China for the death of Chinamen,
Running opium to China in a clipper.

From the Frolic's short career, we let a lesson now appear:
Narcotics pushing doesn't mean that you're a crook.
Drug cartels and foreign mobs are only doing honest jobs,
For which Americans in business wrote the book.

We must wear the shoe that fits, or else be labeled hypocrites
For we know that modern dealers aren't the worst:
Frolic rests beneath the tide, yet she lives on in honest pride
We did it bigger, better, sooner -- we were first!

Remember how God's work was done, when there was silver by the ton,
Running opium to China for the death of Chinamen,
Running opium to China in a clipper.